

# Myanmar

Dramatic reforms in Myanmar in recent years have transformed this long-isolated country into a more open society, one actively seeking to re-engage with the region and the world. Competitive elections, a lively parliament, a more vibrant media, and a growing civil society have allowed for debates on a range of issues concerning the nature of the state and the development agenda that were previously not possible. The landslide electoral victory of the opposition National League of Democracy under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership in November 2015 created the potential to deepen the democratic transition.



In support of the important transition underway in Myanmar, The Asia Foundation re-established a resident country office in 2013 after an absence of more than 50 years. The Foundation's programs work with partners in government, the private sector, and civil society organizations (CSOs), to strengthen the core institutions and processes of democratic governance at national and local levels, support initiatives for inclusive economic development, promote women's empowerment; build the country's capacity for regional and global integration and increase public access to information through policy research and dissemination, and through our Books for Asia program, which has been in operation in Myanmar since 2007.

## STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

*Parliament and Legislative Strengthening:* The development of well-functioning parliamentary processes is central to Myanmar's democratic reform. In 2014 and 2016, The Asia Foundation organized study tours for Union Parliament members and staff, as well as local CSO members, to visit South Korea's National Assembly, with a particular focus on budget oversight and enabling public participation in the legislative process. The Foundation produced *Parliamentary Development in Myanmar: An Overview of the Union Parliament*

*2011-2016*, a research report authored by Dr. Renaud Egretau that examines the performance of the Union Parliament and what is needed to strengthen it. The Foundation also supported Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation to conduct research on the indicators that determine the capacity and performance of state/region parliaments. Findings from both research papers were released in 2017.

*Transparent and Accountable Governance:* To improve fiscal transparency and strengthen the capacity of subnational governments, the Foundation has been conducting training programs on public financial management and budget oversight and monitoring for members of parliament from all 14 state/region governments. The trainings focused on the planning and budgeting processes, linkages between policymaking and budgeting, and the role of the parliament and citizens in budget oversight.

In 2016, the Foundation supported the Open Myanmar Initiative to develop the first online platform on budgetary data in Myanmar, called Budget Explorer ([budget.omimyanmar.org](http://budget.omimyanmar.org)). The platform presents the Union and State/Region Governments' annual budget information in a visual format and can be easily used for analysis by government officials, media, civil society, and the general public. In 2016 and 2017, seminars and



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cartoon exhibitions on fiscal transparency were also organized by Foundation partner Spectrum Sustainable Development Knowledge Network (SSKDN) to increase citizens' understanding of the budget process; and informational materials such as a budget guide and citizens budget were widely disseminated to the public.

**Decentralization and Local Governance:** Decentralization is a challenging process given the history of highly centralized governance, subnational conflicts, and ongoing disputes over the constitution in Myanmar. In this context, the Foundation and the Myanmar Development Resource Institute's Centre for Social and Economic Development (MDRI-CESD) carried out an extended research effort between 2013 and 2016 on a broad range of topics related to subnational governance, including the structure and functions of state/region governments, management of local development funds, urban financing and provision of social services, and the role of the Ministry of Home Affairs' General Administration Department in public administration. The Foundation also partnered with Renaissance Institute (RI) to carry out extensive research on the functions of Development Affairs Organizations (DAOs) in municipal governance and state/region public finances in 2017.

Together with RI, the Foundation held introductory governance trainings for newly elected members of parliament (MPs) in all 14 states and regions on Myanmar's subnational governments after the National League for Democracy-led government took power in 2016. The Foundation and RI are currently providing direct support to expand the capacity of state/region governments and municipal offices in order to mobilize and manage locally resources for locally driven priorities. In four state/region governments, the Foundation facilitated workshops between the cabinet and the parliament, which culminated in the publication of the *State/Region Government Priority Reform Document* in 2017. Furthermore, the Foundation provided ongoing facilitation sessions to cabinet members and MPs to formulate and implement relevant policies, and to enhance their skills on budget preparation, review, oversight, and monitoring.

**Elections:** A 2014 survey conducted by the Foundation found that cautious public optimism in Myanmar was tempered by a variety of challenges, including limited public knowledge of government institutions as well as deep political polarization. Informed by the civic survey data, the Foundation worked closely in 2015 with the Union Election Commission (UEC), civil society organizations, and the app developer community in Myanmar to generate the *Mae Pay Soh* (Let's Vote) initiative, a voter education effort through mobile and web apps, which provided digitized candidate information, political parties, incumbent performance, and voters' frequently asked questions. Nearly 12 million requests for information to the Mae Pay Soh database were recorded before election day. Fueled by the success of Mae Pay Soh



in 2015, the Foundation worked with the UEC during the April 2017 by-elections to build an updated database of candidate and party information, and trained key stakeholders, including government officials and journalists as part of dissemination efforts. The Foundation also supported Charity-Oriented Myanmar and New Myanmar Foundation to conduct voter education initiatives in constituencies in ethnic conflict zones where 2015 general elections were cancelled due to security reasons.

**Tech-supported Policy Reforms:** The Foundation increasingly focuses on the potential for relevant and appropriate technological solutions to address policy challenges. In 2016, the Foundation piloted a new mobile application, *Myankhon*, aimed at increasing the tax base and improving the effectiveness of revenue collection in Taunggyi, Hpa-an, Patheingyi, and Nyaung-U townships. The app allows decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) to digitize tax records and features analytics that allow DAO staff to monitor the performance of tax collectors and forecast revenues. This initiative includes analysis of data gathered from the Myankhon app, release of a policy paper on the current state of property tax in Myanmar, as well as activities to foster public engagement using communication products that will improve citizens' understanding of DAOs' roles and responsibilities. At the union government level, the Foundation provides capacity-building support to the Ministry of Planning and Finance's Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations Division (IFRD) to effectively support state/region governments in their budget appropriations and financial reporting.

## SUPPORTING THE PEACE PROCESS

Myanmar's peace process gained momentum following the signing of the National Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015 and the beginning of the resultant Political Dialogue in January 2016. At that time, The Asia Foundation focused on improving understandings of how ethnic armed organizations administer territory as well as provide basic social

services, resulting in two major reports, *Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar* and *Ethnic Conflict and Social Services in Myanmar's Contested Regions*. In July 2016, the Foundation released *Militias in Myanmar*, a research paper that examines the evolution of militias, offers a typology of the different types of militias, and reflects on their contemporary role.

The Foundation is conducting more detailed research into social service provision in contested areas, especially regarding health and education. The research findings will be used to help further discussions within and among government, civil society, and development partners around “convergence,” namely how government social service systems and those of ethnic armed organizations involved in the peace process can interact or at least accommodate one another during the peace process.

In October 2017, the Foundation released a year-long study, *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development*, which examines the three-way relationship between subnational conflict, development processes, and aid.

## SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In Myanmar, economic growth averaged over 6% annually between 2012 and 2015, aided by the transition towards a more open, market-based economy. However, Myanmar still faces major challenges in reducing poverty and promoting broad-based economic growth. The Asia Foundation is developing the first-ever Myanmar Business Environment Index (MBEI) to identify key constraints and areas for improvement in the business regulatory environment at the state/region levels.

During 2017-2020, the Foundation will conduct a comprehensive survey of Myanmar businesses across the country to understand challenges faced by domestic firms. This nationwide survey will be combined with additional research to prepare an analysis of the business environment in each state/region. The MBEI will help government and stakeholders access information needed to promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth across the country.

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Political Representation:** Between 2011 and 2016, women's representation in politics was low in Myanmar, numbering only 6% of all elected MPs in the national parliament and 3.8% of all elected MPs in subnational parliaments. Those figures increased significantly after the 2015 elections to 13.7% in the national and 12.7% in the subnational parliaments. The Asia Foundation partnered with *Phan Tee Eain* (Creative Home), a women's empowerment organization, to conduct a survey and series of case studies of this “first” generation of women parliamentarians. In April 2017, the Foundation and Phan Tee Eain released, *Women's Political Partici-*

*pation in Myanmar: Experiences of Women Parliamentarians 2011–2016*, a report that was presented to parliamentarians from the union and subnational levels, government officials, development partners, women's organizations, media, and other interested parties in Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon. In June 2017, the two organizations organized the 2nd Women MPs Forum with 35 women legislatures from six states/regions in Nay Pyi Taw, with the 3rd Women MPs Forum expected to take place by early 2018 in Yangon.



**Providing Protection:** Recognizing the need to provide improved and accessible counseling services for victims of trafficking and gender-based violence, the Foundation partnered with the Karen Women Empowerment Group to build its counseling practice. The Foundation also supported Colorful Girls, a program run by community-based organization Girl Determined, to develop a “Trafficking and Risky Migration” curriculum to improve understanding of trafficking, violence, and exploitation. In 2016 and 2017, more than 700 girls from Kachin IDP Camp, Yangon Region, Mandalay Region, and Sagaing Region received trainings on trafficking and risky migration, while crisis intervention tools such as hot lines and crisis reporting instruction booklets were developed. In addition, the Foundation partnered with the Myanmar Library Association (MLA) to train 40 librarians across 10 townships to build their knowledge in trafficking issues so that they can effectively support at-risk, vulnerable young girls and boys with relevant information and help them make informed decisions about labor migration.

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION

Regional and global integration are fundamental to Myanmar's successful transition to a more open and dynamic society. To this end, The Asia Foundation supported the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) to enhance its knowledge of critical issues in international relations, particularly related to its membership in the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN). Such support includes the provision of training seminars on key international relations issues,

research methodology, and digital literacy to MoFA staff and officials, as well as relevant books and journals for MoFA's libraries.

The Foundation has been providing annual support to MoFA officials to attend George Washington University's summer training program on the U.S. foreign policymaking process and a customized study tour since 2013. Whenever possible, the Foundation also supports experts from Myanmar to participate in international and regional forums, such as the "ASEAN Conference on Legal Issues of Regional Importance" in Singapore and the "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat and the Senior Officials Meeting" in Philippines in 2017.

## EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES AND BOOKS FOR ASIA

The Asia Foundation has been donating new, high-quality, English-language educational and children's books to Myanmar since 2007 in partnership with the U.S. Embassy and National Library. Over the past 10 years, the Foundation has donated more than 200,000 books from leading publishers to more than 400 educational and research institutions throughout the country. Special book collections on topics of specific relevance have been assembled and provided to many institutions in the country such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Parliament's Office, President's Office, Myanmar Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Institute of Economics, and the University of Yangon's International Relations Department.

The Foundation partnered with the MLA on a pilot effort to revitalize 10 high school libraries in Yangon Region, Mandalay Region, Magway Region, Mon State, and Shan State between 2015 and 2017. Building on the pilot's success, the Ministry of Education has budgeted funds to expand the project to another 10 schools in Myanmar next year, with potential for greater expansion in subsequent years. The Foundation supported 17 school librarians and MLA members to participate in the 2nd Regional Workshop on School Libraries in ASEAN Countries in Indonesia in 2016 and the 3rd Regional Workshop on School Libraries in ASEAN Countries in Malaysia in 2017. The Founda-



ation also is supporting the National Library and MLA to renovate conference rooms into appropriate space for trainings, meetings, and dialogues on library development and knowledge generation.

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Access to information is a central theme of all The Asia Foundation's programs in Myanmar, with a significant focus on the provision of data and research to the public. The Foundation supported the Media House to produce a bi-weekly *Info Digest Journal*, written in the Myanmar language to increase access to non-partisan information and research findings related to political, social, and economic affairs; environment; public spending; and emerging policy matters in the country. The Media House has also established a website for broader public outreach ([myanmarinfodigest.com](http://myanmarinfodigest.com)) and a webpage for subscribers to communicate with the editorial board ([user.myanmarinfodigest.com](http://user.myanmarinfodigest.com)).

In 2016, the Foundation supported the Information Symposium, which brought together representatives from all sectors to address challenges presented by Myanmar's digital revolution. The Foundation also partnered with the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation to conduct trainings for officials and staff from MOFA and Union Parliament Offices in 2016 and 2017 on topics such as privacy and security measures, and searching for reliable information using Google Scholar.

*The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.*

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