

**Keynote Speech by
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1991 Noble Peace Laureate and Leader of Burma's Democracy Movement
to the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum**

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I'm truly happy to be addressing you today, the ASEAN civil society/ASEAN People's Forum. Burma is part of ASEAN.

We Burmese people want to work very closely with the peoples of the other nations of ASEAN. ASEAN is vital to our interests; ASEAN is vital to our future. And we hope that we also are vital to ASEAN.

Many people say that Asian values are different from western values. They say this often in order to argue against our struggle for democracy. **This repeated assertion that democracy is a western concept hurts us who are struggling for democracy in Burma.**

The Burmese people who started their movement for democracy in 1988 had very little idea of the western concept of democracy. **What they understood was that they wanted security, they wanted freedom, they wanted to be free to shape their own destinies.**

They wanted to live in a land that is free from fear and free from want. They wanted to live in a nation where the people could elect their own government. They wanted a government of the people, for the people, by the people. Not because they had ever heard President's Lincoln's speech or ever read it, but because their instincts told them that this was the kind of government that would look after their interests.

So, what we are trying to do in Burma, is to better our lives, and we believe that the best way to do that is through democratic institutions. Of course the democracy in Burma will have a particular Burmese taste to it, if you like, a flavor to it, a particular Burmese aspect to it. This is inevitable.

But there are certain basic concepts of democracy that we cannot ignore. If these concepts are ignored, then what we have will not be a democracy, but a semblance of democracy.

I'm sure you all understand this, particularly in Indonesia, where you have made an admirable transition from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. We envy you, we want to be like you, we want to achieve what you have managed to achieve. And let me go one step further and say that we hope to be able to achieve even more. I think this is quite natural that we all want the best for our country, for our people. But we also want the best for our region, we want the best for this world, but we have to start with ourselves.

So it is not out of selfishness that I'm asking that you help us in our struggle for democracy in Burma, that you help us in our attempts to strengthen civil society in our country. It is by starting here that we can start to help our region and the rest of the world.

I hope the time will come when there will be a free exchange of ideas and of peoples between our two countries and between the other countries of ASEAN. That the time will come, when we all agree that we want a better world based on basic human rights for all of us.

When we come to that point, I think ASEAN will be a happier, stronger region and I would like to think a region to which the rest of the world will look with admiration and with satisfaction.

Thank you all for what you have been doing to increase unity between the peoples of the nations of ASEAN. It is the contact, the engagement between the peoples that is more important than anything else.

Governments are important but only so far as they work for the people. So, let us look forward to the day when it is the peoples of ASEAN who decide what shape our region is going to take.

Thank you.

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