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Burma: Democratic Hopes Versus Authoritarian Fears

By Doug Bandow - Posted: 10/17/2012

The world today is an ugly place. Buying dictators doesn't yield the geopolitical payoff it once did, but liberating countries doesn't generate the gratitude Americans expect. One nation moving in a positive direction is Burma, or Myanmar.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate and long-time opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi recently completed a two week visit to the U.S. Burma's President U Thein Sein, officially in charge of his nation's transformation, also came last month to address the United Nations.

Until a couple of years ago, Burma competed with North Korea for the title of worst governed nation on earth. Long-running ethnic conflicts in the east killed thousands and displaced millions. After winning a free election, Suu Kyi spent most of the last two decades under house arrest, while thousands of other democracy activists languished in prison. The government's botched response to the 2008 typhoon left hundreds of thousands suffering. All the while the ruling generals battled for power and enriched family and friends.

Two years ago the junta held a fixed election, highlighted by the refusal to allow Suu Kyi or her party, the National League for Democracy, to participate. It looked like nothing much had changed. But then the top generals retired and chose Thein Sein, a former colleague, as president. Suu Kyi has been freed, political prisoners have been released, by-elections have been held, press censorship has been eased, blacklists on foreign visitors have been ended, and ceasefires have been reached with autonomy-minded ethnic groups. The government/military-dominated legislature recently forced members of the nation's constitutional tribunal to resign, suggesting growing independence of even that body from the regime.

The Burmese people are hopeful but wary. A decade ago the junta liberalized, only to quickly reverse course. Democratization has proceeded far further this time, but journalist Aung Zaw argued that the changes are "still fragile." Earlier this year Human Rights Watch [pointed to](#) "abundant evidence of continuing systematic repression." Several hundred political prisoners remain in custody. A couple dozen released dissidents recently were denied passports.

Ethnic violence directed against the Muslim Rohingyas has ravaged Rakhine State in the northwest. Even the reformist Thein Sein responded by playing on Buddhist nationalism. Bitter fighting continues between the military and Kachin forces in the northeast; in fact, that conflict escalated at the end of August.

Most important, [observed](#) Tom Malinowski of Human Rights Watch: "It's not at all clear whether the military is going to cede the strong power it still has over most aspects of life in Burma." Is the military prepared to relinquish all of its privileges, especially in the face of demands for justice over past abuses? The next scheduled general election remains three years distant, after which the 67-year-old Thein Sein has indicated that he might retire.

Much depends on Thein Sein. "I believe he sincerely wants reform," [observed](#) Suu Kyi. However, the power lines in Naypyidaw remain obscure. Suu Kyi urged continuing caution in assessing Burma's progress, [warning against](#) "reckless optimism." Her cousin Sein Win, who headed the recently dissolved government-in-exile, [noted](#): "There are many changes, but there need to be many more changes, and that is not happening now."

Still, the government continues to move forward to reform. Before Suu Kyi arrived the regime freed 514 prisoners, about 80 of them political. That was a critical step for the West: "I think the U.S. will want to make a show of supporting Myanmar's reforms, especially if it gets what it wants -- some more prisoners released," predicted Sean Turnell of Australia's Macquarie University. At the same time, Naypyidaw replaced a repressive junta-era press agency.

Also important is economic reform in what has been a kleptocratic, state-controlled system. The government recently announced that it plans to inaugurate an independent monetary policy next year. Moreover, the Thein Sein administration is pushing a new investment code, though proposed legislation has been held up in what was supposed to be a rubber-stamp parliament. Energy investment is exploding this year as the authorities auction off oil and gas exploration permits: "Myanmar is under-explored," explained D.K. Sarraf of ONGC Videsh Ltd., an Indian oil operation. In fact, the government's ambitions may be growing too fast. It has commissioned a feasibility study on launching an earth-observation satellite with Japanese aid money.

At the same time, Naypyidaw has begun to distance itself from China, its neighbor and long-time benefactor. A desire to achieve some geopolitical balance may have encouraged the military regime to reach out to the West. However, Beijing cannot be ignored: in fact, Thein Sein visited China before going to the U.S. last month.

Washington should continue lifting economic sanctions in order to encourage the reform process. For instance, Burmese imports are still banned. Derek Mitchell, America's ambassador to Burma, [expressed](#) Washington's commitment to work

with the new government in easing U.S. rules "even if fully extracting ourselves from the Byzantine array of restrictions imposed over the years may take some time."

Past reforms should be rewarded and future changes should be encouraged, with the end of all sanctions the ultimate objective -- certainly when democratization appears to be irrevocable. In fact, while visiting America Suu Kyi [called for](#) lifting all restrictions now: "There are very many other ways in which the United States can help us to achieve our democratic ends."

The transformation of Burma remains a long, difficult process. Many pitfalls remain: "Our struggle is not over," warned Sein Win. However, Suu Kyi's trip to America illustrates how much Burma has changed. "We are not yet at the end of our struggle," she observed, "but we are getting there."

Two years ago few people, in or out of Burma, predicted genuine reform. Today almost everyone expects it. The ultimate objective must be to allow the Burmese people to take charge of their own destiny.