

Myanmar's surprising shepherd for democracy

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Kyonku, Myanmar – For most of his career, he was a loyal apparatchik in one of the most brutal military regimes in the world. But in the 12 months since he became the president of Myanmar, U Thein Sein has been leading this country of 55 million down a radical path from dictatorship to democracy, vowing, as he told the country this month, to "root out the evil legacies deeply entrenched in our society."

There are no pat answers about why Mr. Thein Sein, a bookish 66-year-old with a sphinxlike smile, decided to shake up one of Asia's poorest and most hermetic countries. And little has been published about the president, a former general who has been called the Mikhail Gorbachev of Myanmar, perhaps prematurely given the fragility of reforms.

But a trip to Kyonku, his birthplace, located in a remote corner of the country, offers some insights into his character and clues as to what prompted him to embark on such an ambitious reform program.

Kyonku is a small village in the delta of the Irrawaddy River, an area connected by a vast network of canals, inlets and rivers.

Four years ago, Mr. Thein Sein returned to the delta after a cyclone swept in from the Indian Ocean and devastated the area. It was by far Myanmar's worst natural disaster, killing more than 130,000 people.

At the time, Mr. Thein Sein was the head of the country's disaster-preparedness committee and thus the leader of the military junta's emergency response. But as he crisscrossed the delta in a helicopter, he saw how unprepared the impoverished country was for such a catastrophe.

Cyclone Nargis was a "mental trigger," said U Tin Maung Thann, the head of Myanmar Egress, a Yangon research organization that provides policy advice to the president. "It made him realize the limitations of the old regime."

Mr. Thein Sein may have had other realizations. As prime minister for three years, he represented Myanmar, also called Burma, abroad, a contrast to other senior officials in the junta who rarely left the country. Mr. Thein Sein's visits to places like Singapore, where he received treatment for a heart condition, and New York, where he attended sessions at the United Nations, may have opened his eyes to the economic backwardness of his country, one of the poorest in Asia.

Those who followed Mr. Thein Sein's rise through the ranks of Myanmar's military describe him as extremely loyal but also more conciliatory than other senior members of the junta.

As the head of the Triangle command, a region in northern Myanmar rife with drug trafficking and home to a variety of minority ethnic groups, Mr. Thein Sein was remembered as "less cruel" than other men who held the same job, said Khuensai Jaiyen, an editor of an organization that reports news about the Shan ethnic group.

"If you ask the people here which commander they liked the most, it would go to him," Mr. Khuensai said by telephone. "Or, more accurately, he was the commander that people hated the least."

What remains largely a mystery is why Mr. Thein Sein got the country's top job. Unlike other senior officials in the junta, he does not have a power base in the army. He was never considered particularly ambitious - one story making the rounds in Yangon is that he had wanted to retire to a small village. His advisers say he never actively sought out the presidency.

Mr. Thein Sein owes his rise through the military ranks to his former boss, Senior Gen. Than Shwe, the dictator who led the junta for almost two decades until his retirement last year.

General Than Shwe, who was widely reviled in the country for his suppression of democratic forces, is believed to have engineered Mr. Thein Sein's selection as president. One adviser says that the selection of Mr. Thein Sein and the start of the reform process were designed to allow the aging dictator to slip quietly and peacefully into retirement.

"Than Shwe is safe due to these reforms," said the adviser, U Nay Win Maung, who was also a speechwriter to the president. "It creates a safe haven for him. An uprising is not realistic anytime soon."

Mr. Nay Win Maung made these remarks in an interview late last year, a month before suffering a fatal heart attack. In the same conversation, he offered an unvarnished description of Mr. Thein Sein: "Not ambitious, not decisive, not charismatic, but very sincere."

Mr. Thein Sein is clearly not the only person in Burmese society driving the reform process. Other former generals, like Thura Shwe Mann, the speaker of the lower house of Parliament, has been very vocal in pushing for accelerated democratization. Reform in Myanmar, to paraphrase Victor Hugo, was in some ways an idea whose time had come: Mr. Thein Sein's government responded to the bottled-up ambitions and desires of small businesses, Buddhist monks and ordinary citizens who suffered under the junta and were somewhat inspired by the Arab Spring of last year.

But analysts say Mr. Thein Sein's role should not be underestimated. The major breakthrough of this government was convincing Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the country's democracy movement, to rejoin the political system, a coup that gave Mr. Thein Sein considerable credibility at home and abroad.

Analysts attribute Mr. Thein Sein's successful wooing of Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi partly to his personality. He defies the stereotype of a career military officer, especially one in an army so notorious for its brutality. Mr. Nay Win Maung called the president "very un-military like."

Surin Pitsuwan, the Thai secretary general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, who met with Mr. Thein Sein in February, described the president as "very soft, very gentle and very careful."

"He is a very good listener," Mr. Surin said in an interview.

Mr. Thein Sein is also often described as "clean," a standout in a kleptocratic military junta that doled out contracts and concessions to friends and family.

"There were certainly people who were close to the military who thought that he was one of the better ones, that he was not personally corrupt," said Larry Dinger, who headed the U.S. mission in Myanmar until last August.

The junta sold off many of the country's prized assets in the year leading up to the handover of power to the civilian government, a cash bonanza that may partly explain the acquiescence to the reforms by the former leaders of the junta.

Unlike other senior military officers' children, who are well known for their ostentatious displays of wealth and their business ventures with the country's top tycoons, Mr. Thein Sein's three daughters have stayed out of the spotlight. Mr. Thein Sein's wife, who also keeps a low profile, was present during the meeting with Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi last year. The two women got along well, according to Burmese journalists who were present.

Here in his native village, an eight-hour drive southwest of Yangon, Mr. Thein Sein does not appear to have shown any favoritism, either. A year after he was elected president, Kyonku remains without running water or paved roads. Visitors are warned not to travel after dark on the dirt road that connects the village to the outside world because of the risk of colliding with elephants that inhabit the low-lying mountains.

"He's an honest man - he has never favored our village," said U Kyaw Soe, who grew up across the street from Mr. Thein Sein.

The youngest of three children, Mr. Thein Sein was born in a small wooden house on the road that runs through the center of Kyonku.

His parents were landless, and his father, U Maung Phyto, made a living carrying cargo at the river jetty and weaving bamboo mats, Mr. Kyaw Soe said.

The president's father was a former Buddhist monk whom villagers described as unusually literate for the time.

"The main reason for his success is his father," said Mr. Kyaw Soe. "His father was the most important person in his life. He was a great teacher and respected moral values."

His mother, Daw Khin Nyunt, was a homemaker who helped run a tea shop owned by the family.

Mr. Thein Sein's parents died more than two decades ago, and his childhood home was demolished and replaced with a new structure.

But a visit by a reporter and photographer to the village was still considered highly sensitive by the Burmese authorities. After the president's friends and family members were contacted through an intermediary, officials tracked this reporter's car at checkpoints along the way to the village, where several plainclothes police officers were waiting.

"We were expecting you," said U Myint Oo, a local official.

The authorities were polite - at one point offering snacks and cold beer - but the police took notes during interviews.

The ambivalent welcome to foreign journalists appears to underline the collision today between the old and new Myanmar. A year after Mr. Thein Sein took power, the country is in a halfway house between authoritarianism and democracy.

"Have we already completed building a new nation where genuine democracy and eternal principles flourish?" Mr. Thein Sein said in a televised address to the country this month. "No, we still have much more to do."

Mr. Thein Sein's speech was striking for its progressive vocabulary: He spoke of "stakeholders," including the news media, which he repeatedly called the "fourth estate." The media, he said, "can ensure liberty and accountability."

He vowed to put in place a system of universal health care. Spending on health care would increase fourfold in the next financial year and spending on education would double, he said.

Mr. Thein Sein made similarly bold and ambitious pledges during his inaugural address last March, but at the time, skeptics wondered whether his words were simply meant to appease a country hankering for change after nearly five decades of military rule and inept economic management.

Toward the middle of last year, however, Mr. Thein Sein began convincing skeptics by reaching out to Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, lifting most censorship on the media, freeing political prisoners, suspending work on an unpopular Chinese hydroelectric dam project, rewriting land and labor laws and encouraging more open debates in society.

Many analysts say they are concerned that the reform process is highly personalized and overly dependent on the success of Mr. Thein Sein and a handful of his advisers and pro-reform ministers.

There are concerns that political will could dissipate. The euphoria of increased political freedoms could soon give way to the realities of a country with grinding poverty, something that will take years to change.

"This is a window period of excitement," said Mr. Nay Win Maung, the speechwriter and government adviser. "We will very soon have a period of disappointment."