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Burma on Road to Democracy: How Far How Fast?

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A half century of military dictatorship has officially ended in Burma, or Myanmar. The cost has been high, with brutal war and systematic repression finally giving way to nominal civilian rule. Yet taking the final steps toward democracy may be as difficult as making the transition so far.

For years it seemed like this day would never come. In 1962 the mystical military strongman Ne Win took control. The junta called an election in 1990, which gave a landslide victory to Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of a respected independence leader, and her National League for Democracy. The junta voided the results and redoubled repression.

But six years ago the so-called State Peace and Development Council transformed itself into a nominally civilian regime, with the military receding into the background. Suu Kyi, now a Nobel laureate, was released from house arrest. The transition was marred by imposition of a constitution which cemented military power, continuing violations of civil and political liberties, and wide scale persecution of the Muslim Rohingya. But free elections were held last November, in which the NLD overwhelmed candidates from the regime's Union Solidarity Development Party, including cabinet members, party chairman, and parliamentary speaker.

Yesterday the new government was sworn in. Suu Kyi was barred from the presidency by a constitutional provision drafted specifically against her: no one with a foreign relative can be president. (Her late husband and two sons are British.) However, she took on four cabinet ministries: education, energy, foreign affairs, and presidential office. Moreover, she chose classmate U Htin Kyaw as president, having previously explained that she would be "above the president."

To formalize her authority the party's first legislative proposal on Thursday was to create the position of "state adviser," which, explained MP Khin Maung Myint, would be "the president's boss" who "can control the president and all the Cabinet members." The bill would authorize her to directly contact government officials and private groups and individuals. Legislators expect to pass the measure before public holidays beginning on April 9.

In his inaugural speech Htin Kyaw spoke of the need for "a constitution that has democratic norms and is suitable for the nation." That was widely seen as a pitch for changing the constitution, which the military refused to consider both during the extended lead up to the election and after the NLD's electoral triumph. Guaranteed one-quarter of the parliamentary seats by the constitution it drafted, the Tatmadaw, as the military is known, is able to block any constitutional change. The armed forces also retain control of the defense, home affairs, and border affairs ministries.

The NLD also is targeting this disproportionate influence. NLD parliamentarian Than Aung Soe opined: "We will try step by step to reduce the military percentage." Yet doing so will require either the military's consent or a true revolution. And no one should count on the former: On Sunday military commander-in-chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing emphasized the importance of the Tatmadaw retaining its "leading role in national politics."

Gen. Hlaing proclaimed unity between the military and people, despite the former's brutal mistreatment of the latter for decades, and the importance of "stability." He pledged to "cooperate to bring about prosperity" but warned against "chaotic democracy" which could result from "a failure to abide by the rule of law and regulations and the presence of armed insurgencies."

Indeed, it remains unclear why the generals decided to yield full power. They may have concluded that a negotiated transition offered greater long-term security than risking a future popular explosion. The junta's members also apparently thought—erroneously, just as in 1990—that they could divide the opposition and maintain at least a share of elected power.

The military undoubtedly recognized that the nation had fallen dramatically behind the Asian "tigers" and even such neighbors as Thailand. Finally, the nationalistic Tatmadaw found the embrace of Burma's massive neighbor China to be suffocating. Democratization was the only way to bring in America and Europe, which had imposed tough economic sanctions.

Despite the NLD's overwhelming electoral triumph and Suu Kyi's expansive moral authority, governing will remain a cooperative process. Argued historian Thant Myint-U, November "was not an election of a government. It was an election for a spot in a shared government with the army." Myanmar's future requires Suu Kyi and the NLD to push steadily for moderate reform while winning the military's confidence if not trust. While the Tatmadaw is unlikely to reverse course and again seize power—the democratic genie really seems to be out of the bottle—a rupture in relations and confrontation would have unpredictable and potentially disastrous consequences.

The challenges facing the new government are enormous. Despite enormous potential, Burma remains a desperately poor land. However, reforms have barely begun. The latest *Economic Freedom of the World* index placed Burma at a dismal 146 of 157 nations. Sean Turnell of Australia's Macquarie University complained that recent changes "are not, for the most part, liberal market reforms, but simply expanded permissions and concessions, often given to the crony firms that dominate parts of the economy." The government must address pervasive corruption, legal processes, property rights, business regulation, and trade restrictions. Significant economic reforms are needed to encourage domestic entrepreneurs and foreign investors alike.

The state remains authoritarian. Last year Human Rights Watch reported that "the reform process has stalled." Freedom House rated Burma as "Not Free" and moving backwards. The government cracked down on journalists and military-dominated parliament approved legislation further restricting religious liberty. The new government must adopt wholesale liberalization covering free speech and assembly, media freedom, online activism, judicial process, and criminal procedure. Equally important, the military, which still controls the security agencies, must respect the people's new liberties.

Myanmar remains a land aflame. Although most ethnic groups have signed ceasefires with the government, conflict continues with some, such as the Kachin, Shan, and Wa. The government must negotiate and implement long-term peace agreements, which require substantial self-government and reintegration into Burmese institutions. Particularly contentious is the status of the stateless Rohingya in Rakhine State, who have been targeted by Buddhist nationalists. Tens of thousands of Rohingya have been displaced. So far Suu Kyi has downplayed the violence, but the new government must act to protect the Rohingya and other vulnerable groups.

Complicating these tasks are the people's high expectations. President Htin Kyaw called for patience, but that may end up in short supply. The Burmese voted more for The Lady, as Suu Kyi is known, than the NLD or a particular political program. It isn't likely to take long for disappointment to arrive amid practical politics, including difficult economic, ethnic, labor, and religious disputes.

Moreover, while a truly heroic figure who has fought for democracy, Suu Kyi never had the opportunity to practice the art of democracy. She has run the NLD autocratically, failing to develop leaders to follow her, and raised concern with her decision to take over four ministries directly, as well as the super-president position. Before taking power she declared that she will "make all the decisions, because I am the leader of the winning party." That isn't a healthy approach even in a mature, well-developed democracy.

Aung San Suu Kyi

The movement toward full democracy could be at risk if the political fault line between Suu Kyi and the military deepens. While Burma must eventually vest full power in civilian hands, the NLD should avoid breaching the civilian-military relationship by pushing too hard too soon for constitutional and political changes which the Tatmadaw is unwilling to make. Of course, the military should get out of the way. But the only way it will do so without bloodshed is if convinced to do so.

Despite all this, however, what is happening in Naypyidaw is extraordinary. After decades of military dictatorship, civilians have taken over most of the positions of authority in Burma. The people of Myanmar do not yet rule themselves. But they are closer to doing so than at any previous point in more than a half century.

The U.S. and other nations should encourage further economic and political reform. Economic sanctions remain, including on roughly 150 "specially designated nationals," individuals and businesses linked to the junta. American firms are having trouble finding capable local partners and at a disadvantage compared to companies from Europe, which has lifted its restrictions. Indeed, Suu Kyi declared last November that "With a genuinely democratic government in

power, I do not see why they would need to keep sanctions on." While much more remains necessary to create a liberal and free society, Washington should further relax sanctions to reward progress so far. If the military continues to cooperate in Myanmar's transformation the rest of the restrictions should be lifted in the coming months.

Burma once appeared to be vying for the title of worst governed nation on earth, coming in as runner-up to North Korea. That now seems like a long lost world barely remembered in the mists of time. Myanmar is not yet fully democratic, but it no longer is a dictatorship. The Burmese people deserve America's support as they seek to complete their journey to a liberal and free society.

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