

Testimony of Thomas Vajda
Nominee for Ambassador to the Union of Burma
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
August 5, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am honored to be the President's nominee to serve as the United States Ambassador to Burma and thank him for sending my name forward for consideration. I also thank Secretary Pompeo for his support.

I also want to express my deep gratitude to my wife, Amy Sebes, and our two daughters, Bette and Emily, for their support and their sacrifice. They have repeatedly changed jobs, changed schools, and been distant from family and friends so that we could serve the United States overseas. They have been outstanding representatives of the United States and have truly served their country.

Since 1991, I have had the privilege of representing the United States and the American people as a U.S. diplomat. I believe strongly in public service and have worked throughout my career to protect the welfare of American citizens and advance U.S. interests and values. If confirmed, I look forward to the opportunity to continue this work in Burma – whose people we have supported for decades in their efforts to overcome harsh military rule and work toward true democracy.

I know members of this Committee follow Burma closely and understand the enormous challenges the people of Burma continue to face. For five decades, military or military-backed governments employed wide-scale repression and violence that left Burma with a long history of human rights abuses, civil strife, weak institutions, and an underdeveloped economy.

I served as Deputy Chief of Mission in Rangoon from 2008 to 2011, and worked with Embassy colleagues to support the early stages of the opening that led to Burma's first credible national election in a half century in 2015. That led to improvements in a number of important areas. But as events have since shown, Burma continues to confront structural challenges to this day.

The current civilian government has made important progress in consolidating some reforms, countering transnational crime, fighting corruption, and opening Burma's economy. However, the pace of reforms has slowed and in some cases stagnated. The ongoing marginalization of ethnic and religious minority groups, violence and abuses in ethnic regions, and involvement of the Burmese military in politics and the economy have underscored that meaningful change in Burma remains an ongoing effort and an ongoing necessity.

This was never more clear than when the Burmese military committed horrific atrocities, including ethnic cleansing, against the Rohingya community in August 2017 – three years ago this month. In a brutal response to attacks on its forces, the Burmese military massacred, assaulted, and raped thousands of Rohingya, driving more than 740,000 to flee across the border into Bangladesh and internally displacing thousands more.

The United States has repeatedly expressed our deep concern about the horrific violence against Rohingya and ongoing human rights abuses. We have matched this concern with action: with thanks to Congress, we are the leading donor of humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh and Burma in response to the Rakhine State crisis, providing more than \$951 million to date.

We are also a leading voice in pushing for justice for victims and accountability for those responsible for atrocities and abuses, including by sanctioning top Burmese military officials. We must continue efforts to change the military's behavior, prevent future atrocities, and promote justice and accountability. We also must continue to push for Burma to create conditions for the safe, dignified, voluntary, and sustainable return of refugees and displaced persons.

It is also critical that we support Burma's efforts to resist malign foreign influences and challenges to its sovereignty. While the United States and like-minded partners are urging more democratic, political, and economic reforms, there are others who work towards returning Burma to its closed and repressive past. To support Burma in this regard, the United States will need to continue helping government officials, economic reformers, and civil society actors who are pushing back on unfair investment practices and deals that provide little benefit to local communities.

I also want to highlight the importance of Burma's upcoming election in November – only the second nationwide democratic election after five decades of military rule – and acknowledge the significant funding Congress has provided for programs to help ensure a free and fair vote and promote continued reforms.

In light of Burma's enormous challenges and our own interest in the country's democratic and free-market development, U.S. engagement is essential to advancing these reforms and helping Burma defend against malign influences. Change in Burma will take time. It will take leadership and new ideas and hard-won progress; and the United States will have a critical role to play in supporting that process. If confirmed, I look forward to representing the United States and working with the people of Burma to achieve the peace and prosperity they deserve.

Thank you again for your consideration. I look forward to your questions.