

## The Challenges of Trust Building in Myanmar

Zam Than Lian



*Myanmar is currently undergoing a transition in which trust building will be essential to establishing the country along a path of peaceful development. While progress has been made, there are some significant challenges ahead. This paper outlines some of these main challenges and obstacles in regard to building trust at all levels of society as well as links them to the prospects of success for peace, political development, and civil society formation.*

Myanmar has now started to move forward toward the goal of peace, democracy, and economic development. Nevertheless, Myanmar's trajectory along this path has been full of pitfalls that have delayed reaching this goal. Nation-building efforts have proven unsuccessful with the result that the country finds itself at square one, as was the case six decades previously upon independence. Myanmar's thwarted development has left 60 million people without trust in their government, their country, and even among themselves.

There is, however, hope and willingness for reform in Myanmar, with greater energy having been accorded to such since the country's general election in 2010. Indeed, the new government in Myanmar has impressed outside observers with its reforms of the country's politics. In spite of the slow reforms in the fields of economy, education, and health, the population of Myanmar has discovered a renewed faith in the government during this transition period from military rule to democracy. The current government is leading the transition, which necessitates that society

in Myanmar must also be responsive to and cooperative with its leadership. The process will not be easy: there are many concerns that serve to place in doubt the country's nascent democratization. Among them, is there real change underway in Myanmar? If so, are the goals set too ambitious? What if Myanmar fails again? Such questions inspire pessimism among Myanmar's doubters and represent stiff challenges for the current government.

An important element in Myanmar's transition, which the current government should neglect at its peril, is that of trust building—among its parties, among the ethnic groups, and among all people and institutions in the country. Accordingly, this paper discusses the various concepts of trust in light of Myanmar's history and outlines the major obstacles and challenges to trust building as the country looks ahead

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to the future. Indeed, it will be no easy task to build trust among the country's many ethnic groups, and yet, successful nation building in Myanmar cannot be guaranteed unless the central government restores the trust that has been lost among civil society and the country's ethnic groups.

In sum, this paper seeks to reaffirm the importance of trust building in Myanmar. Additionally, it is hoped that the arguments and perspectives provided will further the understanding of members of the international community—whether scholars or policy makers—who are assisting the country to move forward, by raising awareness of these challenges centering on the issue of trust.

## The Concept of Trust Building

It is first necessary to probe the concept of trust. Trust is not merely what we think or believe, but also entails having confidence in somebody's skill or work. At the political level, a government can only inspire trust if it proves itself capable of exercising inclusive leadership in a functional political environment. A government must also learn to pay due attention to different levels

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of human needs and to build trust based upon those needs. A good example of understanding the levels of need is described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow identifies five levels of human needs, which include basic physiological needs (food, water, and so on), safety (security of health, family, property), love/belonging, esteem (confidence, achievement, respect of and by others), and self-actualization (morality, creativity, lack of prejudice).<sup>1</sup> It is clear therefore that when needs at lower levels are met and provided for by the government, this can then translate into trust at higher levels.

Accordingly, in the case of Myanmar, trust at higher levels can be measured in four ways. The first is whether the general public have confidence and feel secure in the current constitution. Second is if the electoral commission has the trust of the people in assisting to form a new government. Third is if the new

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government has consolidated trust building through efforts at achieving national reconciliation. Finally, trust can also be assessed according to the extent to which people feel secure and have confidence in the rule of law in their individual daily lives. Having explored the concept and identified the roots of building trust, attention now turns to a brief examination of trust in the context of Myanmar's history.

## Trust throughout Myanmar's History

### *Pre-Colonial Era*

In the pre-colonial era, building trust was based largely on the bravery and power of the monarch to inspire respect among his subjects. Similarly, among the ethnic communities, trust was based on the individual prowess and achievements of their respective leaders. Largely cut off from central rule, the ethnic groups were dependent on their village community and leaders in fighting off invasions from other village communities (compared to the majority Bamar, who had been engaged in wars with China, Manipur, and Thailand). Therefore, trust in this era could be defined as having been more “primitive” in the sense that it correlated with tribal loyalties.

*The Independence Movement (1900-1948)*

During the independence period, trust building was easier because of the pursuit of a common goal: the independence of Myanmar. Led by General Aung, he managed to bring together the country's disparate groups in an effort to free themselves from colonial tutelage. Signed on February 12, 1947, the Panglong Agreement negotiated a settlement between General Aung and the other principal ethnic leaders.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, February 12 is celebrated to this day as Union Day in Myanmar. Thus, the strive for independence served to establish a common interest and so helped to build trust in achieving this goal.

*Parliamentary Era (1949-1962)*

After Myanmar gained independence from the British in 1948, the leaders of the time opted to establish a parliamentary democracy. One condition of the Panglong Agreement was that Myanmar would become a federal state after ten years of independence. Over the years, some ethnic groups became stronger and made increasing demands for a federal system, when it became apparent that the government had backtracked on the agreement. Trust corroded with the passage of time. Military forces led by General Ne Win eventually took control of the country in a coup in 1962. This represented the juncture when the government and the ethnic groups saw trust broken between them for the first time. As a result of this, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Kuki National Army (KNA), and later many other groups, grew increasingly apart from the military junta.

*First Phase of Military Rule (1962–1988)*

With trust lost among the ethnic groups in Myanmar, the government of Ne Win had to find a way to build a nation without it. The military government thus set about building a strong-arm military organization (Tatmadaw) as a means of stabilizing the country.<sup>3</sup> It failed, however, to provide for the populace, which encountered worsening health, education, and social welfare conditions. This failure by the military government to provide for its population served to undermine trust as well as saw the increasing alienation of the country's ethnic minorities.

*Second Phase of Military Rule (1988–2010)*

The demonstrations of 1988 led by Myanmar students saw demands for the establishment of democracy. The latter was equated as necessary for ensuring a better life—that is, for meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, education, health, and social welfare. This second phase of military government thus sought to learn from its mistakes of the past by drawing up strategies for improving the plight of the people, although it was concerned first and foremost for its own survival. However, its efforts did little to redress the situation. Reform of the military system in fact made it even more rigid and failed to fix the problem of trust that had already been severely undermined by the previous government. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, in terms of both ethnic relations and society in general, trust in the government in Myanmar had reached a nadir.

*Post-2010*

With pressure mounting on the government both inside and outside of the country, it was finally forced to confront the situation in the country. Relocating the capital and building a new parliament building symbolized the beginning of a new era.<sup>4</sup> Slowly scaling back military rule, moreover, and handing over the reins to the current civilian government (the military still retains 25 percent of seats in parliament) has enabled trust to be rebuilt to some extent. This has further been facilitated by the president seeking the counsel of competent advisers to assist him in the process of change and development. For instance, Aung San Suu Kyi made her parliamentary debut in 2012, and other competent civilians have also been drafted in as ministers. Notwithstanding, the way ahead is still full of pitfalls. Resolving the ethnic issue as well as building a vibrant civil society—key to which is trust building—are chief tasks for Myanmar in the twenty-first century.

**Challenges to Trust Building***Power-based Culture*

Over the course of 60 years, Myanmar became governed by a power-based culture that promoted patriotism. This was counterproductive to the development of the country, however, undermining ethnic harmony as well as preventing the flourishing of civil society.

The addiction to power, as practiced by the leadership of Myanmar, has translated into the misuse of that power. One blatant example of this has been the centralization of control and the inadequate representation of ethnic minorities. Therefore a misused wielding of power has replaced trust as a means of political and social consolidation. It should also be recognized that the culture of power has been present not only in the military government but at all levels of society, including among the various ethnic groups. It is clear that Myanmar will never be able to achieve its goal of nation building unless this culture of power is abandoned. Sweden is by contrast one of the best examples of a power-balanced culture. When people in a country begin to trust in their leaders and the country's system, peace is established and governance based on a more balanced exercising of power is brought into being. In its new phase of nation building, therefore, Myanmar must seek to wrest itself from the power-dominated prism. If it fails to do so, it will continue to block the fundamental steps toward trust building between the government, opposition parties, ethnic groups, and civil society.

### *Religion*

There are five main religions practiced in Myanmar: Buddhism (89.2%), Christianity (5%), Islam (3.8%), Hinduism (0.5%), and Spiritualism (1.2%).<sup>5</sup> While there is no official state religion, military rule has traditionally favored Theravada Buddhism, which is the dominant religion. The government has been careful to monitor religious activities that might be deemed to undermine the unity and security of the Union. And while it has not always been repressive of the country's minority religions, there have been religious grievances that have been neglected.<sup>6</sup>

The problem for the new government is to what extent to favor the majority religion. On the one hand, failing to do so might increase dissent among the Buddhist population, especially those unable or unwilling to make compromises for the good of the whole country, including its religious minorities. On the other hand, privileging Theravada Buddhism raises issues of how this should be done without alienating the other religious minorities. Juxtaposed to this is the issue of generational change. The newer generation is starting to question the rationale of building more pagodas—

and thus spending large amounts of money—in a situation where many live in poverty.

There are many countries that practice a separation between the state and religion. In Sweden, for example, the curriculum stipulates that the teaching of religion be fair and objective. Thus a challenge for Myanmar's education sector is to make teaching more inclusive when it comes to the country's different reli-

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gions. If Myanmar truly wants to become a democratic country, it must build a common ground for all—in other words, an inclusive environment where mutual trust exists. The government will have to implement a religious policy which represents not just the majority but provides adequate provisions for the minorities. While this might be “painful” for the majority religion, its adherents must realize that trust building in the religious sphere, at least in the long term, is a win-win gain.

### *Mindset of Fear*

Fear is a mindset in Myanmar that afflicts society and one which hampers the country's prospects for peace and development. Deeply rooted, Aung Sang Suu Kyi has also noted the debilitating specter of fear in Myanmar society.<sup>7</sup> Trust building cannot exist if fear predominates and must therefore be eradicated.

Where did this fear originally come from? It can in part, at its root, be traced to the structure of familial relations in Myanmar. Children are required to respect and obey what their parents say. This is not to say that parents are bad as such, but rather that their children are stifled in their own personal development and grow up with a fixed mindset that is not conducive for changing the status quo. Indeed, being a traditionally patriarchal society, the exercising of control and resultant fear is built into many human relationships. A new mindset is needed that will spur the growth in free thinking absent of fear, which, in turn, will invigorate the country's governmental institutions as well as contribute to a thriving civil society. However, for this to be achieved, trust is essential so that faith is restored

in the nation.

While all human beings have to live under some kind of system, in Myanmar the system of control has created victims out of its population. Even those with the energy and vision to want to change things are thus unable to do so, their vitality robbed by the overpowering system. The government is trying to institute a new system, and in thus doing, it must create an environment in which people feel secure. People need to have trust in—and not fear of—the police force and army that provide this security. While the constitution protecting the rights of all citizens is a fundamental prerequisite, it is also necessary that it be implemented and activated at a grass-roots level. Only then will fear give way to trust in the system. While it still has a long way to go, the new government is gradually undoing the decades of fear and victimization that have marked society in Myanmar.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Cultural/Ethnic Divide*

A further problematic issue thwarting trust building is the cultural/ethnic divide between the ethnic majority Bamar, residing predominantly in south and central Myanmar, and the ethnic groups living in the rest of the country. This issue can be traced back to the pre-colonial era with the relative absence of relations (or evidence thereof)<sup>9</sup> between the Kings of Burma and many of the ethnic groups. Whereas substantial records exist of the relationship between the Bamar, Yakhine, Mon, and Shan, this is not so for other ethnic groups such as the Chin, Kachin, Kayin, and Kaya. Trust between the former was built through matrimonial alliances and aiding each other in wars, which led also to an understanding of the other's culture, religion, and social practices, the historic absence of relations with the latter ethnic groups has led to a large cultural gap.

Today, the main conflict exists between the dominant Bamar and the hill tribes. Their relative isolation in mountainous areas meant that they took different paths. While the Bamar embraced Buddhism, the hill tribes adopted Christianity, which has also added a religious dimension to their struggle. Ignorance of the other has contributed to a “feind-bild” narrative that characterizes relations. It is precisely because of this cultural divide that the government needs to engage in deeper dialogue with the ethnic minorities. Understanding of the other is a precursor to the building of

trust. One cannot take place without the other.

#### *Warlordism*

A system of distrust gradually took root in Myanmar after the coup d'état in 1962, which found its ultimate expression in warlordism. Therefore, it is not only a question of a cultural/ethnic divide but resolving a situation where the government does not have a monopoly on violence but competes instead with different warlords. Myanmar now finds itself in a transition period in which warlords must engage in a trust-building process and lay down their arms. Establishing peace is fundamental in what is a fragile period of “make or break,” and the government must make strident efforts to gain the trust of all ethnic groups. This process goes both ways: the warlord mindset among the ethnic groups must also be relinquished and they must be prepared to willingly participate in the trust-building process.

#### *Human Capacity*

One of the goals of democracy can be simply argued to be that of human capacity development. This can be both individual and collective. The biggest mistake the military government committed in the past was to lead the nation without capacity building at all levels of society. Collective capacity building, which, in turn, is built on trust, is essential if economic growth and development is to be achieved. A positive development in Myanmar today is that the training of people has been taken more seriously in the capital, where now a younger generation are benefiting from capacity building. However, this still only affects a minority of the population. The rural majority—especially those who live remote areas—must also be included in this process. Accordingly, one aspect of human capacity development should be in the education sector, which is in need of an overhaul.

#### *Corruption*

The giving of presents and gifts as a token of respect and gratitude is part of the fabric of society in Myanmar. However, at the same time, gifts can also be used as a form of bribery. For example, employees with little money may use gifts to bribe their way to better positions. Corruption is therefore a big problem in Myanmar. It is so ingrained in society, in fact, that

it will be difficult to stamp out. Measures need to be adopted that, at first, might be unpopular. Yet, if the population sees that establishing more effective rule of law is beneficial for society, they are more likely to embrace it. Key to preventing corruption is increased transparency.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the government also has to clamp down on corruption at a systemic level as well as increase salaries and improve the welfare system so that people do not have to resort to corrupt practices. Both are equally important and also a major challenge. Indeed, according to Transparency International, Myanmar ranks 172nd out of 176 countries surveyed.<sup>11</sup> Trust building therefore should be based not on corrupt practices but on fairness and transparency.

#### *Meeting Basic Needs: Social Security*

The failure to provide social security for its citizens means there can be no long-term stability or opportunity to build trust. To take just one example, if a government fails to provide an adequate healthcare system, the people lose trust in the government to provide for them and hence have to look elsewhere to meet their needs such as private or backstreet clinics.<sup>12</sup> Where people do not feel secure in the state being able to meet their basic needs, this translates into a lack of trust in the government. Returning to Maslow's levels of human needs, it is clear that the government has failed to adequately provide at all levels.

#### *Culture of Superstition*

Another interesting, and perhaps less obvious, factor that impedes trust building in Myanmar is the culture of superstition. In fact, it could be argued that it permeates society. To take a simple example: walking casually down the street on a Monday passing by hairdressing salons, one might observe that no one is having their hair cut: choosing the "right" date and time is important for managing commonplace activities. On the one hand, such a culture is an important resource. It holds together the fabric of society. This is particularly important in times of strife when a government fails to provide for its population. Just like religion, superstitious beliefs and other customs can give strength to people in directing their lives and serving as coping mechanisms or frameworks through which to see the world. On the other hand, it can also impede the adoption of new practices, which will be essential if real values of democracy are to be inculcated

in Myanmar.

## Conclusion

The above obstacles to trust building—which are also challenges that Myanmar faces more generally—can be collectively grouped together into something called the "Myanmar syndrome," which has prevented society from moving forward. It is a culture where, on an everyday level, those soldiers who stay close to the generals benefit while those on the front-line lose out; where office workers are constantly looking out for their own interests rather than working for the common good; where actions are committed with abandon (such as reckless driving); where crimes, even murder, may go unreported and unpunished. In sum, for the reasons outlined in the previous section, all of this manifests itself in a fundamental lack of trust at all levels of society, including at the political level.

Past lessons have taught us that trust is an essential component of nation building in contemporary Myanmar. That it has failed many times in the past can be attributed not so much to the fact its leaders lacked capacity to lead, but rather that they lacked the capacity to build trust among ethnic groups and civil society. Indeed, it is lamentable that this issue of trust has been so neglected. It should be recognized, however, that building trust is no easy task: it cannot be learned from a manual and simply applied. Furthermore, it cannot be externally imposed; rather it must come from within the country. First and foremost, trust requires that there is will to build trust with others. The government must, thus, be willing to sacrifice its own narrow interests in order to build mutual trust with the country's ethnic groups. The ethnic groups, for their part, must also be willing to compromise with the current government, which has shown serious signs that it is willing to start afresh. By highlighting some of the challenges faced, it is hoped that the solutions will also be easier to identify.

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<sup>7</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom From Fear* (London: Penguin Group, 1995).

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## KEY POINTS

- Trust building among Myanmar’s parties, population, ethnic groups, and institutions is an important element in the country’s transition.
- A large number of obstacles have hindered trust building in Myanmar, including the country’s ethnic divide, a mindset of fear, a power-dominated prism, corruption, and a failure by the government to provide for basic social needs.
- Gradually scaling back military rule and handing power to a civil government has allowed trust to be rebuilt to some extent.
- Mutual trust needs to be established above all between the government and the ethnic groups, with all sides willing to look beyond their narrow interests.

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