

'MINDSET CHANGE NEEDED'

Leaders must value, respect people to win support: Suu Kyi

Nobel laureate urges Myanmar people to embrace change, be a part of democratic process

WOO SIAN BOON
woosianboon@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – Leaders should value and respect their people and fulfil their needs, but it is not only those in governance who need to embrace change — “those who are governed (should) change as well”, said Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

The democracy icon and opposition politician said that as Myanmar begins to gain its footing in reconstructing itself and seek the “right kind of leadership”, a mindset change is needed, in a country where the people have been used to being governed under a military dictatorship for over two decades.

“I do not believe that achieving democracy is the responsibility of a particular party or a particular leader or a few leaders. I don't think this is democracy. If we want democracy, we have to be determined that we are going to be part of the process,” said Ms Suu Kyi, who delivered a lecture on leadership at the Singapore Management University yesterday, on her first bilateral visit to an ASEAN country.

Addressing an audience of 600 that included Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim, Senior Minister of State (Transport and Finance) Josephine Teo, business leaders, academics and students, Ms Suu Kyi said: “What we want now is not a military dictatorship, but a democratic mindset that values the people, that understands that whatever we achieve, we have to achieve with the willing support of the people.”

Leaders must value and respect people: Suu Kyi

One way of winning the people's support is by treating them with respect and “as equals”. Giving an example of a road-widening project in her constituency which required some farmers to give up some of their land, Ms Suu Kyi said it was not her offer of compensation that won their support. “They like the fact that they were consulted and we were not going to ride roughshod over them and take their land away as had been done over the course of the past few decades,” she said.

Asked during the Q&A session whether a leopard “can change its spots” — in reference to the military junta that governs Myanmar — Ms Suu Kyi quipped that “leopards are rather beautiful creatures in their own way” and in many countries, the military is admired by the people. The aim, she said, is to change the constitution, which currently provides the military with a privileged place in the government. “That's the first step towards assuring that the leopard will find its real rightful, beautiful backdrop.”

On the issue of fear in the country and the violent unrest between the Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar, Ms Suu Kyi said it is the responsibility of the government — through proper laws and enforcement — to “diminish” the “physical fears” people have.

She said: “If you are in fear of your life ... people won't sit down and talk to one another and sort out their problems.



Ms Suu Kyi. PHOTO: DON WONG

Security has to be provided by the government, and then you've got to make sure people understand that in a democratic society, people talk over their differences, you don't fight over them.”

Noting that national reconciliation is the “centre” of the National League for Democracy's aspirations, Ms Suu Kyi admitted that reconciliation between the military regime and “those who wanted democracy” has not happened in Myanmar. “In the end, the best way for leaders with differing

* SUU KYI URGES THOSE OVERSEAS TO CONTRIBUTE KNOWLEDGE BACK HOME

● Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday urged Myanmar nationals living overseas not to wait for “favourable opportunities” before returning to their homeland, and instead create the opportunities themselves.

Addressing more than 5,800 Myanmar nationals living in Singapore at the Resorts World Convention Centre, Ms Suu Kyi, Chairperson of Myanmar's opposition National League for Democracy, acknowledged the need to offer a sense of security for those living in Myanmar, but said this is something she cannot do alone.

Speaking in Burmese, Ms Suu Kyi shared that she had a short discussion with some Myanmar students, and they had told her they valued the choices and career paths available to them overseas. She appealed to the overseas Myanmar community to use what they have learnt overseas to contribute back home.

When asked how she would tackle corruption if she becomes Myanmar's President,

Ms Suu Kyi said it would take laws and proper enforcement.

She pointed out that citizens can do their part, giving the example of how it is common for people to attempt to skip long customs lines when entering Myanmar by bribing officials. This should not be perpetuated, she said.

Although weighty topics were discussed, the atmosphere in the ballroom was celebratory, with the audience often laughing or applauding during her speech. Some began queuing as early as 5am to snag good seats at the ticketed event, and many were dressed in their national costume of longyi.

Speaking to reporters after the event, of Myanmar Club Committee Member Myat Maw Tun said organising Ms Suu Kyi's visit has strengthened the community's unity.

He said: “In Singapore, we have several small Myanmar groups ... some have different views and objectives. I think we never ever worked together on such a large scale ... we found unity, under her name.”

views to work for the country is to sit down and talk,” she said.

Asked how the political elite in governance can bridge the gap between them and the common people, Ms Suu Kyi said leadership “is not about being popular all the time”.

“You can't expect everyone to agree with you, that is simply not possible ... if you believe that what you are doing is good for the country, then you must be prepared to lose the next elections,” she said.