

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Remarks by President Obama After Civil Society Roundtable

U.S. Embassy
Rangoon, Burma

3:14 P.M. MMT

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, I've just had an opportunity to speak with an excellent cross-section of civil society organizations here in Myanmar — women's organizations, organizations focused on rule of law, we have the press association, the press council represented here, organizations championing the rights of the disabled, labor organizations, student organizations, groups that are concerned with the plight of ethnic minorities here.

And one thing that's become clear from this conversation is that there is a vibrant civil society here, one that is committed to democracy and transparency and accountability. And it is U.S. policy to make sure that these civil society groups are supported and that they have the space in which to let their ideas and their concerns be expressed.

And as many of you know, I got my start in public life not as a politician but actually as a community organizer. I very much believe that when ordinary people have the means to make themselves heard and to organize with each other to present their concerns that society is better. And nowhere is that more true than in a country like Myanmar that is transitioning from a military dictatorship to a democracy.

So I very much appreciate all the ideas that have been shared here. I think that what is most important from all the groups is that the laws are applied in a fair way; that we don't see the government acting with impunity simply because a group may represent ideas that the government hasn't approved of or that in some ways challenges the status quo, but that everybody's voice is allowed to be heard.

Not everybody at this table, by the way, agrees on every issue. We heard different perspectives on some very controversial issues, including what's happening in Rakhine State. But the fact that you can have open dialogue like this means that those problems can be solved. And if those ideas are suppressed, then nothing will change.

So I'm very pleased to have spent time with you and I want to assure you that the United States will continue to be a partner with the people of Myanmar. And we'll continue to engage the government to provide more space and more opportunity for freedom of the press, freedom of association, rule of law, transparency, and accountability.

Thank you so much, everybody. Thank you, pool.

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