

Burma: A View from Rangoon

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Burma (also known as Myanmar) is a land of contrasts. It is geographically the largest country in Southeast Asia, stretching from tropical beaches to Himalayan peaks. It is rich in resources, including natural gas, timber, and gems. Eighty years ago its people were generally acknowledged to be the best educated in the region, and their prospects for development were expected to be high. Yet today, Burma is the poorest country in Southeast Asia with a per capita GDP of about \$625; governmental health and educational expenditures are pitifully small; and Burmese rank near the bottom in most human-development indexes. The ethnic Burman, mostly Buddhist majority lives mostly in the central plains; but more than one hundred other distinct ethnic groups exist, as do notable Christian, Muslim, and Hindu minorities. Visitors universally praise the hospitality of Burmese peoples; yet ethnic-based armed conflicts simmer and sometimes flare in border areas, and Burma receives constant international criticism for major human rights abuses.

Why such contrasts? History explains a lot. Upon independence from the British after Japanese forces captured and then lost Burma during World War II, civil wars broke out between several ethnic groups and the government's Burman-dominated army, hindering the effort to establish a viable democratic polity. The Burma Army came to believe that only it stood between a united Burma and anarchy. Ever since General Ne Win took power definitively in 1962 and inaugurated the "Burmese way to socialism," high-level decision-making has been autocratic, opaque, and inefficient, resulting in very unfortunate governance.

Major street demonstrations triggered by economic difficulties in 1988 brought forth a democracy movement inspired by the daughter of Burma's founding father, Aung San, who was assassinated in 1947 when his daughter was only two years old. Aung San Suu Kyi spent most of her first 40 years abroad. She has spent most of the past 22 years under house arrest in Rangoon. Her detention began even before elections in 1990 that, to the surprise of most everyone, were relatively free and fair and brought a resounding victory to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which won nearly 60 percent of the vote and took more than 80 percent of the seats in a parliament that never sat. The Burma Army overrode the elections and has continued in power ever since, with governance and human-rights abuses, by many accounts, only getting worse.

In subsequent years, Burma's military leaders, headed since 1992 by Senior General Than Shwe, sporadically marched the populace down a seven-step road map toward a "discipline-flourishing" democracy. In 2007, the Army crushed another impressive set of street demonstrations, the "Saffron Revolution," which again was triggered mainly by economic concerns before turning distinctly political. That outburst seemed to stimulate faster movement down the road map, with a new constitution receiving 92.48 percent approval from a 99 percent turnout in the days just after Cyclone Nargis slammed southern Burma

in May 2008. The referendum was credible only to the generals in their new, remotely located capital Nay Pyi Taw.

Aung San Suu Kyi had been freed twice in the mid-1990s and early 2000s before again being forced into jail followed by house arrest in May 2003 after thugs attacked her convoy of cars in what became known as the Depeyin incident. She was due for release in 2009 until an American swam uninvited to her lake-side house, which brought an additional 18 months of captivity for violating the terms of her house arrest. Her most recent detention ended a week after general elections in November 2010.

The lead-up to those elections tilted the playing field markedly in favor of the government and its proxy political party. Rules were skewed and kept political prisoners from participating; key decision dates for registering and recruiting candidates were kept from potential opposition elements until the last minute; and registration fees were beyond the means of most. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD declined to participate in such an environment, though several other pro-democracy parties, including one with former NLD senior members in prominent roles, did plunge in, hoping for some degree of success.

Election Day on November 7 was remarkably quiet...until polls closed and vote counting began. Then, by many credible accounts, election authorities started injecting large volumes of absentee ballots into key races, turning opposition victories against prominent government-party candidates into defeats. Authorities had reportedly been collecting such advance votes from many military and civil-service personnel and their families and had coerced others to submit early ballots as well. The result was government parties winning nearly 80 percent of elected seats. Add in the 25 percent of the new parliament's seats reserved for military appointees, and the government appears to have accomplished a near 90 percent majority.

Several Embassy officers and I were in front of the high, rattan fence that fronts Aung San Suu Kyi's house (a quarter mile down University Avenue from the chancery) on the evening of November 13 just after police suddenly removed barriers that had blocked the street for the past 18 months. A crowd of about a thousand ecstatic Burmese rapidly gathered to see their hero for the first time in seven and a half years. One of Aung San Suu Kyi's first acts was to seek our Embassy's help to spread an invitation for all foreign missions to attend an event at NLD headquarters the next day, a way for most to talk with her for the first time. (We at the US Embassy had been more fortunate, with four opportunities in 2009-2010 to meet her while she was still detained.) Impressively, nearly all embassies attended the event, most at the ambassador level. For many it was their first time inside NLD headquarters. Immediately thereafter, Aung San Suu Kyi addressed a crowd that extended as far as the eye could see, down city streets, up a hillside in front, again with the mood wildly enthusiastic. Any who had presumed popular affection for her had waned were clearly mistaken. She saw her first cell phones, saw people using such phones to capture the moment with photos, and noted that youths, who most likely had never previously had the opportunity to know her, made up a large portion of the crowd.

The Burmese government and Aung San Suu Kyi both say she was freed without restriction. She immediately commenced a hectic schedule of meetings, private conversations, interactions with interest groups, including youth groups, and interviews with media from all over the world. She has met with a wide variety of people, from poverty stricken HIV/AIDS sufferers at an NLD-associated clinic to very senior figures from abroad. She has conversed by phone with Secretary of State Clinton, other ministers, and heads of government. We at the Embassy have had the pleasure of meeting with her quite frequently to discuss big issues, but also on an occasion in January, at her request, to introduce her to the American children from the Embassy during a two-hour event at my residence. After introductions all around, Aung San Suu Kyi sat with the older children to consult on issues from vampires and Harry Potter to what might best motivate young people to engage in politics in the current environment.

Meanwhile, the post-election process of forming a “new” Government of Burma has proceeded. The parliament convened in its sprawling and extravagant Nay Pyi Taw complex on January 31, with a ban on all outside observers. Government decrees instructed that MPs may only ask questions if said questions are submitted ten days in advance for screening to ensure no endangerment to national stability. In sessions sometimes lasting no more than 15 minutes, the parliament has blessed a series of nominations for senior positions. Almost all are from the governing party, and most have military backgrounds. The former Prime Minister has become President. The initial appearance is top-down governance as usual, with the parliament as window dressing.

Still, it is always possible that the dynamics at the top will change, if not immediately, then over time. The United States remains an advocate for inclusive governance, urging serious discussion among all major players—the Government, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, other pro-democracy elements, and Burma’s many ethnic groups; seeking the release of more than two thousand political prisoners so that they can participate in such conversations; and advocating respect for human rights in general. The Obama administration’s policy review on Burma in 2009 acknowledged that past sanctions by the United States and others had not achieved success, but neither had engagement efforts by Burma’s regional neighbors. The review endorsed a US government engagement effort that has signaled a willingness to work through the many tough issues which impede better bilateral relations, with sanctions remaining in place pending developments. Given the serious issues that need addressing, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell predicted a “long and bumpy road,” which has proven accurate to date.

In the midst of such challenges, the United States is working with partners to help address serious needs. The Embassy’s American Center, with over 12,000 members, nurtures a love of learning and the free flow of ideas. It is a beehive of activity, teaching English-language courses, encouraging civil-society skills, and illustrating how American elections work. USAID collaborates with international NGOs and UN agencies to address infectious diseases in Burma that threaten the region and the world. We run a number of programs to promote civil society and empower community leaders. The United States has provided \$83 million in aid to victims of Cyclone Nargis since 2008 and has also responded generously

to 2010's Cyclone Giri in Rakhine State. Given those successful examples, plans are in the works to expand humanitarian assistance activities to desperately needy populations in other regions as well. No doubt the bilateral relationship remains stressed; but Embassy Rangoon can play a useful role to help the Burmese build a better future.