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Myanmar’s Transition
Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities

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Committed since 2003 to its “Road Map” for national reconciliation, the military regime in Myanmar persevered with the adoption of a new constitution in 2008, then held multi-party elections in November 2010. Each of these steps was criticized for significant procedural and substantive flaws, and the overall process was neither democratic, transparent, nor inclusive. The freeing of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010 was welcomed, especially her freedom to carry out political activities. Next, the new parliamentary assemblies were convened in January 2011, and the reins of government were formally handed over to a new, “civilianized” government on 30 March 2011. The new government under President (formerly General) Thein Sein began quickly to introduce some reforms and to set out its own agenda for change in line with the 2008 Constitution, and in its first twelve months in office released a large number of political prisoners. However, a number of substantive issues — such as the ongoing conflicts with several significant ethnic groups — remain unresolved, and some have even worsened. Government action in relation to the ending of human rights abuses continues to be manifestly insufficient, and the role of the military remains unchecked. No substantive measures for reforms to underpin the rule of law have been implemented, and the restoration of various freedoms, including freedom of the press and freedom of association, are being introduced only slowly and partially.

The eleventh Myanmar/Burma Update conference was held at the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra on Monday, 16 and Tuesday, 17 May 2011. It was supported by a grant from the Australian
Agency for International Development (AusAID). Co-conveners of the conference were Professor Monique Skidmore, University of Canberra, and Trevor Wilson and Nick Cheesman of the ANU. The conference was sponsored by the Department of Political and Social Change, School of International Political and Strategic Studies, College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU. The keynote speaker was Dr Thant Myint-U, historian and author, and formerly of the UN Department of Political Affairs.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors wish to thank the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) once again for its generous financial support for the 2011 Myanmar/Burma Update conference and for this publication of the conference papers. Without AusAID’s assistance, neither would have been possible. We are most grateful for the steadfast support we have received from the Department of Political and Social Change at the Australian National University, which has always believed in the Update conference. Professor Paul Hutchcroft and Head of the Department, Professor Ed Aspinall, have been as solid supporters of the conference, and of Myanmar-related activities generally, as one could find. We would also like to thank the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore for once again being willing to publish the conference papers, and Christine Wilson for her copy-editing and indexing assistance. Finally, we wish to thank Karina Pelling and the ANU Cartographic and GIS Services for their assistance with providing one of the best and most up-to-date maps to be found for this publication.
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NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

In 1989, the former military regime changed the official romanized name of Burma to Myanmar and changed the names of states, cities, and towns from the names and spellings used prior to that date. Since then, the name “Myanmar” has been used officially by the United Nations, and inside the country today the revised geographical names and spellings are commonly used. The term “Myanmar” is still contested, however, particularly by activists outside the country, but in this publication the editors have decided to use the name “Myanmar” for the period since 1989, and “Burma” for the period when that was the official name of the country. Likewise, the current official geographical names are used for the period since 1989. The people of the country are throughout referred to as “Burmese”, except where references are made to specific ethnic groups.

Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore, and Trevor Wilson
Map of Myanmar