

Conclusion



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MYANMAR FUTURES

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Myanmar is in the midst of a momentous political and economic transition, the outcome of which will have ramifications not only for the country itself but also for the rest of Southeast Asia and much of continental Asia. This volume has provided an in-depth survey and analysis of the many cultural, political and economic shifts currently underway and the key challenges that the country faces. It is now therefore worth considering what a successful transition in Myanmar might look like.

There can be little doubt that for most people in Myanmar, and for the country's many supporters elsewhere in the world, a successful transition will result in a prosperous and peaceful democracy: many of its people took to the streets demanding democracy in 1988 and electoral support for the National League for Democracy (NLD) was overwhelming in both 1990 and 2015 (Ardeth Thawngmung 2016). However, as with all political concepts, the form and function of democratic rule is heavily contested. In Myanmar, the military's roadmap to 'discipline-flourishing democracy', put into practice with the 2008 constitution, reserves a quarter of legislative seats for serving military personnel, mandates direct military appointments to the executive and allocates the *Tatmadaw* a key role in many aspects of national governance. Such enduring military dominance does not satisfy most definitions of democracy. Nevertheless, with the gradual loosening of constraints on political debate and the NLD government coming to power in 2016, Myanmar is becoming more democratic than at any point in the past half century. Whether the transition can continue in this democratic direction is still unclear.

A fundamental component of any transition to a democratic society is adherence to international norms relating to democracy and a broad portfolio of human rights in the political, civil, economic, social and cultural realms. The political reform process underway in Myanmar therefore has major implications for the country's economic and cultural future. Genuine respect for democratic norms and human rights should lead to a more equitable and ecologically sustainable model of economic development. It should also support the recognition and respect of social and cultural diversity, whether based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability or gender. Democracy, human rights, sustainability and equitable economic development are often treated as separate issues, but this is usually the result of applying unduly narrow definitions. More comprehensive visions of sustainable and just states provide useful insights on the interdependence of these issues (Eckersley 2004). In 2015, Myanmar finally signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which sets out a range of state obligations in these areas.

A democratic, just and sustainable future for Myanmar therefore relies on the notion of inclusion. An inclusive polity, economy and society do not discriminate on the basis of religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. With ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar's north, east and west, and the religious tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in much of the country, this may seem like a utopian vision, but it remains a precursor for any truly liberal or social democratic state.

Political and economic inclusion is generated by adherence to human rights norms but it is also necessary for any successful strategy of sustainable development. Inequality in Myanmar is significant and there is a growing global recognition, even in institutions such as the IMF, that inequality and neoliberal economic models can stifle the full potential of economic development (Dabla-Norris et al. 2015; Ostry et al. 2016; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Myanmar's natural resources and agricultural development provide avenues for addressing poverty throughout the country but only if such development is achieved through ecologically sustainable strategies that respect the rights of ethnic minority and local communities in decision-making. Policies that promote free, high-quality education for all, particularly in ethnic languages, not only improve understanding and tolerance of difference but also provide the human capital for future economic development (Jolliffe and Mears 2016; Lall and South 2013).

Political inclusion is possibly the most significant issue facing Myanmar, with questions of ethnicity a key contributor to historical and contemporary conflicts. Ethnicity feeds directly into Myanmar's unresolved citizenship crisis (Holliday 2014). As Walton (2013) has shown, many in the ethnic Bamar (Burman) community are oblivious of the systematic marginalisation of other ethnic cultures, languages and religions. This unacknowledged privilege is not, however, unique to the Bamar community, as some 'accepted' national ethnic minorities also receive unacknowledged privilege and reinforce the marginalisation of other minority communities.

The key document in this area is the 1982 Citizenship Law, which set out the country's 135 officially designated ethnic groups, the 'national races'. The law was passed during military rule under Ne Win, which was opposed by the NLD and many ethnic groups for its authoritarian and chauvinist practices. While arguing that laws made under Ne Win were unjust and illegitimate, in the new political climate many ethnic minority activists have been happy to cite and promote this law to justify the exclusion of other minorities, notably the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State, although this is part of a broader scapegoating of Muslims throughout Myanmar (Cheesman 2017; van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017). There is no easy political solution to the issue of inclusion in Myanmar but a useful first step could be the technical separation of ethnicity from eligibility for citizenship (see Farrelly 2016).

An intermediate point for the transition currently underway in Myanmar might, therefore, see the law redrafted to remove ethnicity as a primary determinant of citizenship. There are of course significant political impediments to implementing such a change but, just as the concept of federalism is, for the first time, being openly debated in Myanmar, the emergence of a new definition of citizenship, founded on liberal values rather than arbitrary and often ethnologically dubious categorisations, should not be entirely ruled out. Such a shift would take courage on the part of Myanmar's democrats to make the necessary adjustments in what is currently a rigid set of social expectations about ethnic belonging.

In government, the NLD has made efforts to promote what they consider neutral language on sensitive ethnic issues, particularly the Rohingya. Their terminological revisions have caused consternation among 'nationalist' Buddhists, and have also been opposed by some Rohingya themselves. There were reports that Muslims in Rakhine State townships refused to accept new government-issued national verification cards, or 'green cards', as part of a citizenship verification pilot programme because their race and religion were omitted (*The Myanmar Times*, 16 June 2016).

These Muslims wanted their ethnicity listed on the card both to emphasise their identity and because they thought its absence could reduce their chances of eventually gaining citizenship. There is, in such cases, a lack of trust between ethnic minorities and the government due to deep-seated historical animosities. While the NLD government generates much more goodwill than its predecessors, there are obvious challenges when it comes to contentious ethnic and religious fault lines. The removal of ethnicity and religion from government identification cards is, however, a worthwhile ambition for a pluralist democracy. The official diminution of ethnic classification may be possible if supposedly discrete groups accept that they are all, fundamentally, the same.

An attempt to reduce communal tensions came with the government announcement in mid-2016 that it would use the religiously determined, but ethnically neutral, terminology of 'Buddhist community in Rakhine State' and 'Muslim community in Rakhine State' in state-owned publications (*The Irrawaddy*, 21 June 2016). The previous USDP government commonly referred to the Rohingya as 'Bengalis', a pejorative and ethnologically suspect term. Under the NLD government these tentative steps towards more ethnically neutral governance were shaped by the need to balance the competing demands of local nationalists and external critics. In championing such difficult changes, the NLD were encouraged by their landslide triumph at the 2015 election in the face of large-scale 'nationalist' Buddhist protests, including exhortations by prominent monks not to vote for the leading democratic politicians. Even with that popular mandate, the NLD's efforts have foundered amongst the Buddhist majority of Rakhine State who continued to insist on identifying their Muslim neighbours as 'Bengali'.

The NLD attempted to placate international criticism on the treatment of the Rohingya by the appointment of an international advisory commission in August 2016, led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (Reuters, 24 August 2016), and by October the situation in northern Rakhine State was relatively stable, despite the ongoing incarceration of over 100,000 Rohingya in internally displaced peoples (IDP) camps. On 9 October 2016, however, coordinated armed attacks on three border posts near Maungdaw township in northern Rakhine State killed nine Myanmar police officers and eight assailants (*The Myanmar Times*, 10 October 2016). As a result, the region again became heavily militarised with widespread allegations of *Tatmadaw* abuse of the Muslim community and an exodus of 70,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh (OHCHR 2016; 2017).

On 24 August 2017 the commission delivered their final report, which included comprehensive and productive recommendations on pathways to peace in Rakhine State. The NLD government quickly committed to implement the recommendations 'to the fullest extent, and within the shortest timeframe possible'. In the early hours of the next morning, militants attacked 30 police posts and an army barracks in northern Rakhine State, resulting in a brutal military operation which the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights labelled 'a textbook example of ethnic cleansing'. At the time of writing over 400,000 Rohingya had fled across the border to Bangladesh in the three weeks following the attacks. The outlook for the Rohingya and peace in Rakhine State is now even more bleak (Simpson 2017a).

Broader concerns by ethnic minorities over the NLD as primarily a Bamar party were reinforced around the one year anniversary of the NLD government over a bridge-naming dispute in Chaungzon, Mon State. The government insisted on naming the bridge after the Bamar General Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi's father, while the Mon ethnic community were in favour of a more locally sensitive name. By-elections for parliament were held on 1 April 2017 to replace government appointees, including for the seat surrounding the bridge, and to fill several seats left vacant due to civil conflict in Shan State during the 2015 elections. The dispute resulted in a 17 per cent collapse in the NLD vote in Chaungzon and they lost the seat.

Similarly, in Shan State the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) won all six previously empty seats with a negligible NLD vote registered in several electorates. The tactical voting in ethnic areas that delivered the NLD its landslide in 2015 is unlikely to be repeated (Simpson 2017b).

Ethnic concerns fed into broader dissatisfaction with the performance of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in their first year in office. Little progress was made on the peace process, despite Aung San Suu Kyi expending considerable political capital in this area. Furthermore, there were relatively few detailed plans for development with Aung San Suu Kyi continuing to promote a 'socially conservative ideology of radical self-sufficiency and *laissez-faire* relations between the state and society' (Mary Callahan, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 29 March 2017), arguing citizens should muster 'courage' and 'self-confidence' rather than rely on government action or support; an exhortation unlikely to be received with equanimity in ethnic areas facing off against the state's military. The NLD was undoubtedly left a shambolic economic legacy by the previous USDP government and the military operates independently, but the government came to power with unprecedented goodwill and it is striking how this has metamorphosed into an aloof sense of entitlement within the NLD.

One sector with which the NLD needs to engage further is civil society. Since the opening of political space in Myanmar it has been apparent that civil society is not always civil, with chauvinist 'nationalist' movements becoming more prominent. Nonetheless, civil society is an essential component of any thriving democratic system and it has a pivotal role to play in engaging community and government stakeholders. Civil society provides an outlet for pursuing cultural goals, as well as political ones, and provides mechanisms for minorities or groups unable, or unwilling, to enter the formal political process. There are concerns that the NLD government does not consider civil society an active partner in the transition, since it lacks the electoral legitimacy of the NLD. It would be a missed opportunity, and do little for democratic development, if local activists were merely expected to follow the lead set by elected politicians (Simpson and Smits 2018).

After decades of military rule, a free media in Myanmar will also be crucial for the development of a vibrant, inclusive and democratic society but here again the NLD's record is mixed. The rapid expansion of newspapers and news outlets in the country under the USDP government was welcome and there have been some moves by the NLD to continue relaxing restrictions on the media. For politicians and government officials, however, there is still a need to embrace the scrutiny offered by journalists, even when it proves uncomfortable. The media, including its rambunctious online elements, should be considered an essential component of democracy rather than an impediment to smooth national development. Unfortunately, journalists and political activists continued to be arrested and jailed under residual legislation, such as section 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Act, during the NLD's first year in office (Simpson 2017b). The ongoing difficulties and restrictions in reporting on civil conflicts, particularly in Rakhine State, demonstrate that there remain clear limits on press freedom in the country (Brooten and Verbruggen 2017).

Free and fair elections are a key component of successful democracies and the 2015 election was, given Myanmar's recent history, undoubtedly a success by almost any measure. However, Myanmar's first-past-the-post electoral system, while delivering the NLD a useful majority, is actually not the best system for pursuing inclusive democracy. A system of proportional representation, with preferential voting, would result in more representative and inclusive legislatures (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009). If Myanmar's parliaments are seen as accurately reflecting the will of all communities, ethnic groups are more likely to pursue their interests through democratic means rather than armed struggle.

A related factor in the potential success of Myanmar's transition is the continuing centrality of Myanmar's military in the country's political and economic life. While the NLD government gains most of the media attention for its activities, it still only governs with the acquiescence of the *Tatmadaw*. The military may have receded from the frontline of government but it remains a powerful force that, under its own 2008 constitution, is an autonomous institution, free from civilian control or oversight. The military clearly runs its own operations in the restive ethnic regions. The assassination in January 2017 of Ko Ni, a key legal adviser to the NLD, at Yangon International Airport reinforced the views of some that military subterfuge was consciously undermining the government. That he was the NLD expert on understanding and challenging the military-authored constitution, as well as being one of the few prominent Muslims in political life, cast further doubt on hopes that Myanmar had entered a new more liberal and democratic era.

While the constitution ensures that the military plays a dominant role in Myanmar's politics, its role in Myanmar's economy is much less formalised, but no less significant (Ford et al. 2016; Jones 2014). To consolidate democratic rule the NLD must also democratise economic development; if the poor see continuing inequality and little material gain from democratic rule they may be inclined to accept more authoritarian options in future if they come attached with promises of economic relief. During the first year in office Aung San Suu Kyi focused almost exclusively on the peace process at the expense of economic development; in reality, the two goals are interdependent.

Finally, the transition inside Myanmar will inevitably be shaped by events in the wider world as the country continues to embrace international society. External actors are increasingly present in Myanmar as major foreign powers, corporations and INGOs look for opportunities in what is an emerging site for regional competition. Aung San Suu Kyi rightly insists that the Myanmar government, not international actors, will decide on the country's policies both big and small. Nevertheless, no country is immune to the pressures of globalisation, and Myanmar will certainly need to account for many transborder considerations.

To build a modern democratic state, political leaders in Myanmar will need to effectively manage a daunting set of interrelated challenges. As well as establishing robust foundations for democracy inside the country, they will be forced to balance external influences seeking leverage at a time of national vulnerability. It helps that the elected NLD government claimed a strong popular mandate to improve the economy and increase political participation but inadequate state resourcing is likely to remain a persistent constraint. As Myanmar continues its transition towards a more inclusive government and society it remains far too early to claim that the nascent process has been a success.

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