

## **Press Availability with Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes in Burma**

MR. RHODES: Thanks, everybody. I feel like I'm returning to one of my day jobs here. So let me just give you a brief overview of what we've done the last two days, some of the key issues we addressed, and then take your questions. I think it's worth going through what we did, who we met with, because I think that in itself suggests some of what our focus was.

We were able, when I got here Sunday night, to have dinner with some of the groups that will be doing election observation, some of the U.S. and international NGOs and government partners who have a very important role in helping to monitor the election. The next day we went to Naypyitaw. We had a series of meetings with the government, met with the chair of the UEC, met with the President, met with the Commander-in-Chief, and met with the Minister of Home Affairs. Then, last night, we were able to engage with a number of different key thinkers and activists here in Rangoon at the Ambassador's residence.

Today, this morning, we were able to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, and then have a series of meetings with different constituencies. We met with both the Rohingya community, the Rakhine community separately, a group of ethnic leaders, as well as some of the young people participating in the YSEALI program -- the Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative -- and then have an interfaith meeting just now with a group of people.

Let me just say a few opening comments. President Obama asked me to come here because this is clearly a critical moment on the path of Myanmar's ongoing reform process and transition as we prepare for an important election on November 8th, and as we, of course, have recently seen the signing of the National Ceasefire Agreement. The main purpose was I think to give a clear sense of how the United States is viewing the election while also hearing from both the government and people outside of government about how they're viewing the election, and some of the other issues in the country, of course.

I'll just give you a high-level sense of what our key messages were, and then I'm sure we'll get into these issues in questions.

On the election, we underscored again that the United States believes that this is a very important moment for there to be an inclusive and transparent, credible election that reflects the will of the people of Myanmar. We don't expect one election to solve every problem in the country, but we do believe this election can be a very important milestone in the ongoing transition that's taking place. It can move things forward if it goes well, or if it does not go well, it can clearly be an obstacle to progress. We discussed different elements of how they realize the promise of the election, and we can focus on that, of course, in questions.

Again, I think we underscored the importance of people being able to vote, there being transparency about decisions that are made by the UEC with respect to the conduct of the election; that if there are areas where people are not going to be able to vote that there's a clear public rationale for that determination and a clear sense that, if there are groups that are unable to vote because of the circumstances in a particular region, that they have an opportunity to vote at a future date; and importantly, that the results of the election, of course, have to be respected.

I think, in general, we also made the point that after November 8th, this process is not over. Even after the results are tabulated, the process is not over. It's going to be very important that the leaders of the different parties and groups in the country are able to come together after the election in the process of forming a new government. Elections are inherently periods of division and competition, and after the results are tabulated, hopefully the election is successful in expressing the will of the people, that that can then turn into a moment for consensus building. I should add we do believe that the participation of international monitors in assessing the conduct of the election is going to be very important, so that was a point that we underscored.

A few other points, and then move into questions. We did express some concern over some of the trends that we've seen with the role of religion in the current political environment. We see a risk of religious expression being inconsistent with a constitution that separates religion and politics, and of course, when that happens, ultimately it can pose a danger to religious minorities. And so we underscored those points.

With respect to the ceasefire agreement, we welcome this as an important first step in the process of national reconciliation. For those groups that are participating in the ceasefire, we underscored to the government that it's important that there's a clear path for implementation that demonstrates that the ceasefire will lead to real progress in these communities; that there needs to be an opening for groups that did not participate in signing the NCA and being able to, at a later date, join the nationwide ceasefire agreement, and that the government should -- the military should show some restraint in those areas to allow for the type of space for the NCA to truly become nationwide.

And we, of course, addressed the situation in Rakhine State where we continue to be deeply concerned, along with the international community, about the humanitarian situation faced by the Rohingya population. And we underscored the importance of there being humanitarian access to those who are in need, there being freedom of movement for populations in Rakhine State; for people to be able to live in their homes, their villages, their communities, instead of camps; and ultimately, for citizenship to be a part of resolving this issue so that there's long-term peace, reconciliation, and stability in Rakhine State.

And, of course, we've been concerned by the disqualification and disenfranchisement of a significant number of voters in that particular community who were able to participate in previous elections.

So I'll stop there. Actually, let me say one more thing before we move to questions. We've always been very clear-eyed about just how complex the transition is in Myanmar. President Obama, in his opening to Myanmar, and our government's engagement with Myanmar, recognized that given the many challenges in the country, it's going to take time to resolve all of the issues that I've discussed. We see a lot of positive signs. We see parties and individuals campaigning around the country. We see a lot of enthusiasm about the political process. We see voices that were not allowed to participate in the past being expressed. We see vigorous debate in the media and in civil society.

At the same time, we see significant ongoing challenges, both in terms of some of the issues I addressed, like how religion is playing an increasing role in politics and a role that is potentially destabilizing, and in continued obstacles, clearly, to freedom of -- full freedom of expression and full democratic participation in the country. And we recognize that even -- an election that goes very well doesn't complete a transition to civilian rule, not when you have a mandate of a military participation in the parliament.

So with that, why don't I stop and we'll move to questions.

Q As far as we could observe for this upcoming election, anybody could be winning, than slightly, due to the public support with popular votes. If the result is not going to be honored, and then the public mistrust is immense also -- so if election result is not honored, what is the U.S. move, next move?

MR. RHODES: So first of all, with respect to the result itself, again, I do want to underscore that our evaluation of the election is going to look at a lot of factors, drawing on information from the government and the UEC, from international monitors and civil society, and from the media. And we're going to be looking at whether people have access to the vote, whether they're able to vote free from any type of intimidation, whether or not there's a transparent process for explaining decisions, and again, whether or not there's a clear ability for people to express themselves and to vote across the country, not just in certain areas that might favor one constituency over another.

And to that end, the monitoring is important. So just to give one example, we've made clear that we think it's important that just as there's monitoring of civilian voting, there should be monitoring of military voting, so that people have confidence that the same rules apply to everybody. That's the conduct of the election -- recognizing that there are going to be difficulties in an election this complicated in a country with as many ongoing challenges as Myanmar. In some areas, there is continued violence. And I should just say very clearly there that if there are postponements in certain regions because of circumstances that make it difficult to vote, there should be a clear public rationale, and a clear ability for people to vote at a later date.

With respect to your question about the results of the election, that's a second step. There will be a result that will come out and, absolutely, the result of the election needs to be respected. And that's a point that we made in our meetings with the government. We made that point to the President and the Commander-in-Chief, and the other ministers. They have said that they will respect the result of the election. So they're on the record, so that's the commitment that they've made.

The position of the United States consistently since our opening to Myanmar has been that if the democratic transition is moving forward, it opens up additional space for us to deepen our engagement here through our relationship with the government, through our approach to sanctions, through our ability to support and even promote additional investment and commercial activity here from the United States. So if the election is a positive step and the result is respected, inevitably that moves the transition forward, and that opens up even additional opportunities for engagement for the United States.

If the result of the election is not respected -- and I'm not going to get into a hypothetical scenario for exactly what that would look like -- clearly, that would represent a step backwards, and we would have to make assessments about our policies and our engagement in response to something like that. Anywhere in the world where a democratic result is not respected in some fashion, it impacts the way in which the United States engages that country going forward. But we'll have to make that determination at the appropriate time. And our hope is that that doesn't happen, of course.

And again, the last point I'd make is, even after there's a result and it's respected, what we'd really like to see is the leadership of the country, the different institutions and political leaders of the country coming together. Because there will be a process leading up to April when a new government is fully selected and in place. And ultimately, even though there are winners and losers in elections, the transition will work best here if people are working together across different political parties and across different institutions of government.

So I'll stop there.

Q My question is, the UEC and the local authorities have been accused by some of bias in adjudicating disputes related to campaigning, election materials, things like that. Did you discuss this with the Chairman? And based on your discussions, are you convinced that authorities here have both the will and the capacity to fairly adjudicate election complaints?

MR. RHODES: Well, we did discuss this issue. And our point was that, number one, in adjudicating complaints, there has to be transparency so people understand why decisions are being made; that if it's opaque and people have no idea why they show up and they're not permitted to vote, or they have no idea why a polling place was closed, that inevitably is going to impact the confidence of the people in the election.

So we underscored the need for decisions to be clearly explained, for the electoral process to be as clear and transparent as possible to voters. Some of this obviously has already happened, but we have a very intense and important period between now and November 8th, and we would very much like to see the UEC being as transparent as possible with people. That's the first point I'd make.

The second point I'd make is, clearly, as you look at an election in any country, you are able to compile a body of reporting from different sources and evaluate whether there's an appearance that decisions disadvantaged one political or ethnic faction over another. So that will be apparent. So I think at the end of the election, that's the type of thing that we and others who are watching this closely will be able to evaluate. Our hope is that the election is truly inclusive, and if there are problems that they're problems of capacity and not will, and that those problems are addressed in a good-faith manner, and that people in Myanmar, ultimately, who are going to be the judges of the credibility of the election more than anybody else, have the confidence that the election was administered in a way that was not in an way biased politically.

And the third point I'd make is that international monitors are very important here. They're important in terms of capacity, as well. At the dinner the other night it was very clear in talking

to some of the organizations -- they've been working with the UEC for a long time now, and they are able to help fill gaps in terms of capacity, in terms of things like building a voter list, in terms of things like preparing for contingencies at different polling sites. So international monitors should not be seen as some inconvenience of having an election that is a subject of significant international attention. They're actually people who just have a lot of experience in elections in different parts of the world and can bring that expertise to bear and be a source of support to the UEC. And I think, thus far, the UEC has worked with international monitors and has indicated that they're going to continue to provide that access, and that's very important.

And again, the last thing I'd say about that is that international monitors also provide a source of reporting about how the elections transpire, along with the official source from the UEC and the reporting that you all will do. And all of that will impact how we look at the conduct and success of the election.

Q I just wanted to ask you about two things. One is about the NCA you mentioned. You discussed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. There's been some reports in the state media that there's been fighting and intensifying in areas controlled by the armed groups that have not signed. So I was wondering whether you discussed that. And also, if you could perhaps elaborate a little bit more about the topics, particularly the religious -- the role of religion in the upcoming election, and what sort of responses did you get from the President or other stakeholders on that issue.

MR. RHODES: So, on the first question, we made the point that it's important that the government and the military show some restraint in those areas where there are groups that did not sign the ceasefire. Obviously it's a complex situation and there are different sides to this. However, the goal of the government is to reach a truly nationwide ceasefire, which would be profoundly in the interest of the country. And the best way to preserve -- and, I should add, the ethnic groups who didn't sign I think still indicated an interest in being a part of the NCA in the long term here. So I think both sides should provide space for that possibility to be reached.

And that was our message to the government, that showing restraint preserves that space. It also demonstrates a commitment to the NCA in terms of both the letter and the spirit of the NCA so that those groups who signed see that this is still truly a national commitment and that signing an implementation will yield a better life for their communities, but that the pathway is still available to those who didn't sign.

On the question of religion, we heard certainly from different elements of society that we spoke to today concerns that when you look at some of the activities that have taken place, when you look at some of the language that has certainly been more extreme in terms of incitement against religious minorities, that that poses a danger; that there's a sense of potential insecurity that that could lead to violence or instability.

And the point that we made to the government and to different elements of society today is that it's very important, number one, that there be a rule of law that prevents that type of extreme language certainly from leading to any actions against minority populations. There needs to be accountability for people who act on that type of extremist language so that there's some check

in Myanmar against any creeping sense of extremism, which is inconsistent with the constitution, which is very clear that religion and politics should be separate.

I think the government certainly recognizes that constitutional commitment. We're in a political season, but that doesn't mean that there should be -- in a political season there are always passions that are high, but there still need to be limits, and those limits are even more important when it comes to the potential for any religious-based violence or stigmatizing of the minority populations.

So this is something we'll be looking at leading into the election night. I think after the election, too, it will be critically important that the different communities are able to come together. Because ultimately what is in the interest of the country is national reconciliation, and that includes the political process so that different political factions are able to work within a system of government together. That includes ethnic reconciliation through the NCA, which is ongoing, but that also includes the ability of people of different faiths to live together.

And ultimately, frankly, even if you have success on the political process and on the ethnic reconciliation -- and that is a huge challenge -- if there is this sense of religious intolerance that divides people against one another by faith, that's going to undermine the overall project of national reconciliation. And again, ultimately, the legacy of those who have embraced reform should be, and can be, a true national reconciliation that allows the country to move beyond a very difficult chapter and embrace new opportunities.

So I don't want to speak for the government, but we'll be watching both the conduct of the election and what takes place after, given our concerns about these issues.

I can take a couple more.

Q From your meetings here, did you get a sense that coalition politics or sort of cooperation post-November 8th is something that different political leaders in Myanmar are actually aspiring toward so that we understand is important? And especially in your conversations with the Commander-in-Chief, do you get the sense that the military is willing to work together with whoever gets voted in government after November 8th?

MR. RHODES: So, people certainly have said the right things. The Commander-in-Chief has said publicly that they will respect the result of the election and work with whoever the next government is. That was certainly his message in our discussions. We'll obviously be watching very closely to make sure that it is a case that the result is respected.

I think Aung San Suu Kyi is vigorously campaigning, but has also indicated publicly that she wants to work with the different institutions of the country, including the military, after the election. So that's a positive -- I think that sends a positive signal. And I think certainly that's been the position of the governing party as well, that they are committed to respecting the results of the election and working to form a new government based on the results of the election.

I think that it's critically important to recognize that whatever the result -- somebody is going to win, somebody is going to lose -- after an election, somebody is unhappy in any

country. And here, given the complexity of the transition, it's even more important that in that process between the results being announced, a new parliament being seated, a President being chosen, that the leadership of the country can work together across political and institutional divides. That is what is going to enable the election result, whatever it is, to translate into real progress in terms of the democratic transition but also in terms of the ability to deal with the country's problems.

In election season, often everybody stops and focuses on the election, but there are big challenges here. The NCA, we talked about Rakhine State but also promoting economic growth and showing progress for the people in terms of their livelihoods. All of those tasks are going to be easier if people can work together, no matter what the result is, no matter who the winner is.

Thanks.

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