



MYANMAR'S PUSH FOR DEMOCRACY

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Last year Myanmar held its first elections in over 20 years. Despite doubts about the validity of the elections, there have been several noteworthy developments. Even so, the intentions of the new civilian government are still questioned. Myanmar has a long way to go before it can be described as an open, free and fair democratic country. However, beginning with the release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in mid-November 2010, there have been many positive developments which are, in the context of decades of harsh military rule, important to highlight.

Myanmar's New Government

The first major event after Aung San Suu Kyi's release took place in March 2011, with the inauguration of the new civilian government. Even though skeptics were fast to point out that this government consisted of a significant number of former military officers, many also noted that it was the first civilian government in over half a century. The inauguration speech by the newly elected president, Thein Sein, on March 30 revealed a striking shift in rhetoric. Issues such as ethnic conflicts and democracy promotion were discussed in a televised ceremony, which has never before occurred in the history of Myanmar. Understandably, there was concern as to the intentions of the new president as well as his ability to carry out the reforms he spoke about.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Thein Sein's speech was followed up by series of symbolic meetings. In July, Aung San Suu Kyi met with Labor Minister Aung Mye Thaw and in August, she received an invitation to meet President Thein Sein in the new capital of Naypyidaw; something that was unthinkable one year previously. Since then, interaction has continued and the fourth meeting between Aung San Suu Kyi and Aung Mye Thaw was held on October 30 in Yangon. Interestingly, sensitive issues such as ethnic conflicts and amnesty of political prisoners were on the agenda.

Added to this, the government recently made some amendments to the party registration law of 2010, which has helped to create a more conducive environment for

Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Previously, the laws prevented her and other members of the NLD, due to their convictions, from taking part in elections. This has now changed and the NLD recently announced that it will take part in the upcoming by-elections.

International Relations

In line with Thein Sein's promise to increase Myanmar's cooperation with the international community and to become a "respected member" of it, it seems that the new government has taken steps to open up. This is evident by the list of foreign visits which have included U.S. Senator John McCain (previously banned from entering the country), U.S. special envoy Derek Mitchell, Japanese Parliamentary Vice Foreign Minister Makiko Kikuta, Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd, an EU delegation led by Robert Cooper and the recent visit by the UN Special Adviser to the Secretary-General Vijay Nambiar. The visit by Myanmar's Foreign Minister, Maung Lwin, to Tokyo and the United States are also examples of Myanmar's new stance towards the international community.

More importantly though, Myanmar has now been approved to chair the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) in 2014. This is an indication that Myanmar's neighbors are responsive to the reforms and that Myanmar is now moving away from its status as a pariah state.

Censorship

During the last months, a gradually easing of the government's censorship of the media has been seen. In Septem-



ber, Aung San Suu Kyi was, for the first time in over two decades, allowed to publish an article in Pyithu Khit News Journal. Blocks on websites, such as the Irrawaddy, Youtube, BBC and Reuters, were also lifted in September. Meanwhile, the government-run newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*, has stopped publishing its continuous back page section accusing BBC and DVB of sowing hatred and “causing troubles” amongst the population in Myanmar.

Judging by the words of Tint Swe, the director of Myanmar’s censorship department, it seems as if these events are part of a plan to move Myanmar towards press freedom: “Press censorship is non-existent in most other countries as well as among our neighbours and as it is not in harmony with democratic practices, press censorship should be abolished in the near future.”

Statements like this and the above actions are all positive steps towards opening up.

Political Prisoners

The government has taken the first step in the right direction in regard to the country’s political prisoners. The announcement of a general amnesty of more than 6,000 prisoners in mid-October included roughly 200 political prisoners. While it is obvious that many political prisoners are yet to be freed, Ko Ko Hlaing, senior political advisor to Thein Sein, hinted that a further release may come in the near future. Other sources in Myanmar claim that the release of more sensitive political prisoners, including the release of members of the 1988 student democracy movement, will take place in the coming weeks.

Myitsone Dam and Labor Laws

In September, after serious concerns from environmental groups, Thein Sein made the surprising decision to suspend the Myitsone dam project. This is a significant decision

since it is a clear rejection of a large Chinese investment and a confirmation that the new government is indeed willing to take into account the opinions of people outside of the military or the government.

In October, the harsh labor laws of 1962, which had prevented both trade unions and strikes, were lifted. Under the new laws, both public and private workers may form trade unions of a minimum of 30 people and, provided that a notice is given in advance, strikes are not allowed. Judging by Deputy Labor Minister Myint Thein, it seems as if the new government now recognizes that if Myanmar is to develop its economy, it also has to improve social conditions for its workers.

Time for the West to Reciprocate

Myanmar is not a democratic country, at least not by Western standards. However, the debates that have raged in Western media following each of the above developments are not warranted. These positive developments have been criticized from the outset. In comparison to a Western democracy these developments seem like baselines, but in the context of Myanmar’s suppressive history, each of these small steps is highly significant in their own right and should be positively reinforced by the international community. Any step toward a more open society should be welcomed. Instead, we still mostly see words and promises. Myanmar has taken the first steps, and it is now time for the West to reciprocate.

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