



# Myanmar Reforms Slip Into Reverse: How to Save Burma's Democracy

By Doug Bandow  
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WALLAY, BURMA—When foreign dignitaries visit Myanmar, still known as Burma in much of the West, they don't walk the rural hills over which the central government and assorted ethnic groups, such as the Karen, fought for decades. Like Wallay village, which required an extended boat ride through territory that could aptly be described as “rustic” to reach.

Wallay gets none of the attention of bustling Rangoon or the empty capital of Naypyitaw. Yet the fact that I could visit without risking being shot may be the most important evidence of change in Burma. For three years the Burmese army and Karen National Liberation Army have observed a ceasefire. For the first time in decades Karen children are growing up with the hope of a peaceful and perhaps even, they can dare dream, a prosperous future.

The global face of what Burma could become remains Aung Sang Suu Kyi, the heroic Nobel Laureate who won the last truly free election in 1990—which was promptly voided by the embarrassed military junta. The fact that she is free after years of house arrest demonstrates the country's progress. The fact that she is barred from running for president next year, a race she almost certainly would win, illustrates the challenges remaining for Burma's transformation.

The British colony gained its independence after World War II. Conflict erupted when various ethnic groups demanded the autonomy promised by the British but denied by the new Burmese central government. The country's short-lived democracy was terminated by slightly nutty Gen. Ne Win in 1962. In his dotage he was overthrown by military rivals. The only things that changed over the years were the names of the generals and the acronyms they deployed: SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) became SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), for instance.

The paranoid junta built a new—and still mostly empty—capital, Naypyitaw, away from Rangoon, and refused Western aid offers after Cycloon Nargis devastated the country. The regime relentlessly waged war on the Burmese people: bloody campaigns against various ethnic groups, democratic elections prevented and overturned, brutal crack-downs on public protests, suppression of basic liberties. At the same time the Burmese people were locked in grinding poverty. Few observers saw much hope for nonviolent change.

Then the military made a dramatic U-turn. The junta issued a new constitution and four years ago held elections, publicly stepping back from power. The system was still rigged—a quarter of legislative seats were reserved for the military, while Suu Kyi and other dissidents were prevented from running. She also was barred from the presidency because her husband and sons were British. Yet soon political prisoners were released, media restrictions were relaxed, and Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, was allowed to register. Former general Thein Sein took over as civilian president and inaugurated far-reaching political reforms.

The U.S. and Europe responded enthusiastically, lifting economic sanctions and exchanging official visits. Burma became the most and perhaps the only significant foreign policy success for the Obama administration: certainly not Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, North Korea, Egypt, Syria, Ukraine, Pakistan, Bahrain, Israel/Palestine, or Russia. If progress continued Burma was expected to join the ubiquitous “international community.”

However, barriers to progress remained high. The country had to confront the continuing legacies of military conflict, political dictatorship, economic impoverishment, and international isolation. As in the former Soviet Union, the process of moving from brutal authoritarianism to democratic capitalism was far more difficult than most Westerners imagined. Some analysts now suggest that the process of liberalization, reducing arbitrary state authority, may not yield democratization, genuine popular control.

Indeed, despite the veneer of civilian rule, Burma's power lines remain unclear. The military has yielded public control, but it has not given up power, at least its veto over important decisions. It is unlikely that the generals retreated due to a sudden bout of public spiritedness. No one knows for certain why the junta yielded, but military leaders may have believed that they could forestall popular upheaval while preserving their wealth and influence by designing and implementing the transformation. Burma's rulers also apparently were increasingly uncomfortable with China's tight embrace. In fact, some Chinese-backed development projects sparked public dissatisfaction and protests. The military's willingness to relinquish formal control brought in America and Europe as geopolitical counterweights.

Unfortunately, in recent months the reform process almost across the board appears to have gone into neutral, if not reverse.

While most of the military battles in the east are over, occasional clashes still occur. Conflict continues with the Kachin, Shan, and Ta'ang, for instance. When visiting Burma last month President Obama cited “violations of basic human rights and abuses in the country's ethnic areas, including reports of extrajudicial killings, rape and forced labor.”

None of the 14 ceasefires so far reached has been converted into a permanent peace. One Karen fighter told the *Economist* in late 2013: “Fighting could be over. Or maybe not. Meanwhile, we are keeping our weapons.” There have been temporary ceasefires before, and in October ethnic representatives attending a forum in Rangoon issued a statement warning: “we have concluded that there have been very limited positive change and in some cases situations have regressed.” While investment is sprouting in some rebel-held areas—a new hotel in Hpa-an, the capital of

Kayin state, for instance—most communities, like Wallay, are waiting for certain peace and sustained progress.

Of equal concern, Rakhine State has been torn by sectarian violence as Rakhine Buddhists, who make up about 60 percent of the population, targeted Rohingya Muslims. A full range of security forces—local police, riot police, border guards, army troops, and even navy personnel, as well as paramilitaries apparently aided by the armed forces—joined in the attacks. At least 200 Rohingyas have been killed and perhaps 140,000 mostly Rohingyas displaced. Human Rights Watch described the conflict as “ethnic cleansing.”

The fight is complex, with the Rakhine majority itself long oppressed by the central government. Many Buddhists view the Rohingya, though marginalized and even denied citizenship, as a demographic threat. President Thein Sein, either unable or unwilling to act on the victims’ behalf, has downplayed the violence and defended the security forces.

Political reform also remains incomplete. Luke Hunt of the Diplomat complained: “four years after reforms were introduced, backsliding has escalated dramatically and become the order of the day.” Particularly serious has been the reversal of media freedom; ten journalists have been imprisoned and one, Aung Kyaw Naing, died in military custody in October. David Mathieson of Human rights Watch complained to *Time* of “sharply deteriorating press freedoms.”

A handful of political prisoners remain incarcerated and the government arrested some regime opponents over the last year. A few democracy activists still face legal restrictions despite their release. Khin Ohmar, with Burma Partnership, a civil society network, cited “surveillance, scrutiny, threats and intimidation” and told *Time*: “Aung San Suu Kyi may say that reform has stalled, but the reality is that it has regressed.”

The 2008 constitution remains in place. It guarantees military dominance, does not provide for judicial independence, and bars Suu Kyi from contesting the presidency, which is chosen by the legislature. Thura Shwe Mann, the assembly speaker recently announced that while a constitutional referendum would be held next May no constitutional change would take effect before next year’s election. He argued that “We can’t afford in the present political and administrative scenario to make any mistakes in amending the constitution right now.”

Not coincidentally, Shwe Mann is said to have his own presidential ambitions. President Thein Sein apparently has abandoned his pledge not to run again and hopes to win reelection to the post. At the same time, he has backed away from the reform course with which he is identified, pushing legislation to strengthen the power of his position as well as that of the military, whose support he needs. Army head Min Aung Hlaing also may be angling for the presidency.

Suu Kyi’s exclusion is about more than one person’s ambition. Arbitrarily barring the nation’s most popular political figure—probably permanently, since she is now 69—from the government’s top position would make any outcome look illegitimate, impairing the country’s transition at home and relations abroad. Worse, the other potential contenders seem unlikely to press further fundamental reforms, such as limiting the military’s influence.

Even economic liberalization has stalled. Progress is real: Cell phones have become widely available; new construction is evident; foreign imports have surged. However, much of the economy remains in state- or military-controlled hands. New investment laws remain unwritten. Potential investors complain about opaque decision-making. Sean Turnell of Australia's Macquarie University explained that the changes so far "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." Western investors originally were lured by the prospect of a new frontier, but many have held back entering the market.

Compounding these problems is the state of the opposition. Suu Kyi is an admirable figure, perhaps too much so. "The Lady," as she is known, is viewed by many as an icon and thus beyond criticism. She spends much of her time in Naypyitaw, isolated from others in her party, and tends not to delegate responsibility. The National League for Democracy has failed to develop new leadership for the future.

Suu Kyi also has found that becoming an ordinary politician risks sainthood. For instance, she has been criticized for not challenging the brutal treatment of the Rohingya, which would risk her popularity, and drawing too close to the generals, in hopes of minimizing opposition to a presidential bid. Yet there seems to be no one else—even those most disappointed say that they still support her. Their frustration, however, signals the new challenges that await her if she succeeds in ascending the political summit.

In short, the hopes that recently soared high for Burma have crashed down to reality. Yet disappointment may have been inevitable. Observed Ben Rhodes of the National Security Council: "we need some perspective here that a country that was completely closed to the international community, completely closed in terms of its politics, completely dominated by the military, with Aung Sang Suu Kyi under house arrest just several years ago, has now opened up in a very dramatic way and is going to be undergoing a transition for a number of years. And no country goes through the process quickly or easily."

Obviously, additional reform is necessary, but U.S. influence is limited. Washington could reimpose economic sanctions; indeed, it recently added to its blacklist someone believed to be impeding the reform process. However, returning to the policy of the past would be a dead end, since the ruling junta always cared more about preserving power than promoting prosperity. There's no reason to think that calculation has changed for the generals. And if Europe was not prepared to follow suit, the gesture almost certainly would be ineffective.

Nor can the U.S. win further reform with more aid. Washington's lengthy experience attempting to "buy" political change is exceedingly poor. Moreover, with the U.S., Europe, and Japan all active in Burma, participation in the Western economies is worth more than any likely official assistance package. Indeed, Beijing's past financial support did not prevent Naypyitaw's Westward shift. Not that China appears to have learned the lesson: Consultant Aung Tun noted that at the ASEAN summit China offered almost \$8 billion worth of financial inducements. Naypyitaw seems ready to take everyone's money and run.

The administration also hopes to use military engagement as leverage for democracy. It's a particularly sensitive subject given the authoritarian control still covertly exercised by Burma's generals. China, which helped arm Naypyitaw, provided little training or other direct assistance, giving Washington an opening. But the U.S. has discovered through hard experience that contact with America is not enough to win foreign military men to democracy. For instance, Egypt's new pharaoh, President and ex-general Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, spent time in the U.S. The administration should offer military instruction only as a future benefit after further reform. Indeed, American Ambassador Derek Mitchell declared that the U.S. is "not going to have anything close to a normal relationship" with the Burmese military unless the latter's political role was addressed.

It would be tragic if Burma's reform process remains stalled. But there's no magic bullet to spur progress. Washington needs to act with both patience and prudence, fully aware of its limits.

The best strategy would be to work with Europe and Japan to develop a list of priority political reforms and to communicate to Burma that continued progress will determine further allied support and cooperation. Washington and friends should recognize political realities in Naypyitaw and respect the military's insecurities during the transition; for instance, a genuine power transfer could be combined with guarantees, however unpleasant in principle, for those yielding authority.

Accounting for three of the world's four largest economies, the U.S., Europe, and Japan also should collectively press for a genuine market transformation in Burma. They should point out that a substantially larger economy would yield plenty of wealth for economic elites used to living well and regime apparatchiks who failed to share in the junta's plunder, while also spreading the financial gain to the entire population. The latter would help satisfy the rising aspirations of the Burmese people, which should concern the military which has profited so handsomely in the past. Having whetted the people's reform appetites, the generals hit reverse now at their peril.

Finally, friends of liberty worldwide should offer aid and support to Burmese activists seeking to transform what remains an authoritarian system. Such assistance best comes outside of the U.S. government, lest democracy promotion be seen as yet another tool of American foreign policy. Americans tend to be better advocates than Washington of America and America's values.

During his recent visit President Obama said: "We recognize change is hard and you do not always move in a straight line, but I'm optimistic." That's probably the best response possible from Washington, given how far this still impoverished nation has come yet how far it has yet to go. America must continue to engage the regime in Naypyitaw and the generals behind it, leavening high hopes with realistic expectations.

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