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Barack Obama

Southeast Asian Youth Initiative Fellows Address

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Thank you. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat.

Well, thank you so much, Zin Mar, for your introduction and for your example and your commitment to build a free and open press in Myanmar, and all the hope that you represent. Please give her a big round of applause. She did an outstanding job.

Well, to all of you, welcome to Washington. Welcome to the White House. And while I know that you've been here a few weeks, let me just say again, on behalf of the American people, welcome to the United States of America. We are thrilled to have you here.

I'm not going to give a long speech because what I really want to do is have a conversation with you like the one that I had when I was in Myanmar. So this is a town hall meeting; the less I speak the more questions you get to ask. But I do want to take a few minutes to explain why I believe so strongly in the work that brings us together today and why your presence here is so important.

I think all of you know I have a special attachment to Southeast Asia. As a boy, I lived in Jakarta. My mother spent years working in villages to help women improve their lives. So Southeast Asia helped shape who I am and how I see the world. And as President, I've made it a pillar of my foreign policy to make sure that the United States is more deeply engaged in the Asia Pacific region, including Southeast Asia. And I want to welcome the ambassadors from across ASEAN -- thank you for being here and for your partnership. Give them a big round of applause.



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So I've deepened America's ties with Southeast Asia because your region is critical to our shared future. There are more than 600 million people who live in the ASEAN countries, and you reflect an incredible diversity of faiths and ethnic groups and backgrounds and cultures. And that diversity has to be celebrated and it has to be protected. We have incredible economic engines like Singapore. We've got growing economies like the Philippines and Vietnam and Malaysia. And we can see growth that is lifting people out of poverty and creating more jobs and trade and opportunity for all our countries.

We've seen a historic democratic transition in Indonesia. We've got elections coming later this year in Myanmar. Communities in Laos and Brunei are working for development that's sustainable and protecting the environment. And we're seeing new commitments to the education of young women and girls, as is true in Cambodia. The people of Thailand played a critical role in the global response to the earthquake in Nepal. And we are mindful of the King of Thailand's health issues lately and we wish him the best, and our hopes and prayers are with him. So Southeast Asia is stepping up. It's on the move.

And today, America's relationship with the region is stronger than ever. I'm proud to be the first American President to meet regularly with all 10 ASEAN leaders. I will continue to do so until I am no longer President.

We've strengthened our alliances, including with the Philippines. We've forged new partnerships with Indonesia and Malaysia and Vietnam. Our trade with ASEAN has been growing. We're pursuing the Trans-Pacific Partnership. We're working with ASEAN to bind the region more closely together and confront shared challenges, and uphold international rules and norms, including freedom of navigation, and to ensure that disputes are resolved peacefully. At the moment, several of our nations are working to rescue desperate Rohingya migrants who are at sea, which reflects our commitment to the security and dignity and human rights of every human being.

But despite all the work I've been doing and the ambassadors have been doing, building these stronger ties is not just the work of government. They have to be rooted in partnerships between our peoples -- and especially young people like you.

All across Southeast Asia, almost two-thirds of the population is under 35 years old. So this is a young part of the world. Technology is giving you more power to communicate and organize like never before. In Vietnam, tens of millions of people are connected on Facebook. Across the region, you are civil society leaders working for democracy and human rights and religious tolerance. You are entrepreneurs who are turning your ideas into new businesses; activists fighting for the environment and against climate change. And that's the power that young people have, and the spirit of optimism and idealism that you represent. So you're inspiring to me. And I've made it clear that America wants to be your partner. We want to help you succeed.



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So two years ago, we launched the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative -- YSEALI -- to help empower young people like you, to give you more of the skills and resources and networks that you need to turn your ideas into action. And since then, we've offered workshops, online networking, exchanges, professional development, hands-on training. And today, the YSEALI network includes nearly 35,000 young people like you.

Last year in Myanmar, at the town hall meeting that Zin Mar mentioned, I announced our fellowship program to bring young leaders from across the region to the United States to help develop their skills. And for this first class of 75, more than 1,000 people applied. The competition was intense. Today, I'm proud to welcome you as the first class of YSEALI Fellows. We're very proud of you. And I've had a chance to read about some of you and the amazing things that you've been doing. And I suspect that Niema Remejoso, from the Philippines -- there she is right there -- she spoke for a lot of you. She said, "Am I dreaming, or is this really happening?" So it's really happening.

You come from all 10 ASEAN nations, from capital cities and rural towns. You represent different faiths and backgrounds, and different beliefs. Obviously, there are men and women here -- in fact, the majority are women -- because one of the best measures of a country's success is whether it empowers women and girls. And you're all bound together by a common belief that you have the talent and the drive and the power to improve the lives of your fellow human beings.

So for the last five weeks, you've been all across America. You've experienced state legislatures and city councils. You've seen how our day-to-day democracy works. You've worked at nonprofits, learning how to organize and advocate for change. You've interned in some American companies, seeing how to build and manage a business. And I want to thank all of our leaders and partners who are here -- we've got universities and academic institutions, we've got businesses -- all who have been very generous in their support of this overall process.

So you've been experiencing America. Some of you were very lucky and had a chance to go to my home state of Hawaii. I heard that some of you tried to hula dance. Some of you went to my hometown of Chicago, and you saw American ingenuity at its best, including -- I hear that you saw ATMs that give cupcakes.

And I also know that Americans have learned from you as well. You shared your culture and traditions and foods. You discovered American foods like Jell-O. I hear somebody had Jell-O, which -- I was very excited about that. And the friendships and the understanding that you have forged will help to bring our countries together for a long time.

And soon you'll return home. Each of you has developed a project, an action plan, and you'll take what you've learned here and put it into practice. And we're going to be with you during this process as you build your ventures, expand your networks, and -- mentoring young people that are coming behind you.



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We're going to welcome 500 Fellows like you every single year. So this may be the end of your visit to America, but you've really begun this process of building partnerships that will last a lifetime.

And we want you to make sure that you are realizing your dreams. I just want to take a couple of examples. We've got Seth Suonvisal. Where's Seth? Here's Seth. So in Cambodia, Seth works with parliament. So in Tulsa, he witnessed city government at work, the legislative process in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And, Seth, we're proud to be your partner as you strive to ensure that governments deliver for all of the Cambodian people.

We have Muchamad Dafip. Where's Muchamad? There he is. He is an advocate for the environment in Indonesia. Apa kabar? And at the East-West Center -- there aren't two of you, is there? So at the East-West Center in Hawaii, he learned new ways to empower citizens and effect change. So we're proud to be your partner. Together, we can promote sustainable development and help our -- help the next generation meet the urgent challenges of climate change.

We've got Khine Muang -- there's Khine, and -- is a doctor in Myanmar where she offers free surgeries to children for cleft palates and lips, and gives them a new smile and new confidence. So we're very proud. At the Oklahoma University School of Community Medicine, she focused on ways to expand outreach and free clinics. And we are so proud to be your partner, working for the health and dignity of children across Myanmar. Although, I have to say that you are the youngest doctor I've ever seen. I mean, she looks like she's 14. It's very impressive. So thank you.

And where is Pern Phansiri? There's Pern, from Thailand, a tireless fighter against human trafficking. And at the city manager's office in Lee's Summit, Missouri, she saw how a community takes a comprehensive approach to social services. So we're proud to be your partner in standing up for the rights of women and children. We have to end the outrage of human trafficking, and we so appreciate the work that you do.

So this just gives you an example of the incredible talent and commitment that these young people represent. And I want to close with a quick story that captures the spirit of our work together. Thongvone Sosamphan is here from Laos. Where's -- please, stand up. So she's here from Laos. In Atlanta, she visited the memorial and center honoring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And she was struck by one of Dr. King's quotes, which says, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

And that prompted her to think about the true meaning of leadership. And she wrote something very beautiful that I want everybody to hear. "Leadership is inside you," she said. "Everyone can be a leader, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to lead. You don't need to know more than the others. All you need is a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love." That's pretty good.



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So that's what I see in all of you. That's why I believe so strongly that you're going to keep answering that question Dr. King asked: What are you doing for others? It's why I'm confident that all of you will be extraordinary leaders. Already you're doing great work in your communities and your countries, with hearts full of grace and souls generated by love. And you will continue to have a friend and partner in the United States of America.

So we are very, very proud of you. And with that, let's -- I want to hear from you, both questions or you can tell me a story about the exciting food that you've had -- all across the country.

So we have some microphones in the audience, and what I'll do is I'll just call on people and I'm going to go boy, girl, boy, girl so that it's very fair. So we'll start with this young lady here. Please introduce yourself and tell us where you're from.

Question: Hi, Mr. President. I am an elected representative from Malaysia. My question to you is, what is your view on the democracy in Malaysia with the recent jailing of Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition leader, and the crackdown on opposition? Thank you.

President Obama: Well, Malaysia has a history of democracy that has to be preserved. And I have a very good relationship with Prime Minister Najib and we are close partners and cooperating on a whole host of issues.

I think that Malaysia, like all our countries, not just ASEAN countries but countries here in the United States, have to recognize that democracy is not just elections but it's how open and transparent and accountable government is between elections. And it's important that free speech, freedom of the press, an independent judiciary, the right to assemble peacefully -- that all those rights are observed to make democracy work. So as a general rule, I don't comment on even individual cases in this country, much less another country, because I think it's important for the legal system to work.

But I do know that it is important if an opposition leader who is well known has been charged with a crime, that that process of how that is adjudicated and how open it is, and how clear the evidence is, that that is all subject to scrutiny. Because what you don't want is a situation in which the legitimacy of the process is questioned. That has an adverse impact on democracy as a whole. And I think we all have to guard against making sure that there's not a chilling effect on potential opposition in government.

So as I always point out, democracy is hard. I mean, I think that many of the things that are said about me are terribly unfair. But the reason American democracy has survived for so long is because people -- even if they're wrong -- have a right to say what they think. George Washington, our first President, he complained terribly about some of the foolishness that was said about him. But part of the reason he is considered one of our greatest Presidents is because he set an example of recognizing that if democracy was to work then you had to respect the rights of even those people who you disagreed most with, because otherwise there's no way that a democracy can flourish over the long term.



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So these are things that I said publicly when I was in Myanmar -- when I was in Malaysia, rather. I had an opportunity to meet with some community activists and civil society leaders there. And this is something that I say everywhere we go. And it's important for America to recognize that we're not perfect, either, and so we have to make sure that we are constantly seeing how do we improve our democracy. I mean, the amounts of money, for example, that are involved in our elections these days is disturbing because it makes it seem as if a few people have more influence in the democracy than the many.

And so I will continue to speak out about these issues, even with friends. Maybe sometimes we are even more willing to say something when it's friends because we know that they can do better. Thank you.

Yes, sir.

Question: Hello, Mr. President. I am from Indonesia. I am working with the ministry of finance. My YSEALI theme is economic empowerment. My question is, what is your expectation about economic relationship between United States and ASEAN countries in the future? Thank you.

President Obama: Well, we already have a very strong economic relationship. As I pointed out, this is a region that is growing fast. It has a big population. You have very hardworking people, entrepreneurial people. I expect it will continue to grow. And the United States wants to be a partner in all sorts of ways.

Trade is the most obvious and important relationship, economically. And so one of the reasons why I think the Trans-Pacific Partnership is so important is because it sets up a set of principles to ensure fair trade between countries. It calls for higher labor standards for all countries, higher environmental standards for all countries. It makes sure that countries are being treated -- companies are being treated fairly when they are operating in a foreign market.

And there's the potential, I think, if we get this right and completed in the next few months, to be able to ensure that the United States and ASEAN countries that already have a massive amount of trade, that that's able to increase and that there's more opportunity for everybody. But it's at a high standard rather than a low standard.

Part of the goal for ASEAN countries, most of them are now entering into a stage of development where they don't want to just be sending raw materials to someplace else to have them developed, they want to be creating value starting their own businesses, making sure that they are part of the 21st century economy. And that requires upgrading skills, education for their populations. We think we can be helpful in those areas.



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And we want to encourage high educational levels in ASEAN countries because then it's less likely that workers are exploited. And that means then that you're competing with us because you have the best ideas and the best products, as opposed to just you have the cheapest labor. And if all that ASEAN countries are offering are cheap labor, then what happens is U.S. workers get hurt and you don't necessarily see an improvement in standards of living for those ASEAN countries.

If everybody is operating at a higher level then we're all competing on an even playing field, and over time that will result in more growth and more development in ASEAN countries. But I think skills training is the most important thing. I think that the power of the Internet to access markets and ideas will be particularly important for ASEAN countries.

Infrastructure is something that still needs to get done. I think there is still under-investment of infrastructure in that region. I know there was some controversy a while back because China wanted to start an Asia infrastructure bank; we haven't yet signed on to participate.

I want to be very clear -- we actually want China to invest in infrastructure in that region. We want to make sure that the investments are actually good for the people in those countries, which means transparency in terms of how decisions are made at this new bank. But we'll continue with the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank and other institutions, and try to encourage not only investment in human capital, but also the infrastructure that's needed.

And finally, I think sustainability is going to be critical. I worry about the great forests of Indonesia and Malaysia. If those all just become palm oil plantations, and deforestation continues at the same pace it has, then the prospects of additional accelerated climate change are very powerful, not to mention the loss of species and biodiversity. The oceans, if you get overfishing, that's a problem; pollution. Given how populated these areas are, it's very important that economic development ties in with sustainable development. Otherwise, I think we'll all have problems.

Okay. That's good. So, young lady right here.

Question: Mabuhay.

President Obama: Mabuhay.

Question: Mabuhay, Mr. President. I'm a city council member of Davao City, the Philippines. There are a handful -- or there are a few elected officials, some are YSEALI fellows. I really would like to know what is your word of advice for a young, budding political leader, young legislator, elected official like me in a developing democracy like the Philippines? Thank you.

President Obama: That's great. Well, I think -- my first advice is don't be shy, and obviously you're okay. I think you're doing to do great.



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I think that when I think about my own political career, when I look at other political careers that I admire, I think the most important thing is to have a sense of principle and why you're in public service. I think sometimes people want to be in public service just because they like seeing their name up in lights, they like being important. And that's a bad reason to go into politics; you should be like an actress or a singer, or make a lot of money.

But if you're going into politics and public service, there's only one good reason to do it, and that is because you want to help people. And you should know what it is that you stand for and what you believe in. It doesn't mean that you won't have to compromise. It doesn't mean that you might not change your mind about an issue as you go forward and you learn more and you have more experience. But you should have something inside of you that says, these are the things that are really important to me that I will not compromise on, all right?

So for me, throughout my political career, even before I was in politics and I was just working as a community organizer, I knew that I wanted to work to create more opportunity for all people; that my orientation was always how does this help the poor or the marginalized, or somebody who has less opportunity than me; how is this going to help them if they work hard to get ahead.

I know that one of the important principles for me has always been treating everybody fairly. So whether that's women or people of different races or different religious faiths or different sexual orientations, that one of my core principles is that I will never engage in a politics in which I'm trying to divide people or make them less than me because they look different or have a different religion. That's a core principle. That's not something I would violate, right?

So if you have a clear view of what you stand for, then as you move forward, you'll have setbacks. There will be times where you didn't succeed. There will be times where you're frustrated. There will be times you might even lose an election sometimes. But at least you'll know every morning when you wake up and you look at yourself in the mirror, I know who I am and why I'm doing what I'm doing. And I think those are the people who eventually end up having successful careers because people sense that integrity and that leadership. Even if they don't agree with you, at least they know you believe in something.

And unfortunately, too many politicians, they're just climbing the ladder but they don't know why. And when they get there, then they're not very effective leaders. Or they become much more subject to the temptations of corruption because all they're worried about is I want to hang on to my power, and I'm willing to give up anything in You have to be willing to lose something for your principles. You have to be willing to lose an election because you think that there's something that's more important than you just winning an election. And if you do that now -- but you have to -- you should try to win. I'm not saying you should try to lose. But you have to stand for something. That's my most important advice.

Gentleman in the gray suit right there. Yes, you.



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Question: Thank you. I come from Vietnam. Like many others, I look forward to seeing you and the First Lady visiting my country, Vietnam, in the near future. I have a question. Mr. President, what do you expect the young people in the Southeast Asian countries doing in dealing with the current challenges to the peace, stability, respect to international law like the [inaudible], while promoting the cooperation between the 10 countries with others, including especially with the United States? Thank you.

President Obama: Especially with? I'm sorry, the last part?

Question: Especially with the United States.

President Obama: Oh, with the United States. Well, look, I think that -- I've seen already significant progress with ASEAN countries over the last six years that I've been attending the ASEAN meetings and the East Asia Summit. And I think initially the meetings would oftentimes just be symbolic, and there would be a lot of pleasantries and a lot of meetings and cultural events. But we didn't always have an agenda. And I think one of the things that you've started to see is people working much more concretely on what are we trying to accomplish here. How do we develop more capacity, for example, in the region around disaster relief so that if, heaven forbid, there's another typhoon of the sort that we saw in the Philippines, or if, in fact, that we see some other natural tragedy that all the countries assets can be brought to bear, and we've done the training ahead of time to know who can help and how they can help?

I think the -- trying to work on coming up with standards around maritime law is a big challenge. And obviously, there's significant tension right now between many of the ASEAN countries and China, as well as the United States with China, around the South China Sea and how those issues are going to be resolved. ASEAN has been very constructive in trying to put together a code of conduct that all countries should abide by so that disputes around maritime boundaries are resolved through law and an impartial process, rather than just based on who's the biggest. And that I think is going to be very important. ASEAN can play an important role in those areas.

Environmental issues I've already mentioned. This is a very fast-growing region, and it is important to make sure that there's a lot of cooperation between countries because small fisheries, et cetera -- those don't always observe national boundaries. And so, working together, you can accomplish more.

And then human rights issues, and democracy issues, reinforcing good habits among the countries is very important. I think it's fair to say that the elections that will be taking place in Myanmar would not have happened if it hadn't been for the good example that Indonesia set with its transition, and other ASEAN countries showing the path from military rule towards democracy, and how, through all the lessons that have been learned, that could be accomplished. And that I think created more space within Myanmar to -- and President Thein Sein to feel that this is possible.



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So part of the goal here is to make sure that each country is reinforcing the best habits and laws, and observing human rights, and being critical when one country slips but in a constructive way that allows for a path to improvement. And I think ASEAN can do that uniquely.

And the United States will be a partner. We have, obviously, bilateral relationships with each of these countries, but we also want to be a partner with the group as a whole to encourage this cooperative model going forward.

Okay. Young lady right there, yes.

Question: Good afternoon, Mr. President. I'm from Indonesia. I work as a data analyst in the World Bank Indonesia Country Office. My YSEALI theme is civic engagement. My question to you: Now that your second term in the office is about to end, how do you want the world to remember you? Thank you.

President Obama: Fondly, I hope. I still have 20 months in office so I've got a lot of work still to do before I can start thinking about looking backwards. I'm still very much focused on what's in front of me.

But obviously there are things that I've been proud of. When I came into office, the United States and the world was going through a terrible economic crisis -- the worst, really, since the 1930s. And it was hard but we ended up avoiding a terrible depression. And within a year, the economy was growing again. Here in the United States now, we're back to the pre-crisis employment levels. Our auto industry was saved. But also, internationally, we averted a much worse crisis because of, in part, the leadership the United States showed along with international institutions and central banks managing -- that was very important. That's an important legacy for me.

I think that the work that I've done to provide health insurance for people here in the United States and to provide more educational opportunity is consistent with the principles that I talked about, the reason I got into politics.

Internationally, we've reinvigorated diplomacy in a whole variety of ways. People don't remember -- when I came into office, the United States in world opinion ranked below China and just barely above Russia. And today, once again, the United States is the most respected country on Earth. And part of that, I think, is because of the work that we did to reengage the world and say that we want to work with you as partners with mutual interest and mutual respect. It's on that basis that we were able to end two wars while still focusing on the very real threat of terrorism and to try to work with our partners on the ground in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. It's the reason why we are moving in the direction of normalizing relations with Cuba. The nuclear deal that we're trying to negotiate with Iran. Our efforts to help encourage democracy in Myanmar.



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I think the people of Myanmar deserve the credit for this new opening. But my visit there didn't hurt in trying to reinforce the possibilities of freedom for 40 million people. And so that direct engagement, the work that we've done to build and strengthen international organizations -- including on issues like public health and the fight against Ebola is just the most recent example of that -- I think we've been able to put our international relationships on a very strong footing that allows us then to work more cooperatively with other countries moving forward to meet the important challenges ahead.

But I've still got a lot of work to do. So maybe in 18 months, I'll check back with you and I'll let you know.

All right. Gentleman right here with the sash.

Question: Hello, Mr. President Obama. I'm from Burma. And firstly, I would like to say hello on behalf of my family. And my question is, I work in tourism business in Burma, and my question is that -- what do you see critical areas in where the U.S. can contribute economic development in Burma? Thank you so much.

President Obama: Well, Burma, Myanmar, you know, it lost a lot of time over the last 40 years because of the very tight controls on the economy and the discouragement of entrepreneurship and new businesses. Part of the reason why I was so struck when I traveled to Myanmar was it reminded me of when I first arrived in Indonesia back in 1967 -- whereas when I go to Jakarta now, or Singapore or Bangkok, it looks completely different. This looked like the past.

So there's a lot of catching up to do. The good news is, though, countries that are still at those early stages of development, they can grow very fast because there's so much pent-up energy and opportunity. And I think the most important thing is going to be establishing rule of law and systems and practices where if you start a business, you can feel confident that you don't have to pay 100 bribes and you don't have to hire somebody's son, and that you can make a profit; that if there's a foreign investor, that they can invest and be treated fairly, and that their rights and their intellectual property and their property are protected.

Those basic systems of law where those are established, those countries can do well because the natural talents of the people and the incredible resources and hard work of the people then pay off.

I mean, look at Singapore. Singapore is a tiny, little place. It has really nothing -- no resources to speak of. But today, when you travel to Singapore, it is as prosperous as any place in the world. Why is that? Well, part of it is that it's set up a set of systems where if businesses were started or investors came in, they knew that they could find a very skilled workforce; they knew that the rules were international-standard rules in terms of operations.



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So it will take some time for I think Myanmar to move in that direction. But you have your own models even in -- among the ASEAN countries. You don't have to look to the United States; you can look at just your -- some of your neighbors to see what is required for success. And what the United States will try to do is to provide technical assistance, and we will also try to provide direct assistance, particularly around building skills and education. Because one of the keys is to make sure that you have a workforce that can add value.

In the age of the Internet, when companies can locate anywhere, the most important thing is to find someplace where there is security -- so there's no conflict -- where there's rule of law, and the people are highly skilled. And if you have those three things, then people will invest.

Yes, go ahead.

Question: Good afternoon, Mr. President. I'm from Thailand. And now I work on the anti-human-trafficking issue in Thailand and neighboring country. So today, I would like to ask you if you were a Rohingya, which country would you prefer to live with and why? Thank you so much.

President Obama: That's an interesting question. Let me speak more broadly, and then I'll answer your question.

We were talking earlier about what's required for Myanmar to succeed. I think one of the most important things is to put an end to discrimination against people because of what they look like or what their faith is. And the Rohingya have been discriminated against significantly, and that's part of the reason they're fleeing.

I think if I were a Rohingya, I would want to stay where I was born. I'd want to stay in the land where my parents had lived. But I'd want to make sure that my government was protecting me, and that people were treating me fairly. That's what I'd want. And that's why it's so important I think, as part of the democratic transition, to take very seriously this issue of how the Rohingya are treated.

One of the things about discriminating against people or treating people differently is, by definition, that means that people will treat you differently, and you never know when you will find yourself in a situation in which you are a minority, where you are vulnerable, where you're not being treated fairly. And right now, obviously, our focus is on making sure that those who are being subject to human trafficking and are, in some cases right now, still in a very perilous situation out in the open sea, that they are relocated. I want to commend Indonesia and Malaysia for their willingness to take on thousands of these displaced persons. The United States, as part of our refugee process, will take some. We put over \$100 million over the last several years in Burma to make sure that minority groups, including the Rohingya, are protected against.



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But, ultimately, this is going to be a great test for the democracy of the future. Not just in Burma and Myanmar, but in areas all throughout the country. When I was -- and I know this directly because when I was young and I was living in Indonesia, there were times where there were anti-Chinese riots that were very violent and vicious. And, in fact, sometimes the Chinese Indonesians were treated very similarly to how Jewish Europeans were treated in Europe, and subject to stereotypes and resentments.

And the truth of the matter is, one of the reasons that Singapore, I mentioned earlier, has been successful, is that it has been able to bring together people who may look different but they all think of themselves as part of Singapore. And that has to be a strength, not a weakness. But that requires leadership and government being true to those principles.

To their credit, the Indonesian government when I was growing up was very good about not discriminating on the base of religion despite the fact that it was 98 percent Muslim. And I think that the tolerance towards other faiths historically in Indonesia has been part of what's contributed to progress there. You haven't seen the same kind of sectarian animosity that you've seen in parts of the Middle East.

But the one thing I know is countries that divide themselves on racial or religious lines, they do not succeed. They do not succeed. That's rule number one. Rule number two is nations that suppress their women do not succeed. They don't succeed. Not only is it bad because half of the country is not successful -- because they're not getting education and opportunity - - but it's women who teach children, which means the children are less educated, if you're not teaching the moms. So there are some -- each country is different, but there are some rules if you look at development patterns around the world that are pretty consistent. And those are two pretty good rules.

Don't divide yourself on religious and ethnic lines and racial lines. And don't discriminate against women. If you do those two things, you're not guaranteed success but at least you're not guaranteed failure.

I've got time for one more, two more. I definitely don't have time for 30 more. Two more. I've got time for two more. It's a gentleman's turn.

Question: Good afternoon, Mr. President. I'm from Malaysia. I work at Department of Irrigation and Drainage in Malaysia. My YSEALI theme is environmental sustainability. And my question for you is, what have you learned about leadership and life as being President in comparison to what you have might not learned if you were not a President?

President Obama: As President you -- I think probably what makes this job unique is that you are the ultimate decision-maker. So there are other people who work as hard as I do. My staff works very, very hard. They're just as smart or smarter than I am. They care just as much or more than I do. They have wonderful qualities.



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But the one thing as President is that ultimately there's nobody you can pass it on to. Harry Truman, one of our best Presidents, once said, the buck stops here. He meant at his desk. And it's true.

And usually by the time a decision comes to my desk, you know that it's a very hard problem because if it was easy somebody else would have solved it. And so probably the thing that I uniquely have had to learn in the presidency that is -- I hadn't learned as well in other jobs is the ability to look at all the information that you have, listen to all the advice that's there, and the different viewpoints that may exist about an issue, to try to make a decision based not on what is easiest, but what I think is the best long-term solution; and then feel comfortable in the knowledge that I may be wrong, and that there will be significant consequences if I am wrong, to have to have the courage then maybe six months later or a year later to admit this didn't work, and then to try something new.

But being willing to take responsibility for making hard decisions, not be paralyzed because you know there are big consequences to them, and then being able to adapt based on the evidence as to whether it worked or not I think is the most important lesson I've learned. And that's not something that you have to -- is just unique to being President.

I think in whatever your job is you should be willing to take responsibility for getting the best information, to listening to everybody, but then you have to just -- you have to make a decision and understand then that you have to continue to evaluate it. And I think that that's been very important.

The second lesson, which is something that you just learn more of as President, but all of you have already learned in some ways in your work is to surround yourself with the best people. Your most important job is to create a team of people, some of whom have talents that you don't have, to make up for your weaknesses; and then to want to make them better, and make them successful.

Because if they're successful, then the team is successful. So you're not a good leader if you don't want somebody who is smarter than you because you think, oh, well, maybe they'll shine more than you do. Then you're not a very good leader because your team won't succeed.

So I'm always looking for -- who are people who are much smarter than me, or much more organized than I am, or much better analysts. And my job then is just to be able to weave them together so they're all working together effectively. And if you're doing that, then you're a good leader. And you should be constantly thinking how can I help this person do their jobs even better.

And the good news is if you do that and people recognize that you care about them being successful, then they'll work harder, and they'll want to do even better. And they'll appreciate you because they know that you're helping them, instead of trying to keep them subordinate to you.



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Last question. And all the men should put down their hands because it's a woman's turn. No, all the guys have to put their hands down. This young lady in the yellow right here, right in the corner, right here.

Question: Thank you, President. Good afternoon, sir. I'm from Vietnam. Currently, I'm working for the Da Nang Institute for Socio-Economic Development. And first of all, I would like to say thank you to you for giving us this unique opportunity to come to the United States and to meet you today. My question for you is, what is your opinion about disputes and China's action in the East Sea or so-called the South China Sea?

President Obama: Well, as I already mentioned, what has allowed all of Asia to prosper over the last two, three decades -- including China -- is there's been relative peace and stability, freedom of navigation, freedom of commerce. And all of that has been underwritten, all of that has been because there have been certain rules that everybody has followed. Freedom of navigation requires that people observe basic conduct about, this far off, your territory is your territory; after that, it's international waters. If there's a dispute, then there's international mechanisms to adjudicate that dispute.

If you start losing that approach and suddenly conflicts arise and claims are made based on how big the country is or how powerful its navy is instead of based on law, then I think Asia will be less prosperous and the Pacific region will be less prosperous. And that's why we've said directly to China and to other claimant countries, we don't have a claim to these areas. We're not parties in the dispute. But we do have a stake in making sure that they are resolved peacefully, diplomatically, and in accordance with internationally established standards.

And for that reason, we think that land reclamation, aggressive actions by any party in that area are counterproductive. And we will continue as an Asia Pacific power to support all countries who are prepared to work with us to establish and enforce norms and rules that can continue growth and prosperity in the region. And the truth is, is that China is going to be successful. It's big, it's powerful, its people are talented and they work hard. And it may be that some of their claims are legitimate, but they shouldn't just try to establish that based on throwing elbows and pushing people out of the way. If, in fact, their claims are legitimate, people will recognize them.

I will say this, though, that I am very confident -- much more confident in the future of Southeast Asia, the Asia Pacific and the world, because I've had the opportunity to spend time with you. I think all of you are going to do outstanding work. And I want to make sure that you know that not only will this administration and the United States government continue to support the work that you do, but I personally, even after I leave office, will continue to have a great interest in seeing not only you succeed but those coming behind you -- young people like yourself succeed. And I think you should be interested in making sure to promote YSEALI and the network and try to provide similar opportunities to other young people as you become more important in whatever your fields are in the future.