Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and I am extremely grateful to Dean Vali Nasr for his kind invitation for me to speak at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies as part of my first visit to Washington.

I know that the ties between Johns Hopkins and SAIS in particular with Myanmar are more than half a century old. The Hopkins Rangoon Center was established in 1954 as a leading educational and research institution in Asia and over the years dozens of Myanmar students have been educated at SAIS, including several current senior diplomats and a member of my own advisory council.

I hope very much that we will be able to reestablish the strong connections that once existed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here and I am especially pleased to be able to speak to you at this time on Myanmar’s transition, its vision of the future, and its vision for the future partnership with the United States and the American people.

The past two years under my government have been a time of transformation in Myanmar. Military rule was ended, a new constitution was put into effect and we have begun a series of political and economic reforms that we hope will build a strong democracy and a strong market-oriented economy. At the same time we are working to peacefully end the armed conflicts that have plagued our nation since independence in 1948. And we are trying hard to end Myanmar’s isolation, see the removal of all sanctions, and make the contributions we can to both regional and global security and development.

I believe what we are trying to achieve in Myanmar is quite unprecedented. We are transitioning from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one and from a centralized economy to one based on a free market. At the same time, we are engaged in a political dialog process and national reconciliation. We are also reengaging with many governments and international institutions for the first time in decades, all under the burden of remaining economic sanctions.

We face tremendous challenges. We are a poor country. Many of our institutions must be adjusted, others entirely reformed. New ones must be created. Mentalities must change. We must move towards a state that sees itself first and foremost as the servant of the people. After decades of authoritarian rule this is no easy task. We must move towards an economy that is equitable, that is fair and based on a level playing field, that develops our abundant natural wealth but in a way that protects our natural environment. To achieve all this we need maximum international support, including from the United States, to train and educate, share knowledge, trade and invest, and encourage others to do the same.

Periods of transition are always fraught with risk. But I know my country and I know my people. I know how much people of all backgrounds want this transition to succeed. I know how much people want to see democracy take root, put behind decades of isolation, catch up with other Asian economics, end all violence and fighting. Everyone accepts that this is the direction we must take. Everyone understands the need for compromise, tolerance and patience. Yes, there may be spoilers; there may be those who see their interests threatened. We have seen in recent months extremely tragic inter-communal violence. But I assure you that our commitment will not waiver. I am confident that we will find success.
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you all know, our transformation is not taking place in a vacuum. Asia is changing fast and a part of the world that was once a by-word for war and poverty is now entering perhaps its greatest period ever of peace and prosperity. A new generation, free from the burdens of colonialism and ideological conflicts of the past, is taking charge. Perhaps more than anything else, Myanmar must fully join this historic evolution in Asia.

Our country of 60 million sits at the new crossroads of Asia. With China to our northeast, India and Bangladesh to our west, the other nations of ASEAN to our south and east, we border more than two billion people and the fastest growing markets in the world. Our country, once isolated not just by politics but by physical barriers, is now poised to break those barriers. What is absolutely essential is that this new integration with the rest of Asia, this new de-isolation of Myanmar, is managed in a way that benefits the Myanmar people and does not lead to their exploitation. Creating the right institutions of economic governance will be absolutely critical.

We need as well the institutions that will help us cope with threats old and new and forge a new resilience. We are for example one of the countries in the world most at threat from natural disasters as well as from the rising sea levels that will accompany climate change. We remember the devastation of Cyclone Nargis which killed more than 100,000 of my compatriots in less than 24 hours. During last week, the country was again under the threat from Cyclone Mahasen. Earthquakes may strike at anytime. There is the risk of pandemic diseases, a rising threat in Asia. As we work to end the old threats of armed conflict and inter-communal violence, we must also develop a new vision of national security and strategies necessary to ensure the Myanmar people’s human security going forward.

We must recognize the important role of Myanmar Military during this democratization process. Under the past system, Military took charge of the nation’s stability from security point of view. Now, we are in the process of reforming the Military for its role in the democratization and peace building processes.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The politics of Myanmar is complex. We have literally dozens of different ethnic and religious communities. We have a history of armed conflict. Over the past two years we have welcomed the entry of the National League for Democracy under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi into parliament following free and fair by-elections in 2012. There are many other political parties and movements as well. We are also laying foundations for free and fair democratic elections in 2015. We have seen in recent years the emergence of hundreds of civil society organization, thousands of village-level associations, and a vibrant local media and social media.

As we move towards democracy, the challenge is to manage what is and should be an increasingly competitive political space in a way that strengthens democratic change and does not undermine its future success. We must manage expectations. And though democracy means rivalry and competition, we must try to find ways to work together. We must nurture policy-based political parties. But at this critical juncture, we must also rise above partisan politics and set our aims towards a greater nation-building and state-building agenda.

A key part of that agenda will be to reach peace agreements with all non-state armed groups. My government has reached ceasefires with ten non-state armed groups. I am confident we can soon reach a
ceasefire with the remaining major non-state armed group, the Kachin Independence Organization and Army. But that is not enough. Our goal cannot be less than sustainable peace. It will mean compromise. It will mean the further devolution of power to the state and regional levels. It will mean new agreements on resource sharing. We wish to do this in a way that includes all citizens. We want to include not only the armed groups, but also political parties and civil society from all ethnic communities in the political dialogues to come. Peace must be rooted in the broadest possible participation of public support.

And we must forge a new and more inclusive national identity. Myanmar people of all ethnic backgrounds and all faiths—Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and others—must feel part of this new national identity. We must end all forms of discrimination. And we must ensure not only that inter-communal violence is brought to a halt, but that all perpetrators are brought to justice. As we all know, there is a balance between security imperatives and the basic rights and openness that are a part of a more democratic society. We ask your help and advice in finding the right balance.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe the first Myanmar person to reach the shores of this great land was a student by the name of Maung Shaw Loo, who came from Mawlamyaing in 1858. He studied at Bucknell in Pennsylvania and then went to medical school in Cleveland and even met President Andrew Jackson at the White House, before returning home to a long medical career.

The year before Maung Shaw Loo arrived in America, the Myanmar king Mindon wrote a letter to President Franklin Pierce and the year after to President James Buchanan, calling for trade and diplomatic ties between our countries.

Our ties thus go back more than a hundred and fifty years.

We would like to begin a new era in Myanmar-US relations, a new partnership between our governments and even more importantly a new friendship between our two peoples.

We hope for your assistance in making our transformation a success. We hope for help from your great universities and investment from your companies.

There is only one aim for reform process that my government has initiated 2 years ago. That's simply to create a brighter and better future for Myanmar's next younger generation.

As we are elected government, we are striving our utmost to carry out people-centred development to uplift the livelihood of the people of Myanmar.

At the same time, we are also creating favourable conditions for the incoming democratic government that will emerge after the general elections in 2015.

US government, Congress and civil society organizations should give their support in line with evolving dynamics of current Myanmar politics in a transparent manner in order for our democratization process to succeed.

With the help of our neighbors, the strength of my fellow citizens, and with the help of American people, I sincerely believe we will succeed the reform process.

I thank you all.