



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the University of Yangon, Myanmar
11 February 2014**

I stand before you – moved by your warm reception, by the beauty of your country, by the diversity of its people, landscapes and traditions, by the richness of your culture and by its history, which stretches back thousands of years.

Above all, however, I'm moved by the atmosphere of change I've encountered here – in the talks I've conducted and in the places I've visited. That's why I'm especially delighted to have this opportunity to speak to you at this university. Many who studied here later campaigned for freedom and self-determination. Resistance has sprung up here time and again – initially against colonial rule, and later against the military dictatorship.

The courage of the students and the many others who took part in the major popular uprising in 1988 hasn't been forgotten. Their hopes and desires haven't been forgotten. Nor have the brutal reaction of those in power at that time, the mourning for those murdered or the suffering of those abducted and their families been forgotten.

Who would have thought a few years ago that it would be possible to commemorate this uprising publicly, as happened last year when the 25th anniversary was marked? There are now many signs of change in Myanmar – we're following them in Germany with interest and good will.

Of course we've noted that your Government under President Thein Sein has released almost all political prisoners and that members of the once banned NLD and its Secretary General, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, are now sitting in Parliament. It's good that ceasefire agreements have been concluded with almost all ethnic minorities and that people between whom silence or even violence prevailed for many years, are sitting down together around the negotiating table. As freedom of the press has developed and public opinion has become a key political factor, you can judge your Government by the commitments it has made – for example, the pledge to end forced labour and the recruiting

of child soldiers. All of these changes are also opening up your country for investments and entrepreneurship and thus for the material improvements which are so needed.

When I say that it was above all this atmosphere of change which prompted me to come to you, I have very personal reasons. I've come here as the President of the Federal Republic of Germany. At the same time, I stand before you as a German who spent two thirds of his life in the part of his country which was under the yoke of oppression and injustice. As a child, I experienced what it meant to have an innocent loved one arrested, disappear and return many years later both mentally and physically scarred. I know the longing to live free of fear and arbitrary actions by the state, to shape one's own life together with others. Above all, I will always remember the moment when people said good bye to their fear, the moment when they decided to take their destiny into their own hands. In eastern Germany, a democracy movement grew rapidly in autumn 1989 and brought about nothing less than a peaceful revolution. This moment of liberation unleashed tremendous forces. I hope that you, that Myanmar, will have a similar experience.

The transformation from subject to citizen, from authoritarian state to democracy, from military to civilian rule is difficult. Your country has come a long way within a short space of time. However, it still has a long way to go. Obstacles will emerge. For change is often accompanied by fear and rejection. Conflicts which were previously suppressed now have to be conducted openly.

That's easy to say – and yet it's extremely difficult in a country with so many minorities and different religions, and above all with such a long history of war and violence, oppression and expulsion. Many families and villages have known nothing else for generations. No state authority can change that at the stroke of a pen. Tolerance and mutual respect cannot be imposed from above.

However, a state can and must create a framework in which all of its citizens can develop their talents and flourish equally and – above all – in which their rights to live in safety are protected, no matter what they are called or how they look or where their parents come from. It must enable everyone to express their opinions freely and to join together with others. It must enable everyone to practise their faith, whether they are Buddhist, Muslim, Christian or Hindu. In your country, there are pagodas and temples, mosques and churches. That's an invitation to make diversity your country's trademark and a measure of its strength!

I'm concerned – as are so many others – when I hear of the ongoing violence between Buddhists and Muslims in your country. Just like many other minorities, the Rohingyas belong to Myanmar. I

welcome all efforts to grant them a solid legal status as well as the prospect of self-determination within your country.

There's certainly good reason to be optimistic: The agreement on the provisional end to hostilities in Kachin and the efforts to bring about a nationwide ceasefire form an important basis for a process of political reconciliation in which all parties negotiate with one another instead of fighting against one another. Successful peace negotiations are also good for the armed forces which can then devote their energies to preserving the country's unity. And that's not only in the interest of the minorities but also in the interest of everyone in Myanmar. For conflict and arbitrary actions by the state are poison for the country's development. Only national reconciliation can lay the groundwork which will allow Myanmar to flourish.

We Germans will do everything we can to support you on this path, wherever it is useful or possible. For example, we are willing to provide assistance in the sphere of constitutional reform. I also spoke about this yesterday with representatives of the Government, the opposition and, above all, with the parliamentarians involved in this process. I can certainly understand how difficult and yet crucial it is to get minorities more involved. The future of the military in Parliament was also discussed during my talks. Our experiences as a federal state should be of interest to your country. We believe that this form of statehood makes unity in diversity possible.

We all know that freedom, the rule of law and democracy are essential in order to lead a life in dignity. However, they cannot guarantee an immediate economic upturn – even if it's true to say that in the long term, everyone is better off in a society in which a country's wealth and the right to make laws are not in the hands of a small group of individuals and where everyone makes their contribution and gets something back. Continued readiness to embrace change in Myanmar will depend on whether citizens feel that the reforms implemented to date will also improve their daily lives. We Germans know that only too well. For the economic upswing in western Germany after the Second World War also strengthened confidence in democracy.

That's why we want to support your country's economic development. Your geographical location – between the world's two most populous countries – could hardly be better. It's good that you're improving the legal framework in order to boost foreign investment in your country. If you ask German business people what they're waiting to see before investing in Myanmar, then they'll tell you: better infrastructure, a modern financial system and, above all, legal certainty and transparency.

Your country is not only rich in raw materials but also in talented people – many of whom are gathered here in this lecture hall. You,

ladies and gentlemen, have a tremendous opportunity: You can learn from the successes and failures of others! What can create prosperity on a durable basis – not merely in the short term or at the expense of the future? In the transition, how can we preserve what has to be preserved – from the country's natural resources to its cultural treasures and social cohesion?

If there is open debate in Parliament today, if there is public discussion on the financial, social and ecological costs and benefits of raw materials extraction or major projects, then that is not a sign of weakness but quite the opposite: this is the strength of an open society. It also shows that citizens are engaged with their community. They want to play their part. They're asking whether decisions make sense and how much they're going to cost. Politicians will have to do more explaining and seek public approval when preparing major projects – not only in the sphere of infrastructure. That may be tiresome and often also involves a lengthy process. And sometimes a project is abandoned. It's no different in Germany! In the long term, however, a society in which all citizens are able to make their own critical contribution is more able to learn and more open to new ideas. And so I can only reaffirm what President Obama said when he spoke to you here: the most important office in a democracy is the office of citizen.

What do you, the citizens of Myanmar, need to bolster you in your millions of offices? Above all, you need education! You need schools accessible to all in which all children can develop their talents and learn what they need to lead independent lives in their country and in the world. You need companies willing to shoulder their share of the responsibility for enabling young people to learn what they will need later in their professions. And you need universities to reconnect you to the world, just as this university has done admirably in the course of its history. The vision to be found at the entrance to this building encapsulates what really matters, both today and in the past: "To create an education system that will generate a learning society".

It's good that your country is looking to the future with confidence. At the same time, we cannot expect anyone to simply shake off the past or their experiences. Nor would that be good. Most people in your country could tell long stories of enmity and oppression, of fear and guilt. Many will have to decide whether and how they want to reach out to one another, whether they want to ask for forgiveness or forgive, whether they can admit their guilt and mistakes and rebuild trust.

Truthfulness and information are indispensable for a successful transformation. I'm therefore delighted that Deutsche Welle Akademie is in the process of establishing a school for journalists in Myanmar together with other European partners. I'm delighted that our political

foundations have sent staff to Myanmar to help you rebuild your country.

Cooperation is not a one-way street. We're pleased that you're also interested in Germany. I've been told that the new Goethe-Institut in Yangon is already offering German courses even though it hasn't been officially opened yet – that's a good sign! This afternoon we'll be initiating the institute's renovation. It's to become a meeting-place for all those interested in cultural exchange.

The citizens of Myanmar have demonstrated many times in the past that it's possible to not give in to fears but to choose courage. "Fear is not the natural state of civilised man" – Aung San Suu Kyi once wrote, and she has been living by this maxim for decades. Without her commitment and that of so many other courageous people in all sections of your society, the reforms already embarked upon would have been inconceivable. I see many young people in the audience today. All of you now have the wonderful task of making use of this freedom! Have faith in your strength! Help those who fear getting left behind in the wake of change. And don't listen to those sowing discord because they fear losing their power, their wealth and privileges!

How you master the changes ahead is not only important for Myanmar. If you succeed in showing how much better it is to govern with rather than against the people, allowing them to play their part rather than filling them with fear – then that will have an impact on the entire region and far beyond. It will encourage other citizens in Asia who want to take their destiny in their own hands. I can assure you today that as you head towards a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Myanmar where the rule of law prevails, Germany will continue to stand by your side!