

Remarks delivered by Aung San Suu Kyi to guests of the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute on Sept. 19, 2012.

Thank you. I was about to say that everywhere I can see friends but actually I can't see a thing because the light is in my eye. But since I came to Washington I have found that we have so many friends who have been helping us over the years, people who came to Burma under very difficult circumstances to encourage us, to let us know that we have not been forgotten. Because of their efforts and because of their unwavering support, I am here with you today.

There are still many things to be done in my country, but I believe in our people. I believe in democrats everywhere. Democrats with a small "d," I'll say. That is what you taught me just now, I was listening very carefully. Democrats everywhere are very necessary for the world. Democracy is not perfect, I never said it was and I think everybody accepts that it is not perfect, but it is the best system we have been able to devise so far.

The best thing about democracy, in my opinion, that it allows for political change without violence, without hurt to the country. In 1990, we had "democratic" -- so called -- elections in Burma and although our party, my party, the National League for Democracy, won 82 percent of the seats, we were never allowed to even go anywhere near the legislature. Instead, many of our members were imprisoned and it was only after 22 years that we were given another chance to compete in democratic elections.

This was last April when by-elections were held. There were only 45 seats going, and we were able to contest 44 of them. In one, our candidate was disqualified. Well, I will not go into that now, but that also is interesting from the point of view of democratic values and practices.

Of the 44 that were contested we won 43. This did not really surprise me. I was only a bit annoyed because we did not win 44. But I think it surprised a lot of other people. This is because for more than 20 years, the propaganda had been disseminated all over the country and all over the world that the people of Burma no longer supported the National League for Democracy.

Our victory in 1990 was considered something of the past, and the present and the future was interpreted as a phase completely divorced from that past when the people demonstrated their support for us so very clearly. However last April, the people of Burma showed that they were still behind the NLD or rather I would say, with the NLD. The most encouraging thing about the by-elections was not that we won but that the people had been so very quick to learn the value of their votes.

This was what we concentrated on when we were campaigning. Our policy is not to make promises that we could not be sure of keeping. I consider it dishonest to make easy promises when we had no way of knowing whether or not we would be able to keep them. Some tell me this means that I am not a real politician, but I don't agree with that, do you? I feel very reticent about giving my word if I cannot be sure of keeping it. So I would say very simply to the people at the rallies, "all I can promise is that I will try my best."

I was very heartened by the fact that our people understood that I would not be able to do more than my best. They accepted this. I was criticized for this by a politician from the other camp. He did not use my name directly but in one of his speeches he said, "What is the point of voting for somebody who will not make promises?" I was interested to find that he said nothing about keeping the promises, just making them.

Our people are far more sensible than that. We concentrated on the importance of democratic duties as well as democratic rights. If you want rights, you have to be prepared to discharge your duties and we explained that one of the primary duties of those who wish for democracy is to take part in elections, is to use their vote sensibly and that they did.

It was very touching to find how eager people were to vote in the last by-elections. In my constituency, which is not far from Rangoon, but which is actually made up of more than 127 villages and two wards and towns, so it means that my constituency is really primarily a rural village constituency. In my constituency, I found very old people going out to vote, some accompanied by their grandchildren and, of course, young people as well. All those who had come of age, almost everybody who was able to do so took part in the by-elections. They performed their duty. And those who were not on the electoral list, because there were many discrepancies, there were many weaknesses in the way in which the elections were conducted.

I think mainly because we are unused to multi-party elections, one had been held in 2010, but to quote the United Nations, it was "deeply flawed." I think this is a very polite way of putting it. When we had our by-elections in April, there were many who should have been on the list of voters but who were not and so therefore they were not allowed to vote.

I was touched by how upset they were by this. They had absorbed our message that their right and their duty, was one and the same when it came to voting. They had the right to vote and they had the duty to vote. Those who were unable to do so were deeply upset and this I think is a good augury for the future of my country.

The by-elections pleased us in other ways. The people were brave enough to vote for the party they wanted to support. Considering the fact that Burma had lived under fear for decades, this was a tremendous sea change. We were so happy, happy not because people voted for us so much as that our people had dared to vote for us and now we have to deliver.

As I said earlier, we made no promises. Our candidates were warned that they should not make promises that they could not be certain of keeping. Although we make no promises, we know that our people have hopes and expectations for the future. This is only natural. They would not have voted for us if they had not thought that we would be able to make their lives better. This is what we want to do now.

Burma is at a stage when we can go forward and do great things. At the same time, there is still the possibility that we will disappoint our people, that we will dash their hopes. Either by not bringing about change quickly enough or by bringing about change in the wrong way. Speed is not of the essence but it does matter.

Even though we have explained to the people that we cannot change everything overnight, they have the right to expect change within a reasonable length of time. There have to be short-term improvements as well as long term ones. If we can show our people that there can be improvements to their lives in the short-term, they will be prepared to wait for the longer term changes that they wish for.

I am most concerned about the young people in my country, because they are our future. Unless we have the kind of young people who will be able to take over the responsibility of building our nation when their time comes, we will not be able to rest in peace about the way in which our country will be going. This means that we have to look to education and to health.

A month or so ago, I went to a village and spoke to some villagers there about their needs. I was astonished by what one mother said to me. She was in tears, because she could not send her children to school. She knew that the future would be jeopardized if they could not be educated. Others, too, spoke of their children's education, but what struck me was few spoke about their health. They were so concerned about preparing their children for the future through education that they had almost forgotten the physical needs, the medical needs, the health needs.

I explained to them that it not enough to have educated children, they had to be healthy. If their children were educated but unhealthy, they will not be able to use the education that they had acquired, either for their own good or for that of the community. Health and education are the essentials of a strong, healthy, younger generation, who will continue with the process of democratization. Because I think that process will go on for a very long time.

We now talk about the process of democratization in the country. And people ask me whether or not I think that is irreversible. Of course everything is reversible. You must not forget that Burma was once a democracy but that we came under military dictatorship and lost our democratic rights and democratic institutions. Nothing is actually irreversible. But we have to get to the point where stopping the process of democratization -- or turning back -- would be far too painful for anybody to contemplate.

I would say that in theory democracy is reversible even in the United States, but I doubt any one of you here spend restless nights worrying about a reversal to your democratic process. Because it is a process. We will have to keep going on, continuing to build up our democratic institutions and to ensure that our people keep aware of their democratic rights and their democratic duties.

I would like to appeal to our friends here and all over the world to help us to build a secure future for our nation. We need most help in health and education, but also we need help in other areas, for example, communications. When I say communications, I am not talking of IT, I am talking about roads. I will talk about IT later because roads come first.

We have poor roads all over our country. In my constituency, during the monsoons, the roads are so bad that some children are unable to go to schools which are situated in villages other than their own. This means about five months without going to school. One of the needs of my

constituents are roads. I have to tell them that it is not very easy for us to construct new roads. This is a job that is usually done by the government, but we will try our best.

We have tried our best to help our people as best we can, to make them self reliant, to make them understand that they can do things for themselves. For example, water is also in great need. You would not think so. You would not think that a country where it rains for about five months of the year would have problems about water but we do. Because sometimes the water is brackish. It's a question of not enough potable water.

We started out by digging wells. But when we dig wells, we set conditions. First of all, we have to make sure that the well will be dug in a place where most of the villagers will be able to access easily. It should not be anybody's private property. It should not be too far away from the thickly populated areas of the village. Then we of course have to make the condition that the water has to be potable, if the water is brackish, if we don't have enough fresh water available, we do not go on with the digging of the wells.

But we also set a fourth condition. That the villagers should be prepared to form a committee to take responsibility for the upkeep of the well and that they have to be involved in all the preparations for the digging and for the maintenance. In this way, we seek to democratize our people, to make them understand not only that they have a duty to look after their own community, but they also have the ability to do it.

In these small ways we have been working since April to do our best to make our people self-confident and self-reliant. Until our people believe in themselves and believe in their ability to sustain a democratic system, we cannot say that we have achieved democracy.

I have been talking about the communities, how we are trying to teach our people to live in democratic communities, but we also have to think of course and very seriously, about democratic institutions: the executive, the legislative, the judiciary.

The judiciary, I will start with because there's least to say to say about it. The judiciary is the biggest problem in Burma. For years we have suffered from lack of independent and clean courts. This still prevails. Our people do not trust the courts. We do not believe in justice as delivered by the courts and we know that from decades our courts of justice were not free from the influence of the executive.

I have to be honest and say that I am not sure how free our judiciary is now, from the influence of the executive. I cannot say it is free, I cannot say it is not free. I am trying to find out. A couple of months ago I was made the chairman for the Committee for the Rule of Law and Tranquility.

Yes, I know. You all smiled when I said tranquility. But actually it's very logical. Rule of law and tranquility are linked. I translate rule of law as a situation in which the citizens of a country can be confident that the law will protect them, that the law is there for their benefit and not that of the government or others who have influence and power over them.

If people can be confident that the law is on their side, that the law is there for them and not to be used against them, then, I think they will feel a sense of tranquility. To a certain extent they will feel a sense of inner security that generates tranquility. So I am quite happy about the Committee of Rule of Law and Tranquility, although I sometimes worry about the responsibilities that it entails.

We will try very hard to do what we can within the year that has been assigned to the committee to improve the judicial situation of Burma. This involves not just the courts of justice but lawyers, policemen, other security forces, the education of lawyers, the administration and the dissemination of knowledge that our people might know what their rights are and how they may be able to get access to the protection of the law.

Many things to be done, but, I will say that I have been pleasantly surprised by the vigor of the legislature. Now I have to also say that when we came to the legislature in July some of the representatives tended to nod off very often. But I think they're more wakeful now with the advent of the NLD. I do not want to take too much credit for my party but I am proud of the way in which our MPs have conducted themselves during the last session. I am very strict with them. I think that has a lot to do with why they've been behaving so well.

I have been pleasantly surprised also by the fairness of the two speakers -- the speaker of the upper house and the lower house. They have treated us as an effective opposition although there are only 44 of us in a legislature of 651. I feel we are going forward there in the legislature.

With regard to the executive, by its nature, of course, it is more opaque than the legislature, but the president has initiated a reform program which could take us forward to a genuinely democratic society. But it is just the beginning. We do not know how the reforms are going to continue, because reform is a matter of substance as well as a matter of the right speed and the right sequencing.

Reforms are difficult and complex. Especially in a country like mine, where we have not known what reform meant for many, many decades. Too much is expected in too short a time. But we have to explain everything to the people. This is what we have to learn as part of the democratic process, that those who are in power have a duty to explain to those who put them in power, because that is how a democracy works. Those who are in power are in power because people have placed them there through free and fair elections.

And so those who are in power have a duty to explain to those who voted for them, why, they are taking the measures that they have chosen to take. This is essential, and also those who voted the government into power have to understand how to ask questions. You would think that asking questions was a very simple matter. It may be in the United States, but not in Burma.

Our people are now having to be taught to ask questions. It has not been part of our social practices for the last 50 years to ask questions of those in authority. So, we have to start with such elementary lessons as how to ask questions. I don't think it's so simple. Sitting in the

legislature I have been surprised at what the questions are and what the answers are. They sometimes seem to have nothing to do with one another at all.

It is incredible, sometimes I don't quite understand what the questions are anyway because they go on for such a long time that by the time they come to an end, I've forgotten what the beginning was about. And I suppose that is why the answers are quite different from the questions, that the person who answers also does not know what the question was about.

These are things that we can learn and enjoy learning and I have found that our people enjoy learning. Everywhere all over the country, wherever possible, we have tried to set up courses for young people, courses designed to teach them to take part in democratic practices. But these courses are very simple and very limited and certainly, are not enough for us to use as a foundation for the future.

This is again where we need help from our friends -- how to train our people to cope with democracy. I don't mean how to train our people to fight in the democratic arena, I think they know that already, but we want them to be able to resolve their problems without turning it into a fight.

We want people to understand that where there are problems, there should be solutions and that is where the challenge lies: in overcoming the problems, not in avoiding problems. Problems cannot be avoided. So there is so much for our people to learn.

When people ask me, "what does the future hold for Burma," then I would say the future holds out a lot of hope for Burma, but for that hope to be realized we have to work very hard and we have to invite our friends to help us. I know that the world has been kind to Burma. I know how much good will there is towards us. How very much the world wants us to succeed.

The world wants a success story, a happy ending, and we want to be that success story, that happy ending which will make our friends feel that the years in which they've worked so very hard to promote democracy in Burma have not been in vain.

I think I have taken up more than my share of time. I want to thank all of you very much for coming here to encourage me, to support me, and to allow me to see how important it is for us to try our best to succeed that we may be able to repay the kindness that you have shown towards us. Thank you.