

Myanmar's Transition

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Myanmar Update Series

Myanmar's Transition

*Openings, Obstacles
and Opportunities*

EDITED BY

NICK CHEESMAN

MONIQUE SKIDMORE

TREVOR WILSON



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Singapore

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BACKGROUND ON THE ANU 2011 MYANMAR/BURMA UPDATE CONFERENCE

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.

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CONTRIBUTORS AND EDITORS

Cheesman, Nick (Dr): Lecturer, Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, Canberra.

Egreteau, Renaud (Dr): Research Assistant Professor, Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (inc. Centre of Asian Studies), University of Hong Kong.

Farrelly, Nicholas (Dr): Research Fellow, School of International, Political and Strategic Studies, Australian National University, Canberra.

Hla Hla Win: Independent consultant, Yangon.

Horsey, Richard (Dr): Independent consultant. Formerly ILO Liaison Officer, Yangon.

Khin Maung Nyo: Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Economic and Social Development, Myanmar Development Resource Institute, Yangon.

Kyaw Min San: Independent lawyer practising in Yangon.

Lall, Marie (Dr): Reader in Education and South Asian Studies, Institute of Education, University of London.

Myint Zan (Dr): Professor, School of Law, Faculty of Business and Law, Multimedia University, Malacca.

Nwe Nwe Aye: Foreign Correspondent, based in Yangon.

Pe Myint: Writer and journalist. Editor in Chief, *The People's Age*, Yangon.

Pedersen, Morten B. (Dr): Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of New South Wales, Canberra.

Simpson, Adam (Dr): Lecturer in International Relations, School of Communication, International Studies and Languages, University of South Australia.

Skidmore, Monique (Professor): Pro-Vice Chancellor, International and Special Projects, University of Canberra.

Thant Myint-U (Dr): Historian and consultant. Author of *The Making of Modern Burma*, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma*, and *Where China Meets India*.

Thaung Tun: Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Tin Htut Oo: Independent consultant based in Yangon. Formerly, Director-General for Department of Agricultural Planning, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

Turnell, Sean (Professor): Associate Professor of Economics, Macquarie University, Sydney; Editor in Chief, *Burma Economic Watch*.

Ware, Anthony (Dr): Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University; Lecturer in Politics, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Melbourne.

Wilson, Trevor: Visiting Fellow, Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, Canberra.

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

