

Political Developments in Myanmar in Light of the 2010 Elections

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Abstract

With the conclusion of the general elections in Myanmar and the formation of the new government, one more step has been taken on the “Road Map to Democracy” drawn up by the ruling SPDC nearly eight years ago. Political change, it may be, but military dominance in politics seems to remain essentially unchanged. This outcome calls for a review of political developments in Myanmar, taking into account the complexity of domestic conditions that have repeatedly prompted intervention of the *Tatmadaw* in politics. The review highlights the friction between the political reality of the country and the political aspirations of international campaigns.

Keywords: Myanmar, political developments, democracy, *Tatmadaw*, ethnicity, local autonomy, international politics

Political Developments in Myanmar in Light of the 2010 Elections

Between the military coup in 1962 to seize power by dissolving parliament and the new parliamentary rule coming into force in 2011, a period of nearly half a century has elapsed. This is a point of reflection for those interested in, and seeking to understand, political developments in Myanmar: What has changed during these 50 years, and what has not? Answers to these questions may provide some indication about where the country will be heading from this point onward. To be sure, without taking into account the country's turbulent past, predictions about the political development of Myanmar beyond the 2010 general elections will be of little relevance, and policymaking pertaining to Myanmar may continue to be in disarray.

The End of the Beginning or the Beginning of the End

The general elections in Myanmar concluded in November 2010 amid speculation as well as condemnation. The event itself went as smoothly as one could have expected, 20 years after the military in the country regained control and subsequently consolidated its power in politics. Likewise, the outcome of the general elections was hardly surprising to many of those who have been following political developments in the country closely.

Among the 37 political parties contesting the seats in the parliament, the Union of Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)'s Prime Minister Thein Sein, won over 76 percent of the total 1,154 in the House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw), the House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw), and the fourteen sub-national level assemblies. An additional 388 parliamentarians nominated by Senior General Than Shwe filled the 25 percent quota in each Hluttaw reserved for members of the armed forces, in accordance with the country's new constitution adopted by a national referendum in 2008. On January 31, 2011, the first session of the brand new Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Assembly of the Union) convened in the new capital Nay Pyi Taw, thus bringing the 2008 Constitution into effect.

By the new constitution, the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces may be entrusted by the President (after coordinating with the National Security and Defense Council) to assume full powers from the president at a time of emergency when the security of the Union is deemed to be under threat. Under the parliament elected President, Thein Sein, serving as Vice-Presidents are Tin Aung Myint Oo (SPDC Secretary-1, nominated by the military appointed parliamentarians) and Sai Mauk Kham (representing the USDP, nominated by the Amyotha Hluttaw). Chairing the Pyithu Hluttaw and the Amyotha Hluttaw as Speakers are Shwe Mann (SPDC's third highest ranking officer) and Khin Aung Myint (former Minister of Culture). The majority of the 34 appointed ministers are former military officers. Notably, the occupants of the ministerial posts in defense, home affairs, and border affairs are Lieutenant and Major Generals.

As far as the actual distribution of power is concerned, the pattern seems not to have changed in any fundamental way, which would incidentally validate the criticism from Western governments and the Myanmar exile community that the 2010 general elections were designed to prolong SPDC rule and legitimize the entrenchment of the military in domestic politics.

Since 1990 when the military regained control of the country, legitimacy of rule has been at the core of both internal politics and international politics. For the political opposition that was denied a chance to hold office, the military rule lacked legitimacy, and the injustice has fueled unrelenting international campaigns for democratic change in Myanmar. To claim and sustain its legitimacy, the military government has over the years engaged in politics that includes systematically undermining and stifling various political forces challenging its rule. Intolerance toward dissidence in politics has been a hallmark of rule in independent Myanmar. Cyclical political suppression and military intervention have, however, not solved the fundamental problems in the country that continue to feed public grievances, driving aspiration for change on the streets. While the legitimacy of military rule remains a question at issue, disconcerting are the prospects for peace and stability in the country without the military in politics at this point in time. If the turbulent experience of Myanmar in the past has any bearing on the present, there seems to be an answer.

Rethinking the “Discipline-Flourishing Democracy”

The modern history of Myanmar has been fraught with political upheavals, ethnic conflict, and lack of development overall. Challenging the formation of the new nation at the time of the departure of the British were multiple interest groups with different political agendas, competing for influence in politics. Paramount in Myanmar politics is the influence of assertive personalities, whose prestige and charisma are vital to form power bases but equally conflict-ridden. Parliamentary rule after the country gained its independence was short-lived, largely due to inept governance compounded by ideological rifts (often underpinned by personal rivalry). The military caretaker government in 1958 was put in place essentially to stabilize the civilian government dominated by the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), which had been severely weakened at the time as the result of intra-party strife and widespread insurgencies. Finally, the military coup in 1962 dissolved the parliament. The constitution subsequently adopted in 1974 affirmed one party rule by the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) in a civilian outfit.

The Burmese Way to Socialism under the BSPP leadership ran aground as economic stagnation began to take its toll. Turmoil engulfed the country after Ne Win tendered his resignation in 1988, and violence escalated despite parliament agreed to a return to a multiparty system of government. The army intervened and assumed power when the government apparatus had practically collapsed. The general elections that followed in 1990 delivered victory to the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi despite her concurrent house arrest. For a moment, there was euphoria that political change in the country was imminent. But the military insisted on convening the National Convention to draft a new constitution before handing over power. The prerequisite was duly rejected by the NLD. The aftermath drew international condemnations. From a *Realpolitik* perspective, however, the prospect of the NLD holding office without seeing the country reverse to chaos would have been bleak, since the NLD was no more experienced in government than the AFPFL in the 1950s. Similarly, as history has shown, the chances of any political forces inside the country attempting to topple the military rule (or to rule without military backup) would be slim, despite its international unpopularity.

Key to this observation is the relationship between the *Tatmadaw* (armed forces) and the Union of Myanmar. The fact is that the military in Myanmar has never left the political stage since the country's independence, willingly or unwillingly. In different periods, the *Tatmadaw* has proven effective by its own standard in responding to government crisis, stabilizing the country and maintaining order, resorting to the means at its disposal. Over the decades, the *Tatmadaw* has developed responsibilities both for national defense and for government administration. The military presence in politics has, however, little bearing on state capacity (in terms of bureaucratic function). If anything, the protracted military rule in the country has demonstrated exactly the opposite, that is, the weakness of the state apparatus.

To continue the much-neglected nation building while demonstrating to the world a keen effort to implement political change in Myanmar, the ruling SPDC unveiled its Seven-Step Roadmap to Democracy in August 2003. The significance of what was designated a "discipline-flourishing democracy" goes beyond political rhetoric. It constitutes, in effect, a new form of statecraft, in that the shadow of the *Tatmadaw* is set to hang over politics for some time to come.

In this context, it is worth noting that, not only has it been indispensable in enforcing order in the country, the *Tatmadaw* also happens to be the only organization that has the capability to reach from top to bottom (and gradually from the center to the periphery). The rank and file answering to the Commander-in-Chief is exempt from the kind of ideological rifts that have constantly split politicians in the country. The USDP did not win just by chance. The political party evolved from a mass organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, established in 1993 under the auspices of the ruling generals. Its transformation into a political party ought to be seen as a systematic building of state capacity by the military. In that light, the widely reported new conscription legislation—turning every able-bodied citizen a soldier (age 18–45 for men and 18–35 for women)—would appear to be a supplementary design to consolidate the state by managing society through "discipline."

All things considered, there is hardly any doubt that the military is entrenched in politics. For those who wonder how long this situation is likely to last, the correlation between instability and military rule, as the country's past has demonstrated, provides the answer. The 2010 general

elections marked a step forward toward a formal transition from military to civilian rule, although such a transition can be expected to be gradual. To be sure, the state cannot function without order, and peace is a pre-condition for any meaningful political transition in Myanmar. Whether peace can be lasting will largely depend on how the new government is going to function with the military behind the scenes and how the serving military can relate to appointed military representatives and both groups to compulsorily retired officers who are now USDP representatives.

Facing the new parliamentary rule is the same constant challenge of maintaining order and strengthening state capacity. After years being marginalized by the military government, the NLD is now history, in a sense that its existence is presently more of an idea than an organization (except in cyberspace).¹ Its days as a formidable political force have long gone, although the media of the Myanmar exile community continues to refer to the defunct party as the political opposition, and by the same token, Aung San Suu Kyi as the leader of the political opposition party. Despite the ongoing political change in the country, prestige and charisma continue to play a role in Myanmar politics. Since her release from house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi has reportedly urged the youth rallying under the NLD banner to develop a pro-democracy network, using modern communications technology;² at the same time, she has held meetings with a number of foreign diplomats in an effort to maintain her defunct party's influence internationally.³

Whether or not Aung San Suu Kyi will continue to have a political role of any significance in the country is uncertain for the time being. Testing limits, she has been sending signals of preparing to engage in dialogue with the military generals on the one hand, (remarkably adopting a conciliatory tone, as conveyed in the vocabulary of "debate," "disagreement," "negotia-

¹ The NLD declined to register early in 2010 to contest the general elections later in the year, thus dissolving itself in legal terms. Breakaway members organized the National Democratic Force and contested in the general elections, winning 16 seats in the parliament.

² As widely reported, two months after her release from house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi received an Internet connection at her Inya Lake home, and intended to use the cyber tool to connect with her supporters. Ba Kaung, "Suu Kyi Readies for Cyberspace," *The Irrawaddy*, January 22, 2011, http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=20583

³ Economic Intelligence Unit, "Taking Stock: Myanmar," *Business Asia*, January 10, 2011, <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF6/bas.pdf>

tion,” and “win-win”),⁴ while on the other hand, she is envisioning a role for herself in politics outside parliament. As she was quoted as saying, “In any case, there are always some who participate in politics inside parliament, and others who are involved in politics outside parliament. We will be in the latter category.”⁵ It remains to be seen, however, what this inferred “politics outside parliament” will entail. In view of the present circumstances with the defunct NLD, the likelihood of Aung San Suu Kyi opening up a new front altogether to revive her influence seems to be increasing (below). Yet, the extent to which she may be allowed to play a role in politics, or in society, will depend on whether her activities will be perceived in the country as threatening the new political order.

Intractable Issues of Integration and Equality

The Union of Myanmar was founded on an amalgamation of “Burma Proper” with its borderlands inhabited by ethnically diverse peoples under the jurisdiction of indigenous chiefs. The agreements reached by Aung San with representatives from most of the frontier regions at Panglong in 1947 were significant in a sense of formal politics, albeit had little impact on the actuality of political integration in the country. The early years of independence saw the outbreak of insurgencies in all hues (ideological and ethnic) sweeping across nearly half of the country, lasting for four decades. In 1989, ceasefire processes began under the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and continued under the SPDC. In the two decades that followed, 17 out of 18 ethnic armed forces “returned to the legal fold,” as the SPDC announced in March 2009.⁶

The existing ceasefire agreements were reached under certain conditions, specific to the ceasefire groups involved, and differing with respect to demographic composition, territorial control, military capacity, and proximity to foreign countries. These factors, in turn, made differences in government strategies of negotiation, affecting equally the amount of leverage that each ethnic community could utilize in maximizing local autonomy (political, cultural, and economic). The goal of the military government to

⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi, “Hope is the Desire to Try,” *The Irrawaddy Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 12, December 2010, http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=20387

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The New Light of Myanmar*, June 1, 2009.

reach ceasefire agreements was initially to “reign but not rule;” as such the “ceasefire groups enjoy their autonomy relying on their own armies.”⁷ As estimated, some 90 percent of the territories along the 2,000 kilometers long border between northeastern Myanmar and southwestern China have until recently been under the control of five ceasefire groups.⁸

The ceasefire made it possible for the local communities to divert manpower and resources to economic activities. Availing themselves of their geographic advantage and investment capital from neighboring countries, the ethnic leaders went into business with relatives on the other side of the national border. During the two decades of the ceasefire, the border communities have undergone a transformation. Today, the living standard in parts of the periphery is markedly superior to the average in the interior. Paradoxically, economic boom and prosperity have, as a result, raised the stakes in the political process. While ethnic leaders may not necessarily oppose the Union as a political system *per se*, many seem to have reasons to be intensely wary of the intent of the government in Nay Pyi Taw, and therefore are determined not to lose control over the local economy crucial to the development of their communities.

As the general elections were looming, the military government moved to achieve its ambition of “one country, one army” by reorganizing the ethnic armed forces into the Border Guard Forces (DGF) under the command of national army officers; such reform entailed calls for the surrender of arms and a reduction in size of the ethnic armed forces in the local communities. Growing anxious over the scenario of their private armies shrinking under the command of the national army officers, the ceasefire groups began to have second thoughts. Under the circumstances where the majority ceasefire groups were skeptical of the BGF reorganization, the government army moved in, and a skirmish broke out in August 2009 in Kokang under the jurisdiction of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (the first rebel group that entered into ceasefire negotiations with the military government in 1989). The incident resulted in tens of thousand refugees fleeing across the border into China’s southwestern province of Yunnan.

⁷ Li Chenyang, “Effects of Conflict between the Ceasefire Groups and Myanmar Military Government in Northern Myanmar on China since 2009,” paper presented at International Academic Symposium, University of Hong Kong, June 23–25, 2010.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The SPDC hereupon extended its deadline for the BGF reform more than once. In due course, some ceasefire groups caved in, whereas others continued to drag their feet. An ultimatum to outlaw the ceasefire groups refusing to accept the BGF reform by the end of April in 2010 has been interpreted as an annulment of the ceasefire agreements, by which “the *Tatmadaw* can launch an attack any time.”⁹ So far, however, no ceasefire group has been branded an illegal organization; nor has the government army launched any military attack on the ceasefire groups. How the situation will develop after the new government has been sworn in remains to be seen. Sporadic scuffles may be difficult to avoid, but by all accounts, the likelihood of an all-out civil war looks remote. The ceasefire groups may be unequivocally outgunned and outmanned, but their confrontation with the government army is likely to persist for some time to come.

The resistance to the reorganization of ceasefire groups into the BGF underscores the age-old misgivings on the part of the local actors, although the same can be said about the unsettling wariness on the part of the ruling SPDC. At the core of the problem are disputes over rights and a lack of equality, the same kind as those that fueled the insurgencies lasting for decades after independence. Despite the ceasefire that has brought peace to the country recently, lingering grievances continue to be potentially destabilizing. In the environment of emerging economic reform that has benefited development in the border regions, property rights are expected to be a focal point of conflict and negotiations for local autonomy between the newly inaugurated central government and local actors.

One important development with regard to central-local politics is the creation of regional-level assemblies and their inclusion in the parliamentary rule, which has motivated ethnic and local representatives to participate in the ongoing political process from drafting the new constitution to convening the first session of parliament.

Of all other ethnic political parties contesting the 2010 general elections, the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party turned out to be in the lead, winning 18 seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw, three in the Amyotha Hluttaw, and 36 in the region/state assembly. Being the largest non-Burman nationality claiming a five million population (half of which reside within the Shan State) and

⁹ Harn Yawngnwe, “United States-Myanmar Relations: On the Threshold of Rapprochement? A Response,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2010: 431.

occupying a territorial expanse as large as one quarter of the entire Union of Myanmar, the Shan nationality has a special place in history. The Panglong meeting in 1947 granted the Shan and the Kayah, in addition to their frontier area special status, the option to withdraw from the Union after a ten-year period after independence. Serving as the first president of the Union of Burma was a member of the Shan nobility, who in his tenure spearheaded a federalist movement, championing autonomy and rights against the central government. The movement was brought to a sudden end by a military coup toppling the civilian government in early March of 1962.

Since her release, Aung San Suu Kyi has made known her inclination to support a second (also known as “21st Century”) Panglong conference.¹⁰ The reference to the historical event is incidentally a familiar practice intended to perpetuate personal influence in politics, as Aung San Suu Kyi did back in 1988 calling the popular uprising—from which she emerged as an icon of democracy—the Second Struggle for Independence, invoking the memory of her father, Aung San, the founder of the country’s much celebrated Burmese Independent Army. In the light of the historical circumstances, the role that Aung San Suu Kyi hopes to play at the present juncture would appear no less political than before. The reaction from the government to her initiative has been hostile, calling it “very dangerous to the nation and the people.”¹¹

Having learned lessons from their predecessors, the political actors of the Union today are not prepared to take any chances. One of the vice-presidents of the Union elected from the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw is a Shan, a less good deal compared to the one upon independence, but sufficiently significant on a symbolic level. The new constitution leaves no room for rights of secession from the Union, and extra administrative measures have been taken seemingly to prevent any attempt by local actors to move toward federalism as 50 years ago. The proportion of USDP representatives in the Regions and States may not be even (less dominant in the States designated to ethnic nationalities, with the exception of Kayah),¹² but the elected Chair-

¹⁰ Aung San Suu Kyi, “Hope is the Desire to Try.”

¹¹ Kyaw Ye Min, “Plot to Break up the Union, Unacceptable to the People,” *The New Light of Myanmar*, February 11, 2011.

¹² Richard Horsey, “Outcome of the Myanmar Elections,” SSRC Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, November 17, 2010, <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF5/rhout.pdf>

men (Speakers) of all fourteen region/state assemblies are without exception USDP members,¹³ notwithstanding members of ethnic minorities being included. The organizational conformity in that political party membership overrides locality and ethnicity is understandably crucial to decision-making, especially on issues where local interests run counter to those of the Union.

Still ahead is the competition for power between the new government of the Union and local actors. Again, this is not to suggest that local actors are unified vis-à-vis the government in Nay Pyi Taw. There is a great deal of discrepancy needed to balance between the seven States within the Union of Myanmar, and similarly within each of the seven States.¹⁴ While integration of the periphery today may look more feasible than ever before with the government apparatus being strengthened, external forces are demonstrating increasing interest in issues of ethnicity. Since the U.S. government adopted its what became known as the *smart policy* of engagement in 2009, there has been discernible emphasis from Washington on issues concerning ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Exile groups have duly incorporated the same rhetoric in their information dissemination, promoting the role of Aung San Suu Kyi in national reconciliation. Days before the opening session of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, the Thai foreign minister reportedly pledged to Aung San Suu Kyi that his government “felt that her position as opposition leader who could also represent minority groups in Myanmar could play a significant and positive role in Myanmar.”¹⁵ A gesture like this could risk being construed as crossing the boundary between domestic and international affairs.

¹³ The Karen State is an exception, where the chair is a military appointed representative. Ko Pauk, “USDP Sweeps Speaker Posts in Local Assemblies,” *Mizzima*, February 1, 2011, <http://www.mizzima.com/news/election-2010-/4830-usdp-sweeps-speaker-posts-in-local-assemblies.html>

¹⁴ Each state has a dominant ethnic group to which the autonomous status is granted, in addition to other ethnic groups. The new constitution grants low-level autonomous status to a number of ethnic minorities living within the boundaries of the existing seven states.

¹⁵ “FM Kasit Tells Suu Kyi of Thailand’s Support for Reconciliation in Myanmar,” MCOT, January 23, 2011, http://www.mcot.net/cfcustom/cache_page/159608.html

Forces for Change from Outside

Diplomacy today, in an environment of highly ideology-driven international politics, differs markedly from that of yesterday. Back in 1962, foreign observers reacting to the military coup demonstrated remarkable understanding that the action taken by the then Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces was necessary to restore order. There were at the time more messages of congratulations to Ne Win from the diplomatic corps than outcries from the international community. The events in 1988 were decisively internationalized, owing partly to Aung San Suu Kyi and her charisma, and partly reflecting the emerging globalization of political change that began to shape media attention. By comparison, the student protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 received far more international attention than the popular uprising on the streets of Yangon in 1988. But, the aftermath of the 1990 general elections in Myanmar—in which the NLD claimed victory with over 80 percent of seats in the parliament, with no prospect of holding power—was far-reaching.

Idolizing assertive individuals with charisma in Myanmar politics, as discussed earlier, seems to have caught on in international politics in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi and political change in Myanmar. Since the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 to Aung San Suu Kyi, her image has captivated the world, exerting immeasurable influence on policymaking in the West. In as far as applying sanctions against the government of Myanmar is concerned, the United States and the European Union have been in agreement and largely coordinated their efforts (ranging from trade embargo to investment bans, in addition to restrictions on travel to Western countries). The consistency of the U.S. position of linking sanctions to support for Aung San Suu Kyi has been extraordinary, to the extent that “No living foreigner has shaped contemporary U.S. attitudes toward a single country more than Aung San Suu Kyi.”¹⁶ In response to her displeasure over the NLD being forced out of contesting the general elections,¹⁷ politicians in the U.S. and

¹⁶ David. I. Steinberg, “Aung San Suu Kyi and U.S. Policy toward Burma/Myanmar,” *The Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2010), p. 35.

¹⁷ The NLD declined to register, reportedly following Aung San Suu Kyi’s decision, whose status being a leader of a political party under house arrest (or serving prison terms) was challenged by the political party registration law promulgated in March 2010. Derek Tonkin, “Into the Political Wilderness,” *Burmese Perspectives*, March 31, 2010, Network Myanmar, <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF3/bp310310.pdf>

the EU joined forces with campaigners around the world calling the upcoming general elections “neither free nor fair.” The current snag in the review of sanctions policy in the U.S. and EU seems to be entangled, again, with support for Aung San Suu Kyi and what she stands for.

Debate on the merits and drawbacks of the sanctions policy has continued for quite some time now. Those against the policy maintain that sanctions have been hurting the ordinary people in Myanmar by impeding economic development; those in favor of lifting sanctions argue that sanctions have failed to remove the military from power (and arguably, the sanctions policy has consolidated the military rule in the country). The politicians sticking to the status quo insist that keeping sanctions in place is essential in order to support Aung San Suu Kyi, almost regardless of whether the sanctions have any actual effect. Despite a policy review launched in 2009, the U.S. government has so far not changed, but only reaffirmed its position of “no change” to the existing sanctions policy, while pressing the government of Myanmar to hold dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, recognize the NLD, and release political prisoners. The EU is presently on standby to review its policy, as the annual extension of sanctions on Myanmar last renewed in April 2010 is about to expire. For the governments on both sides of the Atlantic, there is a distinct dilemma in removing the existing yet impractical sanctions policy—that is, simply, the shared commitment to Aung San Suu Kyi, her party, and her cause.

In that light, it would be convenient for (and to some extent come as a relief to) the politicians among her supporters, if Aung San Suu Kyi were to announce publicly her opposition to sanctions. For weeks after her release from house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi appeared to be stalling. On occasions more than one, she let her audience know that she would look into the pros and cons of the sanctions policy, but seemed generally unwavering on the matter (except in the area of tourism). Wait-and-see appeared to be her strategy; understandably, for as long as sanctions remained in place, she could hope to maintain her leverage in holding talks with the government. As indeed revealed in an interview with *Irrawaddy* magazine, on a question about what kind of pressure she would expect the international community to exert on Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi linked the situation with sanctions remaining in effect to what was referred to as the “new political landscape” (after the 2010 general elections), and maintained that it remains

to be seen whether it “really is a new landscape or not.”¹⁸ One week after the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw convened and subsequently elected the government and parliament leaders while Aung San Suu Kyi being increasingly seen internationally as “outflanked by the generals,”¹⁹ she spoke urging the West to keep sanctions on Myanmar.²⁰ Almost simultaneously, the NLD released its long-awaited review of sanctions, counter-arguing that sanctions were hurting the people inside the country and calling for discussions with Western powers on how the sanctions issue might be resolved.²¹

The decision to impose sanctions on the government of Myanmar was originally political. Over time, it has evolved into largely a moral issue, one in a sense more interesting than the effectiveness of the sanctions policy itself. The dilemma that politicians presently find themselves in seems to offer a lesson: symbolic politics with focus on a person specially chosen (in this case, Aung San Suu Kyi) may be helpful in rallying support and resources for a single purpose (as it has been in the case of political change in Myanmar), but it equally imposes unwanted constraints on policy options when the intended objectives become unattainable, since deification cannot be undone. A similar stumbling block is the stigma attached to the name of the country. In 1989, the ruling SLORC changed the name of the country back to its indigenous term Myanmar from Burma, presumably to rid of the colonial remnant. The NLD and its supporters (in particular, the United States and Great Britain) rejected the name change in defiance of the military government, while academics have chosen to use both, commonly seen in the form of Burma/Myanmar or Myanmar/Burma. Suffice to say, the use of either name has been “a surrogate indicator of political persuasion.”²² For the UN and ASEAN that adopted the change, along with many other third-

¹⁸ Aung San Suu Kyi, “Hope is the Desire to Try.”

¹⁹ Frank Peel, “‘The Lady’ Outflanked by Burma Junta,” *Financial Times*, February 5, 2011.

²⁰ Aung Hla Tun, “Suu Kyi Party Urges West to Keep Myanmar Sanctions,” *Reuters*, February 7, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/02/07/uk-myanmar-sanctions-idUKTRE7160KM20110207>

²¹ NLD, “Sanctions on Burma: A Review,” with commentaries by Derek Tonkin, Network Myanmar, February 8, 2011, <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF6/comment-on-nld-statement.pdf>

²² David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), p. xi.

world countries, a country's name in English is by international practice and consent a country's name.

Further challenging the governments in the countries that tend to invest a good deal in symbolic politics is how to reckon with the new government of Myanmar—as a new entity having emerged recently from the new Assembly of the Union, or as continuation of the old one. To the neighboring countries of Myanmar, it is both a continuation of the old government and a new one. The consistency is largely determined by geography; as such, no major policy adjustment is called for in the wake of the general elections. Countries outside the region may yet decide and choose, based on whatever is politically expedient. Despite the political stalemate over sanctions, the pressure for change from outside trying to influence political development in Myanmar is unlikely to cease. The momentum seen in the past two decades is something to be reckoned with as part of an established order in international politics. It would, however, be useful to bear in mind, in the wake of the general elections, that “political change in Burma can only be decided by the Burmese themselves, and within the country.”²³

Conclusion

The result of the 2010 general elections spotlights indeed a “gap between reality and aspiration in the transitional societies”—revisiting an observation made some 50 years ago in the earlier period of nation building.²⁴ The ineffectiveness of the sanctions against the government in Myanmar and campaigns for democracy in the past twenty years, furthermore, underscores the discrepancy between the intentions of those on the outside and what concerns those living inside the country. Obviously, how one views the credibility of the government in Myanmar depends largely on where one stands, inside the country or outside it. In the circumstances where the military dominance in politics continues, it may be tempting to liken the USDP today to the BSPP yesterday. The present multi-party system, however, does accommodate a formal process of political consultation, in which the military is a part, albeit not the only one. Similarly, how the current political

²³ Andrew Selth, “Civil-Military Relations in Burma: Portents, Predictions and Possibilities,” Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper, No. 25, 2010: 18.

²⁴ Lucian W. Pye, *Politics, Personality, and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity* (New Haven, Mass.: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 6.

system is going to evolve to deserve the name of parliamentary democracy will indeed depend on many factors other than the military itself.

It is by no means uncommon in modern history, as illustrated by the experience of many countries, that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. What is unique about Myanmar is that the political power keeps retreating to the barrel of a gun in response, each time, to a specific pattern of political development on the ground. The military entrenchment in domestic politics reflects some fundamental problems hindering political integration in the country deriving largely from historical relations between the center and periphery, ethnic diversity, and inequality in general. Particularly destabilizing the country has been a historical and persistent unwillingness to compromise on all sides, in addition to competition for influence by multiple interest groups and what has been referred to as “insurgency as a way of life.”²⁵ Confronting the new parliamentary rule today are continuous challenges to peace consolidation and political integration, which cannot be successfully managed without properly addressing the core issue of equality.

With privatization of state assets underway and Special Economic Zones under construction, a full-scale economic reform toward a market economy in Myanmar may be expected to be slowly forthcoming. Yet, what the world is about to witness the emerging Burmese Way to Capitalism under the USDP is not going to make the issue of local autonomy less contentious than it was when the country was undergoing the Burmese Way to Socialism under the BSPP. To be sure, sensible policymaking will require considerable flexibility, to accommodate the ongoing economic development in the border regions and equally the customary way of life there. Whatever settlements may be reached in the end between different stakeholders will have a far-reaching impact on the stability of the border regions, and political development in the country as a whole.

²⁵ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), pp. 88–101.

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