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Barack Obama

Joint Press Conference with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

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Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: I -- I'm sorry if we've kept you waiting. Let me just begin by saying what a great pleasure it is for me to welcome President Obama again to my house, and to be able to meet all of you.

I would just like to say that there have been those who have been saying that there is tension between the United States and the National League for Democracy -- or perhaps with me. I would like to make quite clear that the friendship between the United States and those who have been struggling for democracy in Burma is a very strong one. We may view things differently from time to time but it will in no way affect our friendship.

And I have absolute confidence that the United States will continue to support us with regard to the democratic transformation and that when Burma becomes a fully functioning democracy in accordance with the will of the people, we will be able to say that among those friends who enabled us to get there, the United States was among the first.

So please don't think -- please don't worry that there will be any problems between the United States and those working for democracy in Burma. We all believe in the same values. We all believe in the same principles. We may sometimes think that there are different ways of getting to the goal that we wish to achieve, but these differences are part of the democratic tradition. Democracy allows people to have different views, and democracy makes it also -- makes us also responsible for negotiating an answer to those views.



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I would like all of you to feel welcome in this country, and I would all -- like all of you to feel that you can join us in hoping for better days. But at the same time, I always warn against over-optimism because that could lead to complacency.

Our reform process is going through, let's us say, a bumpy...patch. But this bumpy patch is something that we can negotiate with commitment and with the help and understanding of our friends from all over the world. So let us not exaggerate the differences, the difficulties. But at the same time, let us not exaggerate the rosy picture either.

What we need is a healthy balance between optimism and pessimism. We need to view the -- the situation for what it was. But at the same time, we all have to be confident that we will get there -- we will get where we want to get to, because that's what our people want. In the end, it's the people of Burma who will decide where this country is going to and which way and how and when.

So we accept responsibility for the fate of our country, but at the same time we welcome the support and the help of our friends. And we always appreciate them very greatly.

Thank you.

Barack Obama: Well, good afternoon, everybody. Mingalaba. It is wonderful to be back in Rangoon and to once more have the opportunity to spend time with Aung San Suu Kyi. As we know, it was in this house that she endured years of confinement -- never giving up hope, never wavering in her determination to build a free and democratic Burma. Daw Suu, you helped set this country on a better path. I'm grateful for your friendship and for the hospitality that you've shown in opening your home up not only to me, but to all these people.

When I made my first historic visit to Burma, this country was just taking preliminary steps towards democracy. And in the past two years, important changes have been made. The economy has begun to grow. Political prisoners have been set free. There are more newspapers and media outlets. Children have been released from the military. And these are all important changes that have opened up greater opportunity for the people of Burma.

At the same time, as Aung San Suu Kyi just said, it's clear how much hard work remains to be done and that many difficult choices still lie ahead. The process for reform is by no means complete or irreversible. For many, progress has not come fast enough or spread far enough. People need to feel safe in their homes and not be subject to arbitrary harassment by authorities or individuals acting with impunity. People need to be empowered to pursue their dreams. And as Burma approaches important national elections next year, it will be critical to ensure that all of Burma's people can participate in shaping the future of their country.



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As a member of parliament and the head of the rule of law committee, Aung San Suu Kyi is working hard to make government more transparent, more accountable, to protect the rights of all the Burmese people, to promote reforms that would expand the political space for more people to contribute their voices. But implementing the major political and economic reforms that are necessary to keep Burma advancing toward democracy is going to take a great deal of political will and no small amount of determination. And we, as friends of the Burmese people, are clear-eyed about the scale of the challenges that remain, and recognize that we cannot remain complacent.

Today, Daw Suu and I had a wide-ranging discussion about how the United States can help facilitate and bolster Burma's democratic transition. We talked about the need for stronger rule of law, for elections that are free, fair and inclusive, and for continued constitutional changes that will move Burma more fully towards a civilian government.

We spoke about how we can work together to promote national reconciliation and defuse sectarian tensions among Burma's diverse ethnic groups. Specifically, I stressed the need to find durable and effective solutions for the terrible violence in Rakhine state -- solutions that end discrimination, provide greater security and economic opportunities, protect all citizens, and promote greater tolerance and understanding. Strengthening human rights protections for all of Burma's people is an essential step to realizing the vision we share for the future of this beautiful country.

The last time I stood here, I made a pledge to the people of Burma -- that if we continued to see progress toward reform, the ties between our countries would grow stronger, and the United States would continue to do whatever it could to help ensure Burma's success. Over the last two years, I think we've made good on that pledge, and I want to reiterate the commitment to match continued reforms with greater support and friendships in the future.

We're committed to working directly with the people of Burma, and not just the government. So later today, I'm looking forward to speaking with representatives of Burma's civil society groups and with young leaders from Burma and all across Southeast Asia who are working to create greater opportunities for themselves and for future generations. I think these new voices are going to be critical to making sure that reforms are sustainable and meaningful to people across the country and across the region.

So, Daw Suu, thank you again for welcoming us here today. We continue to look to you for inspiration as well as resolve, and I know that you will continue to be a fierce advocate on behalf of the people of Burma, a future of democracy, and I know that you will be a strong partner with the United States.

Thank you. Questions?



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Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: Who's speaking?

Barack Obama: I'll go first. Christi Parsons.

Q: You have been traveling in countries with long histories of repressing freedom of expression and censorship. And it was interesting yesterday that President Xi seemed to be saying that reporters who have problems have themselves to blame. And so I wonder to what extent you feel the need to contend with these ideas with leaders in this region as you travel. And what do you say to them? And by way of example, I might ask you -- Attorney General Eric Holder says no journalist will go to prison for doing his or her job, on his watch. And so I ask about the case of James Risen, the journalist who is facing this prosecution for not revealing his source in a leak prosecution. I wonder if that's -- are you speaking specifically about this case, and is that your position as well?

And if I may, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, ask you -- how concerned are you about the violence against ethnic minorities in your country, and specifically the Rohingya people? And what do you believe is your responsibility to speak out about it? Thank you very much.

Barack Obama: The issue of press freedom is a constant concern in my interactions with the Chinese government. It's an issue that I've raised with the President here in Burma. I'm pretty blunt and pretty frank about the fact that societies that repress journalists ultimately oppress people as well, and that if you want a society that is free and vibrant and successful, part of that formula is the free flow of information, of ideas, and that requires a free press. That is part of our tradition.

As I explained to President Xi in China, it's in our DNA. We believe in the primacy individuals being able to pursue their dreams, endowed with certain inalienable rights. And we believe that when governments censor or control information, that ultimately that undermines not only the society, but it leads to eventual encroachments on individual rights as well.

I can't comment, Christi, on any particular pending case, as you know -- that's sort of an iron-clad rule -- or any particular prosecution. I can read back to you what Attorney General Holder has said, which is no journalist is going to go to jail for doing their job. And I don't think you're suggesting that there's -- that the two cases are comparable. But I recognize that in our own society we have to constantly balance the need for certain national security issues to remain secret with journalists pursuing leads wherever they can.

And the good news is, is that we've got courts and we've got a First Amendment. And we got a whole bunch of tools to ensure that that balance is properly debated and adjudicated.

But I think that when I am traveling, it is important as the President of the United States to not just talk about our interests, but also to talk about our values. Sometimes it has an impact; sometimes it doesn't. Although I was impressed that Mark Landler got an answer to his question from President Xi.



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It might not have been the one he was expecting, but he did end up taking the question. So you just keep on chipping away and seeing if we can make progress.

Q: [Off-mic inaudible]

Barack Obama: Hold on a second, Christi. Don't try to segue into a second question.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: I think I better take over because I've got to have my time as well.

Barack Obama: There you go.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: The National League for Democracy always has been against violence of any kind, either on racial grounds, or religious grounds, or ideological grounds. We do not believe that violence really resolves anything at all.

Our struggle for democracy has been carried out with a strong grasp on the principle of nonviolence. And also, we believe in the rule of law. So if you ask how do we propose to resolve all of these problems of violence between communities, between different ethnic groups, we've got to start with rule of law. People have to feel secure before they can start talking to one another. We cannot achieve harmony without security. People who feel threatened are not going to sit down and sort out their problems.

So I would like to recommend, as the chair of the Rule of Law and Tranquility Committee -- don't forget that tranquility is also included -- that the government should look to rule of law. It is the duty of the government to make all our people feel secure, and it is the duty of our people to learn to live in harmony with one another.

If we want democracy, we have to be prepared to live by the principles of democracy. We have to dare to live according to the principles of democracy. I think we'll get there, but it will take us some time. But we will remain fully committed to the principle of nonviolence.

Q: [inaudible] Mr. President, I'd like to know about the Myanmar reforms. You've been talking with the President and parliament speakers, and also you're going to talk with the civil societies group, and then youth. So my direct question to you is that: Have you got any specific agreement with the Myanmar government or President Thein Sein about Myanmar reforms such as constitutional change, and peace negotiation, peace process, and also 2015 general election?

And also to Daw Aung San Sui Kyi, you have got a one-hour discussion with the President, and at the current political situation, as you said, it's a bumpy situation. So if you didn't make amendment, or you didn't change constitution, the NLD and you, yourself, is going to be very difficult after 2015 elections. So have you talked about those issues with the President? Or the President talk to you about U.S. support for you? Thank you.



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Barack Obama: Well, the issue of making sure that reforms and the transition is fully realized was the main topic of our conversation and the main topic of my conversation with the President last night.

As I indicated before, there are signs of progress. We shouldn't deny that Burma today is not the same as Burma five years ago. But the process is still incomplete. And I was very specific with the President in terms of how we will measure whether or not the transition has been fully realized.

Number one, we expect elections to take place on time. We do not want to see delays, because it's time for the voice of the people of Burma to be heard in a fair, free, transparent election.

Number two, I indicated to the President that the constitution amendment process needs to reflect inclusion rather than exclusion, that there are certain provisions in the Burmese constitution that objectively don't make much sense. Ultimately, what changes are made are up to the people of Burma. But, for example, I don't understand a provision that would bar somebody from running for President because of who their children are. That doesn't make much sense to me.

Number three, we are very much in favor of the peace process, and I encourage the President to move forward in the negotiations. He expressed some optimism about the ability to bring a deal to a conclusion. But as Daw Suu has indicated, you have to be skeptical until it's actually done.

Number four, I indicated that we are paying attention to how religious minorities are treated in this country. Now, I recognize the complexities of the situation in Rakhine state. On the other hand, consistent with what Daw Suu just said, I am a firm believer that any legitimate government has to be based on rule of law and a recognition that all people are equal under the law. And discrimination against the Rohingya or any other religious minority I think does not express the kind of country that Burma over the long term wants to be. And I know of no successful democracy in which sectarian or religious divisions are allowed to fester, or the people of different faiths are treated as second-class citizens. Ultimately, that is destabilizing to a democracy.

And finally, I expressed to the President the need to continue to make additional progress on basic issues of freedom and personal security, that journalists can't be jailed simply because they were critical of the government; that arbitrary arrests or individuals being in some fashion abused by government with impunity rather than being respected and treated in accordance with law, that that's a test of whether or not a society is moving towards a genuine democratic process.



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And the President yesterday acknowledged that some progress has been made, and there was more to do. And our position will be to continue to measure what's happening on the ground, to consult with a wide range of groups here in Burma. We will strengthen our relationship where we see progress. Where we don't see progress, then we will continue to express our concerns, and we will not be able to fully realize the kind of bilateral relationship that we want to have with Burma, the Burmese government, until we've seen some of these reforms completed.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: Well, you asked whether it's going to be fruitful for the NLD to win the elections if the amendments to the constitution are not pushed through. I think it's too early to ask this question. We've just spent one afternoon debating the question of constitutional amendment. I think perhaps some of you may have heard that proportional representation is not going to be instituted.

So when we started defending [inaudible] system against proportional representation, there were many who said to us, you are a very small minority in the legislature; how can you hope to win this case? It's not a matter of wanting to win a case, it's a matter of standing up for what you believe in, for what you believe is necessary for the future of our country.

Now we are asking for a constitutional amendment not because we're trying to win a case, but because we think that certain amendments are necessary if this country is to be a truly functioning democracy in line with the will of the people. Because of that, we will persist in our efforts to have the constitution amended in the right way and within the framework of the law. I've always put great emphasis on this because I want peace and tranquility in our country. I want our people to learn to live under the rule of law, and to support and uphold the importance of the rule of law.

So with regard to the constitution, we know that the people support our wish to amend it in certain ways, and we are prepared to negotiate with those who do not wish to amend the constitution. I think that's what democracy is all about. We need a culture of negotiated compromise as the foundation for our democratic union.

So we would like to -- it's not just a matter of debating the case in parliament and winning Brownie points or Boy Scout points, or whatever they're called. But it's just a case of standing up for what we think our country needs. And we would like to talk to those who disagree with us. That, again, is what democracy is about. You talk to those who disagree with you; you don't beat them down. You exchange views. And you come to a compromise, a settlement that would be best for the country.

I've always said that dialogues and debates are not aimed at achieving victory for one particular party or the other, but victory for our people as a whole. Whatever we decide on should be seen as a victory for our nation, for the kind of democratic union that we have been trying to build up for decades.



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So please don't worry about whether or not we will win the elections in 2015. Of course, any party wants to win the elections. I'm sure the President will tell you that. But winning is not everything -- it's how you win. I'd rather lose than win in the wrong way. And that is the way I want our party and our people to approach the problems that we have to tackle -- that we want to win in the right way. We want to bring the changes of the constitution about in the right way.

We want to build up a strong foundation for national reconciliation, which means reconciliation not just between the different ethnic groups and between different religious groups, but between different ideas -- for example, between the idea of military supremacy and the idea of civilian authority over the military, which is the foundation of democracy.

So we want to exchange views and to come to an understanding with all those who at this moment do not yet agree with us. And we are confident that we can come to such a settlement, come to such an agreement because, after all, I do believe that what all of us want is what is best for the country as a whole -- not just for particular individuals or groups or organizations.

So while I tell you that you need not worry about what affects amendment or non-amendment to the constitution might have on the elections, I might as well ask you to vote for us when we do get there.

Barack Obama: Pete Maer.

Q: Mr. President, it seems the stage is set for even more confrontations between you and Republicans when you get home, if that's possible. We're told that you're soon going to sign the immigration reform executive order. To what extent are you concerned about a Republican backlash from an action of that magnitude?

And on two other issues, I'm wondering what your take is on the plan to pass a bill to build the Keystone pipeline that's in the works now, before the State Department's review process is over. And Senator McConnell is angry over the climate deal that you had made with China. How does all of this square with your post-election assessment that people want to, as you put it, get stuff done?

And if I may also pose a question to you, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Thank you for hosting all of us here from the White House media corps. As the President mentioned of the constitutional barring of you running in your country's election, what do you think the impact will be from the President's statement that was made here today on his strong opposition to that constitutional wording? And what impact do you think it will have on the government here? And is there anything more that you'd like to see him do? Thank you.



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Barack Obama: Pete, the day after the election I said that there are going to be areas of agreement between me and Republicans, and there are going to be areas of disagreement. There are going to be actions I take they don't like, and there are going to be bills they pass that I don't like.

And I think, moving forward, that's exactly what's going to happen. You've mentioned areas where we disagree. I believe that America is a nation of immigrants. Everybody agrees that the system is broken. There has been ample opportunity for Congress to pass a bipartisan immigration bill that would strengthen our borders, improve the legal immigration system, lift millions of people out of the shadows so they are paying taxes and getting right by the law. It passed out of the Senate. I gave the House over a year to go ahead and at least give a vote to the Senate bilaterally; they failed to do so. And I indicated to Speaker Boehner several months ago that if, in fact, Congress failed to act, I would use all the lawful authority that I possess to try to make the system work better. And that's going to happen. That's going to happen before the end of the year.

But what I've also said to them -- and I said this during the lunch with the Speaker and Leader McConnell -- is that I am always interested in negotiating a legislative solution to the immigration problem, and that the minute they pass a bill that I can sign that fixes our immigration system, then any executive actions I take are replaced.

So they have the ability to fix the system. What they don't have the ability to do is to expect me to stand by with a broken system in perpetuity. And I would advise that if, in fact, they want to take a different approach, rather than devote a lot of time trying to constrain my lawful actions as the Chief Executive of the U.S. government in charge of our enforcing our immigration laws, that they spend some time passing a bill and engaging with all the stakeholders, the immigrant rights groups, the law enforcement groups, the evangelicals, the business community, all of whom have said this is something that needs to be done, is way overdue. And we've been talking about it for 10 years now, and it's been consistently stalled.

So with respect to Keystone, I've been clear in the past, Pete, my position hasn't changed, that this is a process that is supposed to be followed. Right now you have a case pending in Nebraska, where the pipeline would run through, in which a state court judge has questioned the plan. And until we know what the route is, it's very hard to finish that evaluation. And I don't think we should short-circuit that process.

I have also noted that, as policy matter, my government believes that we should judge this pipeline based on whether or not it accelerates climate change or whether it helps the American people with their energy costs and their gas prices. And I have to constantly push back against this idea that somehow the Keystone pipeline is either this massive jobs bill for the United States, or is somehow lowering gas prices.



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Understand what this project is. It is providing the ability of Canada to pump their oil, send it through our land, down to the Gulf, where it will be sold everywhere else. That doesn't have an impact on U.S. gas prices. You know what does have an impact on U.S. gas prices is the incredible boom in U.S. oil production and natural gas production that's taken place under my administration.

And if my Republican friends really want to focus on what's good for the American people in terms of job creation and lower energy costs, we should be engaging in a conversation about what are we doing to produce even more homegrown energy. I'm happy to have that conversation.

With respect to the climate change deal, I have been very clear that I have responsibilities as President not just to current generations, but to future generations. The science is indisputable. The planet is getting warm, and it is getting warmer in part because of man-made activity.

And the release of carbon gases -- carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere can have a potentially devastating effect that will cost our country, could devastate communities, could increase the impact of natural disasters, and will have an impact worldwide that is destabilizing and could affect our national security. That's not my opinion, by the way, that is the opinion of our Joint Chiefs of Staff, that climate change is a direct national security threat.

Now the argument that I've received in the past has been either denial of the science or, alternatively, there's no point in us doing something about it despite us being one of the two largest emitters in the world, because if we do something and China doesn't do anything, we'll just put ourselves at a competitive disadvantage, we'll lose jobs to China, and the problem won't be solved anyway.

I'm not going to deny the science, but I took seriously the notion that we want all countries to participate in solving a global problem. And so I engaged with China over a lengthy set of negotiations. And by all independent accounts, for the first time, we got China to make a very serious commitment to constrain its greenhouse gases. Why would anybody be against that? That sounds like the right thing to do to me. So that's a response to those specific ideas.

But let me reiterate what I said at the top. The fact that I disagree or Republicans disagree with me on a certain set of issues doesn't exclude us working together on a whole range of issues where we do agree. They're interested in tax reform -- so am I. Let's get to work. They're interested in promoting trade that will create jobs and opportunity for U.S. workers and U.S. businesses -- all over it. It's part of what this Asia trip has been all about. They're interested in rebuilding our roads, our bridges, our ports, our airports, putting people back to work, making sure we're competitive -- I'm game. So the one thing that I think is going to be important for us to have a successful partnership over the next couple of years is not making disagreements on a single issue suddenly a deal-breaker on every issue.



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Democracy can never work that way because there are always going to be some differences. And when there are differences you can't elevate those differences above the commonalities.

I'm sorry that was a long answer, but it was a lot of questions.

Do you want to --

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: I'm sorry the President can't get away from all those.

Barack Obama: I know. But before Daw Suu responds to the point about the constitutional amendment, I just want to emphasize, ultimately it's up to the people of Burma to make a decision about all these provisions.

I expressed an objective view that some of current provisions don't seem to have much grounding in common sense or precedent when you look at other constitutions around the world, and seem more focused on advantaging or disadvantaging certain players. And one of the basic concepts of a constitution is that it creates a level playing field for all people, and then so I use that as an example not because I think my voice is the one that's most relevant in terms of the constitutional amendment process, but ultimately it's up to the people of Burma.

Q: [Off-mic.]

Barack Obama: I did? It doesn't make much sense to me.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: I believe democracy should stand up for that principle.

Barack Obama: Absolutely.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: Well, I've always said that it's somewhat flattering to have a constitution written with me in mind. But it shouldn't be done that way. That's not how a democratic constitution should be written. And we object to that clause not because -- not because it debars me from the presidency as such, but because it is against the principle of democracy and also unconstitutional. The constitution says that all citizens should be treated as equals, and this is discrimination on the grounds of my children, my children's spouses, et cetera, et cetera.

Now, this is not acceptable. And our people are firmly behind us in our desire to change this clause. And if President Obama said anything about the necessity to change a clause like that, they will love him very much for it. So he will be very popular among our people.



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And as he said, in the end, it is up to our people to shape the destiny of our country, including the way the constitution is going to be rewritten. And I think the majority of our people understand that this constitution cannot stand as it is if we want to make the full transition to democracy; 59(f), as you know, debars anybody who is children of -- the spouses of the children belong to -- are citizens of another country.

And according to the law -- and I think the President will know the law better than I do because I'm not a lawyer -- according to the law, anybody who is over the age of 18, or whatever legal adult age may be in his or her country, is responsible for himself or herself. Nobody else is responsible for that person.

So from that point of view also, you cannot penalize anybody for what his or her adult children do. From that point of view, it's illegal, it's against all norms of justice. And from the point of view of democracy, it is not right to discriminate against one particular citizen. You wouldn't like to be discriminated against, would you?

So I think our people support the idea of amending this clause because -- not particularly because they want me to be president, perhaps because they do. But I don't think it is so much because of that, but because they realize that this is unfair, unjust and undemocratic.

Q: Thank you. I am [inaudible] from 11 Media from Myanmar. And I wanted to ask the question to Mr. President. The question is, have you discussed about the [inaudible] situation in Myanmar [inaudible] president Thein Sein last night? Because more journalists than politicians have been arrested, particularly in [inaudible], under the present Thein Sein administration. And when you discuss about this, how did he respond to this discussion? Thank you.

Barack Obama: I didn't bring up specific cases with him. I brought up a basic principle that I stated earlier, which is that a free press is a foundation for any democracy.

We rely on journalists to explain and describe the actions of our government. If the government controls the journalists, then it's very difficult for citizens to hold that government accountable. It's a fairly straightforward proposition. And I recognize that there is a transition process that's taking place, that there is a more robust debate today than there was the last time I visited. But to go back to what we said earlier, we can't be complacent. And we, as a government, are going to be troubled when we hear reports of journalists being imprisoned, being killed, being intimidated, or being censored.

And when we engage with this government -- or any government -- and we have evidence that that's taking place, then we're going to raise it.

Thank you very much.