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Virtuality, Perception and Reality in Myanmar's Democratic Reform

Victoria Christensen

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About the Author

Victoria Christensen is currently working for a humanitarian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). She previously worked in Europe and the United States, as well as for an NGO on the Thailand-Myanmar border.

In 2011-2012 she was a participant in the International Training Course in Security Policy (ITC) at the GCSP and a student in the Master of Advanced Studies in International and European Security co-run by the GCSP and the University of Geneva.

She would like to thank all the interviewees for sharing their knowledge, and especially Dr Graeme P. Herd who introduced her to the concept of “virtual politics” and then provided endless guidance and enthusiasm throughout the process.

List of Acronyms

| | |
|--------|--|
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| ASSK | Aung San Suu Kyi |
| EITI | Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative |
| ENC | Ethnic National Council |
| EU | European Union |
| DCAF | Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces |
| DKBA | Democratic Karen Buddhist Army |
| DPRK | Democratic People's Republic of Korea |
| HRV | Human Rights Violation |
| IGO | International Governmental Organization |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| KIA | Kachin Independence Army |
| KIO | Kachin Independence Organization |
| KNLA | Karen National Liberation Army |
| KNU | Karen National Union |
| NDSC | National Defence and Security Council |
| NLD | National League for Democracy |
| NUP | National Union Party |
| PILPG | Public International Law and Policy Group |
| SLORC | State Law and Order Restoration Council |
| SPDC | State Peace and Development Council |
| SSR | Security Sector Reform |
| UEC | Union Election Commission |
| UNFC | United Nationalities Federal Council |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| UNOCHA | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| USDA | Union Solidarity and Development Association |
| USDP | Union Solidarity and Development Party |

Foreword

Ms. Victoria Christensen was a participant in the 26th International Training Course in Security Policy (ITC) offered by the GCSP as well as in the 6th Master of Advanced Studies in International and European Security (MAS) organized jointly by the GCSP and the European Institute of the University of Geneva.

The ITC with its 9-month duration is the longest of GCSP's principal courses. The main goal of the ITC is to provide expert training for professionals through a balance of knowledge transfer and skills development. The ITC is run by an international faculty composed of highly qualified academics and practitioners with broad experience in diplomacy and/or military affairs. Additionally, participants are addressed by some 150 high-ranking diplomats, military officers, government officials and experts from across the Euro-Atlantic community and beyond. The 26th ITC assembled 30 participants representing 26 countries from four different continents. This diversity is a true value of the course as it helps foster common understanding, the exchange of different experiences and cooperative networks that can translate theory into practice.

In parallel with the ITC, Ms. Victoria Christensen enrolled in the MAS run jointly by the GCSP and the European Institute of the University of Geneva. In addition to the taught component, MAS participants have to undertake a substantial research project which consists of writing a thesis and defending it successfully in front of a jury. The following *Geneva Paper* is a product of this MAS research project.

Ms. Christensen spent five months in 2011 working on the Thailand Myanmar border with an NGO, researching and documenting human rights abuses occurring throughout Myanmar's ethnic areas. She also spent time travelling in Myanmar, in particular in Shan state and Yangon to collect information for an English language version of a Karen news site. For this thesis, and building on her previous experience and knowledge, the author conducted interviews over a period of six weeks with 25 interviewees (40 hours of dialogue) with a range of domestic and international experts on Myanmar (see list of interviews). The interviewees were carefully chosen to represent a wide spectrum of expertise relating to Myanmar. A questionnaire focused on their perceptions and perspectives as to whether the reforms in the three key indicative policy areas were "virtual" or "real". The

results of the interviews were analysed for recurrent themes and the questions were attributed numerical weighting. This method was ideally suited to capitalize on Ms. Christensen's own NGO networks and Geneva's location as a global hub of soft power.

Dr. Graeme P. Herd
MAS Thesis Supervisor and Co-director, ITC, GCSP

Executive Summary

Since the summer of 2011, the country of Myanmar has been experiencing rapid democratic reform. Headlines lauding these positive changes have become commonplace in the international media. However, experts and academics who have been involved in the decade-long campaign to bring peace and democracy to Myanmar remain divided over how sincere these changes are. Some accuse the Government of carrying out “window-dressing” reforms to please the Western governments and enable the lifting of sanctions. They argue that the Government has a vested interest in maintaining the reins of power and that there is no incentive to make true democratic reforms. During a speech in Oslo in June 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi, the Myanmarese Pro-democracy leader described the recent reforms as positive but warned against blind faith in the process and pointed out the main challenges that remain unresolved – namely the ethnic issues and the ongoing imprisonment of political prisoners.

This *Geneva Paper* will posit that the current reforms are a means for Myanmar’s Government to ensure the continuity of military power in a different guise in order to allow engagement with the international community, rather than a case of democratic reform for the sake of democratization itself. The reason that the Government is so keen to engage with foreign governments and companies after years of isolation, is the incentive of the lifting of all sanctions, as well as a diversification in both business opportunities and aid following years of sole reliance on China. From a Western perspective there is widespread enthusiasm for engagement with Myanmar. This is driven not only by businesses, who are lining up to profit from Myanmar’s resources, but also by the fact that a market democratic Myanmar would break potential proliferation links with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and fit geo-strategically with the United States’ widely proclaimed Pacific Century.

The paper will start by analysing the election and pre-election period 2008-10 in order to identify to what extent the recent evolution in Myanmar is a form of virtual politics as opposed to real democratic transition. Virtual politics can be defined as a way of directing democracy which is a step ahead of electoral fraud. Virtual politics goes beyond the stuffing of ballot boxes. It is creating the impression that the framework and mechanisms of a democratic state are in place but in fact behind the scenes it is the same elite holding the reins of power and directing what happens within the country.

It will then identify what true democratic change would look like in the context of Myanmar. To do so it will use relevant key indicators to evaluate whether the country is on the path to democratic transition or whether there are more virtual politics at play. The paper will conclude that the situation unfolding within the country should not be taken at face value and that whilst there are clearly visible reforms underway these have yet to be institutionalized and legitimized.

Due to the current nature of this subject and the lack of primary sources available, interviews with a wide range of experts, both inside Myanmar and abroad, provide the main body of the research. The interviews allow for an in-depth analysis of the apparent reforms to reach a conclusion upon where real democratic change is being evidenced and where the Government of Myanmar is shaping perceptions through its smart use of virtual politics.

Map of Myanmar



Map No. 4168 Rev. 2 UNITED NATIONS
May 2008

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

Introduction

In 1962 a military coup deposed the civilian Government of Myanmar, at the time ruled by U Nu. From that point, until the current civilian Government took power in 2011, the country was ruled by a military regime, most recently in the form of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Multi-party elections were held in 1990. However, when the National League for Democracy (the opposition) won, the ruling military refused to recognize the results. Elections were held again in November 2010 and, despite the fact that they were regarded by many as technically flawed and undemocratic, they brought a nominally civilian Government, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), to power for the first time in almost 50 years.

Following a landmark meeting between President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi in August 2011 the new Government began a process of visible democratic reforms. These included the beginning of a ceasefire negotiation process between the Government and the ethnic minority groups of Myanmar, some of whom had been embroiled in civil war for over 60 years; by-elections in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) was not only allowed to run but in which it won the majority of the available seats; the loosening of travel restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi who travelled to Geneva in June 2012 to address the International Labour Organization and then to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize which she was awarded in 1991; and the release of hundreds of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners.

Opinion amongst observers of the situation remains divided about how substantive these reforms are and even Aung San Suu Kyi herself warned against “blind faith” in the democratization process during a speech in Europe in June 2012.¹

This research paper will develop the idea that the Government of Myanmar is using virtual politics to create the perception of a journey towards democracy and argue that it is doing so in order to maintain the continuity of military power as

1 M. Stothard, “Suu Kyi Accepts Nobel Peace Prize”, *The Financial Times*, 16 June 2012, accessed on 23 June 2012 at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1acb99e0-b7a0-11e1-86f1-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1ycBiuFCa>

opposed to a true transition to democracy as an end in itself. This is of particular current interest since the geopolitical value of Myanmar is higher than it has ever been, given that a market democratic Myanmar would break potential proliferation links with Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – a significant concern of the United States – and increase the perception in China that the United States has adopted a balancing or even containment policy towards it.

One of the leading works in the field of virtual politics is Andrew Wilson's *Virtual Politics*.² Wilson deals with the Post-Soviet space and the methods used by the political technologists in the former states of the USSR to "direct" democracy and ensure that power stays in the hands of the elites whilst giving the appearance of running a multi-party system. As Wilson observes, "directed democracy involves radical process management tasks such as damage limitation, limit-setting, or prompting and pointing. Victories, whether in elections, politics in general or in business, are 'organized', as the old Bolshevik phrase had it, rather than simply won."³ Virtual politics can be likened to a director putting on a stage show, making sure the audience suspends disbelief for the duration of the show and believes the story the director is telling them. A government practicing virtual politics will put in place all the mechanisms of democracy such as elections and a seemingly free press. However, they then use tools of stagecraft to ensure that these mechanisms are used to legitimize the power without producing any real threat to the status quo.

For the purpose of analysis, the situation in Myanmar will be divided into two periods – pre- and post-April 2011.⁴ These two periods of analysis will constitute the two main sections of the paper. In order to carry out the analysis of the pre-2011 period, a variety of primary and secondary sources are used that document the period covering the months leading up to the election and the election itself. As the paper moves on to the post-election period the availability of sources is more scarce due to the current nature of the topic. Therefore the author conducted qualitative research interviews with a variety of professionals working on the subject of Myanmar. In order to gain a balanced view of the situation eight categories of professionals with which to conduct interviews were identified: representatives of certain ethnic minority groups (specifically Kachin, Karen and Rohingya),⁵ UN agencies operating within Myanmar, pro-Government/

2 A. Wilson, *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005.

3 *Ibid.*, p.38.

4 Thein Sein's new Government came to power on 30 March 2011.

5 These three groups were chosen for specific reasons: the Karen as they have the longest running civil war with the Government, the Kachin as their long running ceasefire broke down in 2011 and they are now engaged in civil war once more, and the Rohingya because of their status as stateless.

independent academics and experts, anti-Government academics and experts, foreign embassies operating inside Myanmar, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating inside Myanmar and human rights organizations. Whilst this is not completely exhaustive, these categories are representative enough to give an objective view of the situation inside Myanmar and allow sufficient analysis of progress towards democratic transition. The interviews were conducted over a period of six weeks with 25 interviewees and a total length of approximately 40 hours of dialogue (see list of interviews).

The questionnaire was designed to gain an overview of the subject's experience and exposure to Myanmar both pre- and post-election and then to focus on their experience and opinion of what has been happening since the election in relation to three key indicators to identify potential reforms as well as examples of virtual politics. Whilst the modest number of interviews conducted may be viewed as providing only a limited notion of the situation in Myanmar, this is compensated for by the fact that the interviewees were carefully chosen to represent a wide spectrum of expertise and knowledge, allowing for at very least an indicative analysis of the situation.⁶ The results of the interviews were analysed for recurrent themes and the questions relating to three indicators identified were attributed numerical weighting, quantified and then used in the analysis in section two.

⁶ The interviewees were not controlled for gender or age as these were viewed to be irrelevant to this study.

2008-2011 – The Reforms Begin...

In order to better analyse the current reforms in context, and understand to what extent we are witnessing virtual politics, it is necessary to first look back at the behavior of the ruling Junta in the period running up to the new Government coming to power. This chapter will analyse the actions of the Junta in the period of 2009-spring 2011 – when Thein Sein's new Government came into power – for examples of virtuality and political stagecraft.

The Junta was aware that if the new pseudo-civilian Government was to stand any chance of being accepted both domestically and by the international community it had to undergo a makeover. The simplest way of doing this was to maintain the same set of characters but to swap their military uniforms for *longyi*s. In other words, to give the appearance of being civilians.⁷ To enable this, 22 military officials retired from office on 26 April 2010 along with the current president, Thein Sein, who was at the time the fourth highest ranking general in the Junta. Three days later, the USDP registered with the Union Election Commission (UEC) under Thein Sein's leadership.⁸

If one analyses the current Government structure it is clear that whilst it maintains that it is a civilian Government, this status is questionable. In the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC), which is the main decision-making organ of the Government, only one out of the 11 members is not a current or previous senior ranking military officer. The majority of senior ministerial posts are held by former generals and the constitution guarantees the three most important ministerial posts of defence, home affairs and borders to serving generals.⁹ With regards to the fundamental power structure of the Myanmar Government nothing has really changed. The changes are purely cosmetic and targeted primarily at shaping the perception of the West, creating the impression of a civilian Government.

7 A *longyi* is a traditional form of dress in Myanmar.

8 W. Mow, "Tight Censorship on Reporting USDP", *The Irrawaddy*, 5 May 2010, accessed on 10 February 2012 at http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=18388

9 Human Rights Watch, *Country Report Myanmar*, New York, January 2012, p.1.

Manipulating the election process

The abuse of a state's administrative resources is a traditional way to defraud the electoral process.¹⁰ However, it is not a particularly subtle way of doing so and as such draws the attention of the opposition, who will document this abuse of the process in an attempt to delegitimize the regime. In the case of the 2010 elections, numerous accounts of widespread abuse of administrative resource can be evidenced. Examples include:

- The USDP demonstrated its strong link to the SPDC and used state resources and exercised state functions in order to both bribe and coerce voters to support its candidates.¹¹ The USDP offered road-building projects, free identification cards, mobile phones, health care, low-interest loans, and other incentives to voters and villages in exchange for support on election day;¹²
- A Government official in the Ministry of Finance and Revenue reported that the Prime Minister (also the head of the USDP) ordered all Government departments to ensure that every absentee ballot from a civil servant was voted in favor of the USDP. Local authorities also reported that individual ward Election Commissions transferred all absentee ballots to votes for the USDP, regardless of whether or not the voter chose the USDP.¹³

However, when it came to Arakan state, the SPDC/USDP developed a much smarter way of deploying administrative resources to influence the outcome of the elections. The main ethnic group of Arakan state is the Rakhine and it is also the home of one of the most controversial groups in Myanmar, the Rohingya. Despite a long running campaign, the Rohingya are still not considered as citizens of Myanmar and, as such, are stateless.¹⁴ In the 1990 election, Arakan state was one of only two areas where the National League for Democracy (NLD) or the pro-Government National Unity Party (NUP) did not win (the other area being Shan state). Instead, 11 seats were won by the Rakhine Democratic League. Despite the fact that election results were never honoured, this was clearly still a risk factor that the regime considered when planning its strategy for the 2010 elections. Rather than opt for outright electoral fraud to ensure victory, the SPDC/USDP adopted a smarter strategy. In order to win the Rohingya vote and ensure the USDP beat the Rakhine National Development party several educated Rohingya, living and work-

10 A.Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.73.

11 The Public International Law & Policy Group, *The 2010 Myanmar Election: Neither Free nor Fair, Pre-Election Monitoring Report*, Washington, DC, 2010, p.14.

12 *Ibid.*, p.15.

13 *Ibid.*, p.19.

14 For a background of the Rohingya people and their situation see Human Rights Watch report, Vol.12, Iss.4, 2000.

ing in Yangon with no real ties to the Rohingya population in Arakan state, were encouraged to stand for the USDP in Arakan state. Government representatives travelled to the Rohingya area and promised lots of incentives in return for votes including, most significantly, citizenship and the promise of ID cards.

A telling indicator that the Rohingya vote was important was the fact that the SPDC/USDP started registering the Rohingya population, something for which the UNHCR had been campaigning for years but that the regime had always ignored. Co-opting the Rohingya vote for the USDP was a smart move on two levels. Firstly it secured Arakan state and secondly it brought quite a controversial ethnic minority into the Parliament.

As it stands the three Rohingya Members of Parliament (MPs) have been allowed a voice in Parliament and have raised such issues as restriction of movement and denial of citizenship. Yet, the response from the Government has not been forthcoming so there are questions over what impact, if any, these candidates can actually have.¹⁵ An additional concern was raised during an interview with an expert on the Rohingya situation who pointed out that all three MPs are known to have business ties to the Government; therefore questions remain over their incentive to really drive reform.¹⁶

Creating and blocking the opposition

When analysing the Myanmar elections in 2010 there seems to be an awareness amongst the SPDC that if the election was going to be considered at all democratic there would have to be other parties in the race. In the run up to the 2010 election the Myanmar regime favoured “soft” opponents. These were parties who gave the impression of being a real challenger for the sake of both domestic and international observers, but whose interests and direction were intertwined with the ruling Junta and posed no real threat. The National Union Party (NUP) provides an example.

The SPDC employed tactics typical of virtual politics to promote these parties while, at the same time, blocking the opposition namely by creating roadblocks in the political registration process, but then only making these applicable to non-pro Junta parties, thus allowing pro-Junta parties (the soft opponents) to run without problem. Examples include:

- The UEC unfairly denied party registration to three Kachin ethnic parties who submitted registration papers to the UEC in April 2010. By contrast, the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin state (UDPKS), led by former local

15 Anonymous interview with a Rohingya expert, 10 February 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

16 Anonymous interview with a Rohingya expert, 10 February 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

SPDC official and Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA, the forerunner of the USDP) patron Khet Htein Nan, obtained permission to register just two weeks after filing registration papers;¹⁷

- On 13 August 2010, the Election Commission set a 30 August deadline for political parties to submit their list of candidates for the election, leaving very little time to organize and recruit candidates to field in the election. This time constraint, along with a registration fee of 500,000 kyat per candidate (about USD 610) to be paid up front,¹⁸ led to many parties reducing their number of candidates and caused the UEC to dissolve five parties as they did not meet the prerequisite number of candidates needed to contest the polls.¹⁹ This action served to neuter the opposition quite dramatically and meant that only approximately 650 non pro-Junta candidates were fielded compared with 1,800 in 1990. On the flip side, parties aligned to the SPDC, primarily the Junta-proxy USDP and the NUP, fielded over 2,000 candidates between them compared to only 500 in 1990 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of Parties Contesting the Elections – 1990 vs. 2010

| Historical Context | 2010 | 1990 |
|---------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Seats | 1,171 | 492 |
| Registered parties | 47 | 235 |
| Contesting parties | 37 | 93 |
| Pro-Junta candidates | Over 2,200 | Approx. 500 |
| Other candidates | Approx. 650 | Approx. 1,800 |

Source: Altsean, *Burma's 2010 Elections, the Story so Far*, Bangkok, 15 Oct. 2010, p.6.

As this chapter demonstrates, the SPDC/USDP's behaviour in the run up to the election could not be considered to be straightforward. What is observed instead, is a Government who was demonstrably aware that in order to win the election and claim it as "free and fair" they had to bring some political stagecraft into play: enough to influence international observers whilst at the same time guaranteeing USDP success. As the examples above make evident, their attempts ranged from the crude to the more refined but ultimately were unsuccessful as the elections were internationally regarded as neither free nor fair. The next chapter will analyse the evolution of this political stagecraft as the USDP took power.

17 KNG, "UDPks Gets 50 Million Kyat from Junta-backed USDP", *Kachin News*, 20 July 2010, accessed on 20 February 2012 at <http://kachinnews.com/news/1679-udpks-gets-50-million-kyat-from-junta-backed-usdp.html>

18 K. Htwe, "Newly-registered Parties Face Financing Problems", *The Irrawaddy*, 18 March 2010, accessed on 20 February 2012 at http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=18073

19 Union Election Commission of Myanmar, *Notification No. 97/2010*, Naypyidaw, 2010, translated by *The New Light of Myanmar*, 15 September 2010.

2011 Onwards: True Democratic Transition?

This section will utilize the insights and knowledge gained during the interviews to carry out an analysis of the reforms in Myanmar since April 2011 for evidence of virtuality versus real steps towards democracy in the context of three key indicators:

- creation of an open and transparent political and parliamentary system;
- release of all prisoners of conscience and a fair trial for political prisoners; and
- cessation of all ethnic conflict and human rights violations against ethnic minorities and the initiation of a political process towards a system that grants all peoples of Myanmar equal rights.

Whilst not exhaustive, if met, these three indicators would demonstrate that substantive political reform is underway and Myanmar can be considered as in a transition to democracy.

Key indicator 1

Creation of a transparent political and parliamentary system

Since the new Government came to power several reforms have been enacted with regards to the creation of a more open and transparent political and parliamentary system. These reforms have taken place most notably in two key areas: freedom of the press and electoral reform.

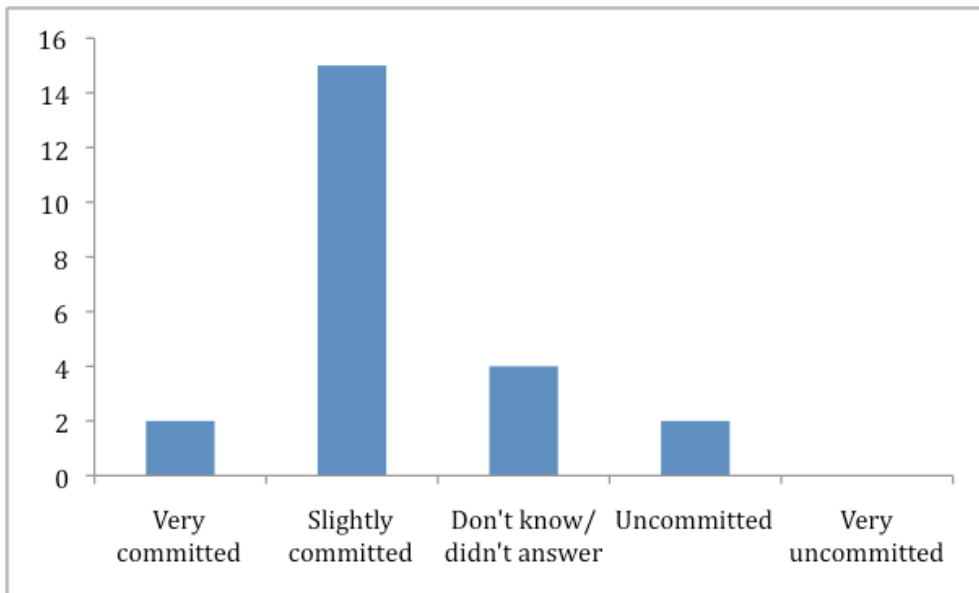
Freedom of the press

During the military regime Myanmar consistently ranked near the bottom of indexes regarding freedom of the press. As recently as May 2011 it ranked 191 out of 193 countries in Freedom House's press freedom rankings. In the last year, there have been official statements saying that censorship laws will be relaxed and this has been accompanied by a visibly more open media, however no change to the law has yet been made.²⁰

20 See "Information Ministry drafting amendments for Print Media and TV Laws beginning April 2011 with the aim of granting relaxation for motion picture and video censorship in conformity with new era and system", *The New Light of Myanmar*, 11 December 2011, accessed on 2 March 2012 at <http://www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/Dec11.html>

This was one of the areas where interview respondents seemed most convinced that the Government of Myanmar was in some way committed to reforms, with all but two respondents (see Chart 1) stating that they believed the Government was committed to relaxing the censorship laws. Even the interviewee who was the most vocally critical of the Government stated that he “had seen an improvement in the ability to send information back and forth to Burma”.²¹

Chart 1: To what extent is the government committed to improving freedom of the press



Source: research interviews conducted by the author, Jan.-March 2012.

Another interviewee, who has close contacts at the *Myanmar Times*, stated “things have changed unbelievably” with regards to censorship.²² Sports and entertainment no longer need to run through the censor. However, everything else is still required to go to the censor ahead of publication and a recent International Media Support report found that Myanmar’s censorship board still orders the removal of approximately 20 to 25 percent of articles submitted by newspapers and magazines covering current affairs.²³ Despite this, there have been other, very visible signs that press restrictions are loosening. A notable example was the wide

21 Interview with Bertil Lintner, Journalist and Burmese expert, 19 January, 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

22 Anonymous interview with a diplomat, 24 January 2012, conducted by Skype to the United Kingdom.

23 International Media Support, *An Assessment of Media Development Challenges and Opportunities in Myanmar: Change is in the Air*, Copenhagen, January 2012.

coverage of US State Secretary Clinton's visit to Myanmar and the fact that her speech was printed verbatim in the *New Light of Myanmar* following her visit in December 2011.²⁴

However, despite the positive feeling amongst the interviewees about the Government's intent to relax censorship, there are several key issues that, if not resolved, will undermine steps towards freedom of the press and ensure that these reforms do not maintain meaningful depth. Most notably is the issue of self-censorship, an issue that four of the interviewees raised, stating that a culture of information control had existed for so long that journalists impose a level of self-censorship. This is compounded by the fact that under the Printers and Publishers Registration Law journalists can still officially face imprisonment for writing articles that are critical of the regime. Until this law is overturned, there is the ongoing risk that newspapers and magazines continue to practice self-censorship and restrict what they publish in an effort to prevent problems with the Government.²⁵ It could be argued that the Government is relying on this degree of self-censorship to maintain a level of control on the press whilst at the same time making highly visible improvements for the sake of Western observers.

Along with the relaxation of press censorship, the change most commented upon during the interviews was the easing of Internet restrictions. Previously blocked sites such as the BBC, YouTube, the *New York Times*, as well as Myanmar exile media such as the Irrawaddy and Mizzima, are now accessible within the country. Yet access to many popular blogging sites such as Wordpress and Blog-Spot remains blocked. There is a crucial distinction to note here in that it appears that the regime has begun to allow freer access to information for its citizens, while continuing to restrict their ability to publicly express their own opinions.²⁶ In addition this "reform" was not accompanied by a change to the repressive Electronic Transaction Act which allows citizens to be imprisoned for sending unauthorized information over the Internet. This law has been widely used to repress and imprison journalists.²⁷

Despite Thein Sein's widely publicized rhetoric on improved freedom within the media space, this law and the fact that there are monitoring systems still in place in Internet cafes (only 1 percent of Myanmar inhabitants have Internet

24 "Myanmar, US to Promote Relations", *The New Light of Myanmar*, 2 December 2011, accessed on 10 Feb. 2012, <http://www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/Dec02.html>

25 *Ibid.*, p.2.

26 Burma Partnership, "Freedom of Expression and Opinion in Myanmar: Still a Long Way to Go", Chiang Mai, 23 January 2012, p.2.

27 Shawn W. Crispin, "In Burma Press Freedom remains an illusion", Committee to Protect Journalists, 30 March 2012, accessed on 6 April 2012, <http://www.cpj.org/blog/2012/03/in-burma-press-freedom-remains-an-illusion.php#more>

access in their homes) is enough to prevent free use of the Internet. Consequently, the much publicized unblocking of Internet sites should be viewed primarily as a public relations exercise aimed at demonstrating to international observers that the regime is “reforming”.

The iconic influence of Aung San Suu Kyi

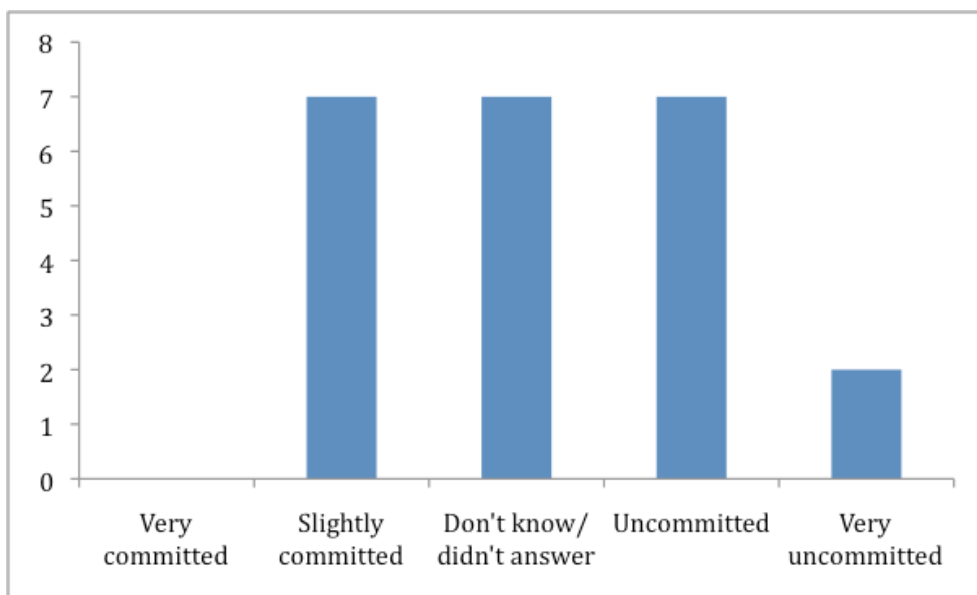
Perhaps the most visibly striking show of relaxation in press censorship is the fact that publications can now print photos of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), the leader of the NLD who until November 2010 was under house arrest. As all those interviewed for this paper testified, her image, once banned in Myanmar, is now seen everywhere in Yangon. As many observers have interpreted, the Government reached out to ASSK as they realized they could not gain acceptance by the West without her endorsement. As one interviewee stated, “it is better (for the Government) to engage with her and prevent her from becoming even more of an iconic martyr”.²⁸ This was a common opinion amongst interviewees, with eight of the interviewees positing, unprompted, that the Government realized that in order to add legitimacy to their apparent reforms they needed to co-opt ASSK. Since summer 2011, when President Thein Sein had his first meeting with ASSK, he has used her popularity to his advantage. By being seen to work with ASSK, Thein Sein not only improves his standing domestically but also with Western powers, many of whom, particularly the United States and United Kingdom, continue to look to ASSK for direction vis-à-vis their foreign policy on Myanmar. In this respect the Government has played its cards very wisely in order to shape the perception of both international organizations and Western governments.

28 Interview with Bertil Lintner, Journalist and Burmese expert, 19 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

Electoral reform

The interviewees were divided evenly when asked how committed they believed the Government was to electoral reform. In order to gain a better understanding of the situation it is necessary to go beyond the numbers and analyse the situation in more depth.

Chart 2: To what extent is the government committed to electoral reform



Source: research interviews conducted by the author, Jan.-March 2012.

Western governments have put a lot of focus on the by-elections held on 1 April 2012. The fact that the NLD won 43 out of 45 available seats, and ASSK herself won her seat in Kawmhu, Yangon division, led to widespread satisfaction at the results and a tendency in the international media to overlook the widespread accusations that the elections were not “free and fair”. This belief was publicly posited by ASSK prior to the elections in a statement to the press on 30 March.²⁹

Post-elections, an interviewee who was in Myanmar during the by-elections, detailed numerous instances of electoral inconsistencies that he had witnessed.³⁰ Electoral fraud does not match with the rhetoric from the Government that the by-elections would be “free and fair”. Rather than being viewed as yet another example of the Government deliberately trying to fix the elections, three of the

29 F. Wade, “By-elections ‘will not be free and fair’: Suu Kyi”, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 30 March 2012, accessed on 6 April 2012, <http://www.dvb.no/news/by-elections-will-not-be-free-and-fair-suu-kyi/21153>

30 Second anonymous interview with Karen journalist, 4 April 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

interviewees raised the point that the historical legacy of electoral fraud was so institutionalized in Myanmar that, even if at a national level the Government were prepared to let the by-elections run freely, at a local level USDP candidates would be keen to maintain their seats and use the tools to which they were accustomed to try and do so. It was not in the interest of the national Government for the by-elections to be found to be not “free and fair”. In fact it was in their interest for the NLD to win the majority of the seats if the Government of Myanmar were to continue to gain the favour of the West.

Many in the West, including the United States and the European Union (EU), publicly stated that the way in which the by-elections were conducted would be a key indicator of whether the reforms within Myanmar are real.³¹ Following the by-election results US State Secretary Clinton announced: “These elections and the progress that we have seen are precisely the kind of step that the President and I envisioned when we embarked on this historic opening”.³²

There were only 44 seats available out of a potential 659. In this sense the Myanmarese Government conforms with one of the main concepts of virtual politics as outlined by Wilson which is, “Elections are held to legitimize power but not to provide any real threat to it”.³³ As one long-term observer of Myanmar’s politics, Maung Zarni, pointed out in an interview, “The by-elections pose no threat [to the regime], instead they served to legitimize the edifice that has been created by the constitution and the flawed elections in 2010”.³⁴ Two of the interviewees for this study used an interesting terminology with reference to the by-elections, saying that it was being used to “launder the political process in Myanmar”.³⁵ This is at the core of virtual politics – using the traditional mechanisms of democracy to legitimize the power, all the while continuing to direct the political situation.

In order to understand this situation better it is necessary to examine some of the main points of the constitution of Myanmar, which impact the election process. The contents of the constitution guarantee that the core power of the Government remains with the military. They are guaranteed one quarter of the seats in both houses of the bicameral legislature.³⁶ This factor coupled with the USDP’s large majority in both houses of Parliament, means the USDP/military bloc

31 European Union, *Council Conclusions on Burma/Myanmar*, 3142th Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, 23 January 2012.

32 US State Department, “Recognizing and Supporting Burma’s Democratic Reforms”, Washington, DC, April 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/04/187439.htm>

33 A. Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, *op. cit.*, p.xv.

34 Interview with Dr Maung Zarni, Burma academic, 22 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Brunei.

35 Interview with Dr Maung Zarni, Burma academic, 22 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Brunei and interview with Debbie Stothard, Burma expert, 2 February 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

36 Government of Myanmar, *Myanmar constitution*, art.74(a), 109(b), Naypyitaw, September 2008.

can unilaterally amend the 2008 constitution for which 75 percent approval of the representatives of both the upper and lower houses of Parliament is required. In addition, the USDP/military bloc can unilaterally elect Myanmar's next President.³⁷ With such a system weighed in their favour, the Government can allow the elections to go ahead freely and fairly as they have constitutionally preserved their hold on power.

Overall, with regards to the creation of a more open and transparent political and parliamentary system, it is clear from the examples cited above that whilst the Government of Myanmar is making some visible advances in terms of relaxed Internet access, less censorship, a by-election that has brought the NLD into Parliament, things are not as they seem and these steps could all be perceived as good use of the virtual politics, with no legislative or constitutional reform to make these changes substantive.

Key indicator 2 – Release of prisoners of conscience and a fair trial for political prisoners

When analysing the release of prisoners of conscience for examples of virtuality one uncovers a game in which the Government sees the prisoners as bargaining tools. This is a view shared by five of the interviewees and summarized by Benjamin Zawacki of Amnesty International. Zawacki pointed out that “The release of prisoners of conscience in Myanmar is being staggered in a seemingly calculated way by the Government. Whether to win similarly staggered concessions from the international community [...] or merely keep at bay both domestic and international criticism”.³⁸

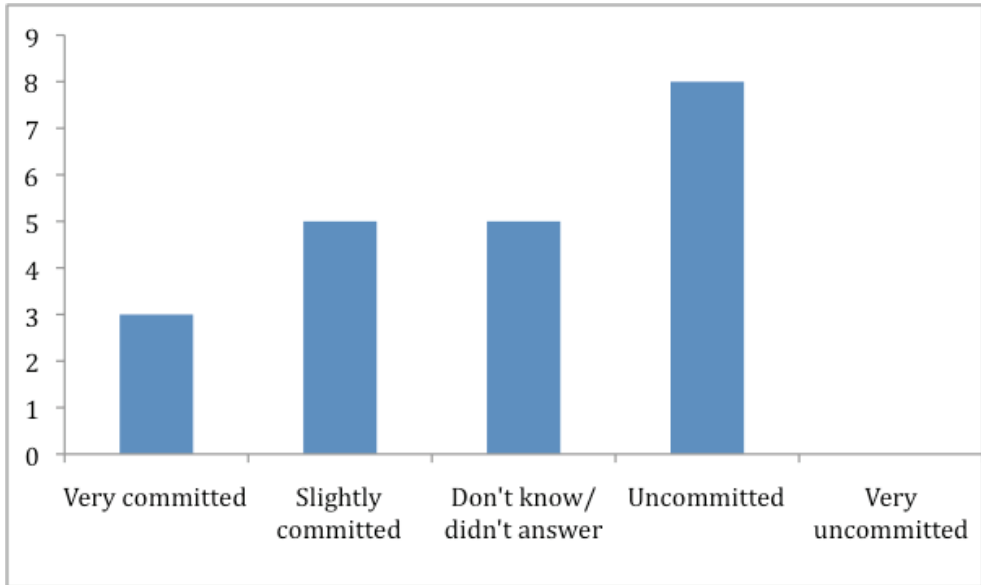
This is further compounded by the fact that the most recent, and most widely praised release, contained the most high profile prisoners. This well-calculated move not only served to attract positive attention from the international media, it also took a lot of pressure off the Government. In addition, those prisoners released on 13 January 2012 were only given conditional release meaning that they can be sent back to prison to serve the end of their sentence if they are perceived to break the law.

It is interesting to view the qualitative results of the research for this question as despite the visible progress made to date, eight of the interviewees believed the Government to be uncommitted to releasing the rest of the political prisoners (see Chart 3).

37 Altsean, “Burma 2010 Election Recap”, Bangkok, 26 November 2010, p.2.

38 B. Zawacki, “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly in Myanmar”, *The Asia Times*, 8 November 2011, accessed on 25 Jan. 2012, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/MK08Ae02.html

Chart 3: To what extent is the government committed to releasing all political prisoners?



Source: research interviews conducted by the author, Jan.-March 2012.

Another interesting issue relating to the release of prisoners of conscience is that of the role of the Human Rights Commission for Myanmar (HRC). The HRC was established by the Government on 5 September 2011. This was intended as a clear message to the West that Myanmar was serious about cleaning up its human rights record. However, despite this obvious attempt to positively improve their image, the HRC has been widely regarded as an organ of the Government with little or no autonomy to drive positive change. During interviews for this paper, 23 out of the 24 people interviewed believed it was not independent from the Government.³⁹ One interviewee, who works for an international organization operating inside Myanmar, stated that at present their organization does not feel comfortable taking human rights issues to the HRC but that they are closely monitoring the situation to see how the Commission develops and may, with time, change their stance.⁴⁰ Another interviewee, who is a Kachin human rights activist, said very few of the people within the Kachin community trusted the HRC and saw it as an extension of the Government. She went on to explain that this opinion was backed up by a situation that occurred at the end of 2011 in Kachin state. Some villager elders reported to the HRC that the army had burned down their church. Two days later the authorities came to the village and threatened the

³⁹ Interviews conducted with Myanmar experts between January and March 2012.

⁴⁰ Anonymous interview, IGO worker, 18 January 2012, Geneva.

elders with physical recriminations if they made more reports to the HRC.⁴¹ The credibility of the HRC is weakened further by the questionable background of its members, most notably its chairman and vice-chairman who have both routinely denied the existence of Human Rights Violations (HRVs) in Myanmar at the UN for the last 15 years.⁴²

The superficiality of the HRC was demonstrated in its handling of the campaign for the release of political prisoners in Myanmar. Its “lobbying” in October 2011 could be viewed as suspicious. It sent an open letter to the President requesting the release of all political prisoners. This was immediately followed the next day by a release of over 6,000 prisoners, of whom an estimated 200 were political prisoners.⁴³ Further contributing to this lack of credibility was the statement from Win Mra (chairman of the HRC), in February 2012, who declared to journalists that the HRC would not investigate allegations of abuses in the ethnic armed conflict areas as this was not appropriate due to the government’s current attempts to negotiate a ceasefire.⁴⁴

The most critical element of this subject is that the Government is dealing with the surface symptoms and not tackling the root of the problem. By releasing political prisoners/prisoners of conscience it is responding to the most vocal calls within the international community. However, as long as there is no legislative reform to prevent people from being arrested for simply speaking out against the Government, this reform cannot be regarded as institutionalized and must be viewed cautiously.

41 Anonymous interview, Kachin activist, 21 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

42 “Human Rights Commission”, Altsean-Burma, accessed on 10 March 2012 at <http://www.altsean.org/Research/Regime%20Watch/Judicial/Human%20Rights%20Commission.ph>

43 Myanmar Human Rights Commission, “Myanmar National Human Rights Commission’s Open Letter to President Thein Sein”, Nay Pyi Taw, 10 October 2011.

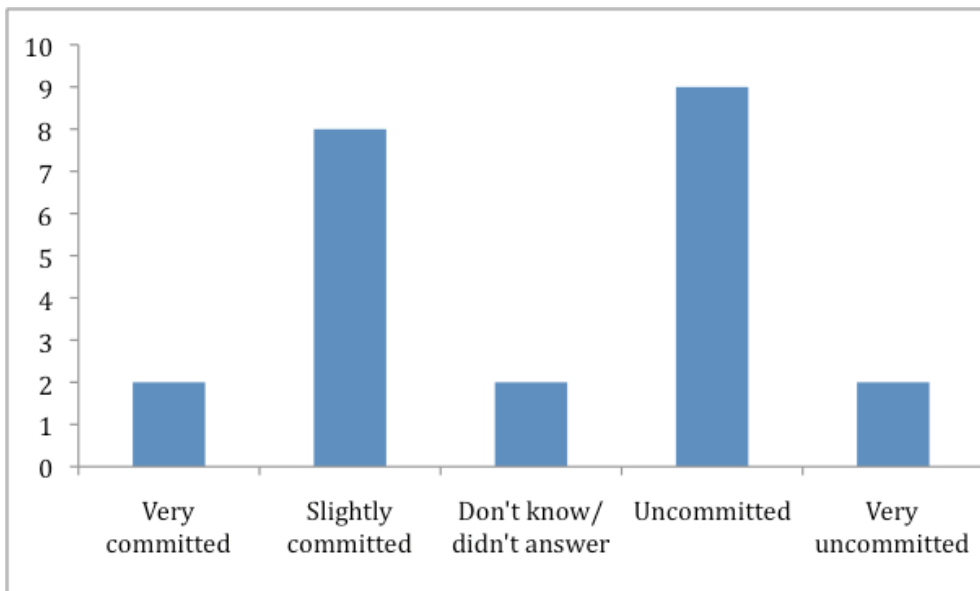
44 AFP, “No Probe Into Ethnic Abuse: Rights Body”, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 15 February 2012, accessed on 5 April 2012 at <http://www.dvb.no/news/noprobe-into-ethnic-abuse-burma-rights-body/20255>

Key Indicator 3 – Cessation of ethnic conflict and human rights violations

Resolving ethnic conflict

The interviewees for this paper were split down the middle about whether or not the Government is committed to resolving the ethnic conflicts (see Chart 4). What was interesting was that unprompted by the interviewer, nine of the ten interviewees who had responded that they believed the Government to be committed to resolving the ethnic conflicts also stated that they believed the motives were financial/political rather than simply to stop the fighting. The two main reasons posited were access to resources and to enable the lifting of sanctions.⁴⁵

Chart 4: To what extent is the government committed to resolving the ethnic conflicts?



Source: research interviews conducted by the author, Jan.-March 2012.

The resolution of the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar is perceived by many to be the biggest challenge the Government faces. The situation over the past few months since the reforms began is summed up well in the statement from Benjamin Zawacki of Amnesty International, made during interviews for this research: “For six months or more, not only did the political and economic reforms in Myanmar not extend to the ethnic minority areas, but the human rights situation actually got progressively worse there. [...] This is the key human rights challenge facing Myanmar in February 2012”.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Interviews conducted with Myanmar experts between January and March 2012.

⁴⁶ Interview with Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International, 25 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

That said, some tentative progress has been made in the ethnic areas. What could be considered as one of the biggest breakthroughs came on 12 January 2012 with the signing of a ceasefire between the Government of Myanmar and the Karen National Union, bringing to an end the longest running civil war within Myanmar. The signing of the ceasefire was picked up immediately by the international media and widely reported by well respected news sources such as the BBC and Al Jazeera.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, within a few days of the ceasefire announcement, an expert on the ethnic situation in Myanmar contacted in the context of this research stated that no deal had been signed, which was confirmed by reports in the Karen press.⁴⁸ The Government had informed the press that there was a ceasefire to demonstrate, to the international community, that they were making progress on this issue. This is of particular note as the Karen National Union (KNU) ceasefire was one of the key factors that led to US State Secretary Clinton announcing that the United States would deploy an ambassador to Myanmar for the first time in over 10 years, stating that the ceasefire was “an important step forward” and that they would continue to reward “action with action”.⁴⁹

In the days following 12 January, three more interviewees confirmed that a ceasefire had not been signed. This was also confirmed by sources working along the border of Karen state and Thailand. Though this was a common perception amongst the local community, news had not yet reached the Western media. The news reached the international media on 3 February 2012, at which point the *New York Times* reported: “Karen rebels deny signing a ceasefire”.⁵⁰ This article did not deny that a ceasefire was signed, rather it focused on the fact that the KNU denied signing a ceasefire, therefore not fully calling into question the legitimacy of the Government’s earlier claims. The article went on to state that this stance from the KNU will “be a significant setback for the Government’s efforts to end the grinding civil conflicts that have divided the country for decades.” This demonstrates that the writer of the piece believes the Government is making efforts to try to resolve the ethnic conflict, a trend commonly replicated throughout the Western media since January 2012. The Government had sufficiently shaped the perception of the Western media so that even after the facts were disputed the bias of the media did not change.

47 “Burma Government Signs Ceasefire with Karen Rebels”, BBC, 12 January 2012, accessed on 10 Feb. 2012 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16523691>; “Myanmar and Karen Rebels Sign Ceasefire”, Al-Jazeera, 12 January 2012, accessed on 10 Feb. 2012 at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2012/01/201211261327632470.html>

48 Interview with Bertil Lintner, expert and journalist on Burma, 19 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand; “Karen Leader denies ceasefire agreement is signed”, *Karen News*, 12 January 2012, accessed on 3 July 2012 at <http://karennews.org/2012/01/knu-leader-denies-ceasefire-agreement-is-signed-2.html/>

49 US State Department, “Remarks on Burma”, Washington, DC, 13 January 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/01/180667.htm>

50 T. Fuller, “In Myanmar, Karen Rebels Deny Signing a Cease-Fire”, *New York Times*, 3 February 2012, accessed on 10 Feb. 2012 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/04/world/asia/in-myanmar-karen-rebels-deny-signing-a-cease-fire.html?pagewanted=all>

Whilst apparently no ceasefire agreement was signed, what is certain is that negotiations did take place between the Government and the KNU on 12 January 2012 and these negotiations have led to a lull in fighting in Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) controlled areas. Three observers close to the situation stated that the Government is now moving troops previously stationed in Karen state up to Kachin state where fighting continues and where the Government is suffering heavy casualties.⁵¹ This is yet another example of clever stagecraft as the Government kept the focus of the Western governments and media on one area whilst committing atrocities elsewhere. By engaging in ceasefire negotiations they are acting in line with the demands of the international community but at the same time human rights violations in Kachin state are increasing.⁵² One interviewee also claimed that the recent spate of brutal attacks by soldiers on civilians were revenge for attacks by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).⁵³ Three interviewees conjectured that the whole ceasefire process was staged in order to allow the troops to be freed up and redeployed to Kachin state.⁵⁴

Despite the fact that ceasefire negotiations are ongoing and the fighting has stopped in Karen state, there are ongoing reports of land confiscations.⁵⁵ The Government is framing these land confiscations in a positive way, rationalizing them as “development projects” since land is being used to build Government buildings including schools and hospitals. At best, these land confiscations, despite their intended purpose, constitute human rights violations. At worst, three interviewees posited there is a much darker side to them: the schools will be Government-run schools, teaching in Burmese serving only to further the Burmanisation of Myanmar; the hospitals are being built in strategic locations on traditionally contested borders and will be ideally placed to serve the military when fighting breaks out again.

Ongoing conflict in Kachin State

Another area that requires consideration is Kachin state. The conflict there brings into play yet another layer of complexity that must be considered when trying to understand the situation in Myanmar – the question of a division between the Government and the military. This theme was raised by every interviewee. What

51 Anonymous interviews with three Karen journalists/activists, 15, 17, 20 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

52 Human Rights Foundation of Monland, *Burma's Democratic Facade: Human Right Abuses Continued*, Bangkok, December 2011; Human Rights Watch, *Untold Miseries Wartime Abuses and Forced Displacement in Burma's Kachin State*, New York, March 2012.

53 Interview with Debbie Stothard, Altsean-Burma, 6 February 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

54 Anonymous interviews with three Karen journalists/activists, 15, 17, 20 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

55 Documented by numerous bodies including *Burma Issues* and Human Rights Watch.

became apparent from their comments was that nobody was sure about the exact power structure within Myanmar vis-à-vis the military and the Government. This was most notably evidenced when Thein Sein twice gave the order for offensives against the KIA in Kachin state to cease and on both occasions these orders were ignored. Thein Sein can continue to be seen positively by the international community whilst in reality he had no intention for the orders to be carried out.

However, several of the interviewees posited that the military and Government were separate entities and that the relationship was fragile and opaque with nobody being sure about the exact delineation of power between the two. One certainty though, was that the military was in charge, evidenced by the refusal to follow Thein Sein's orders to cease offensives against the Kachin. The situation becomes even more unclear when one considers that troops continue to deploy into Kachin state along with weapons and ammunition.⁵⁶ Is all of this being done without the consent of the President or is he a willing bystander?

It is clear that the myriad of issues related to the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar will not be simple to solve. The Government is clearly making positive steps to deal with the problem, nevertheless, until the root issues are addressed, a political solution offered and all military offensives and HRVs ceased, then this can be viewed as no more than further examples of virtual politics aimed at protecting the interests of a core elite.

To conclude, this section clearly indicates that the situation in Myanmar is not as close to a transition to democracy as the Government would like observers to believe. In all of the three key indicators examined there were clear examples of the Government using virtual politics to shape the perception of both its own people as well as observers overseas in order to convince them that they were making true and lasting reforms. The reforms witnessed to date should be viewed as examples of the powerful core, who are resistant to change, allowing the reformers to enact these highly visible reforms and please the international community as long as they pose no threat to their power base. This power base is at the crux of the Myanmar puzzle. Sizeable financial interests and an opaque financial system have long-term negative implications as they encourage resistance to reforms amongst the elites, whose power and wealth depends on their ability to shape the rules to benefit their narrow interests.⁵⁷ The main question is when does the power slip, the reforms take on a life of their own and real change become unstoppable.

56 Anonymous interviews with three Karen journalists/activists, 15, 17, 20 January 2012, and one Kachin activist, 21 January 2012, conducted by Skype to Thailand.

57 Burma Economic Watch, Sean Turnell, *Reform and its Limits in Myanmar's Fiscal State*, Sydney, July 2011, p.12.

Conclusion

The state of affairs in Myanmar is exceptionally complex and dynamic; the political situation is changing every day. Defining how the situation will look in the future is impossible and it would be unwise for any theorist to make forecasts about how the country will look in two years, let alone further into the future. However, what seems to be clear from the analysis, is that the situation unfolding within the country should not be taken at face value. This is why it is so critical to identify key indicators against which to benchmark the reform and allow observers to gauge when true democratic transition is occurring as opposed to virtual politics.

One of the key factors to be considered when assessing to what extent there is virtual politics at play as opposed to a real transition to democracy is that there is not one power directing things in Myanmar. Rather, there is an internal power struggle; at a minimum between the Government and the military, and potentially even between the President and his supporters and more hardline factions within the Government – an intra-elite power struggle of status quo versus real change.

This study is not able to define what the exact power structure is within Myanmar, as the deliberate opacity of the political scene and the complexity of the personal relationships within the sphere of power prevent an accurate analysis of the situation. What is certain is that it is in the best interests of a core group of individuals to maintain the reins of power. This is mostly driven by two factors – financial resources and personal security. Nevertheless, the fact that the reforms were even initiated, demonstrates that this group realizes that in the modern, globalized world it is impossible to maintain the status quo and that engagement with the wider world is required. The eagerness of both the West and Myanmar to engage with each other, and the desire of Myanmar to improve relations with the West, have expedited the visible reforms.

This being said, this paper has demonstrated that no matter how encouraging these reforms are, until they are institutionalized and accompanied by appropriate legislative changes, the Government of Myanmar must be considered to be practicing a form of virtual politics in order to shape the perception of the outside world to achieve its own agenda.

Table 2 below lays out a summary of the analysis carried out in this paper. It compares the current reforms in the “Virtual Politics” column against what would need to be seen to demonstrate a real transition to democracy.

Table 2: “Virtual Politics” versus Real Transition to Democracy

| Indicator | Scenario A - “Virtual Politics” | Scenario B - Real Transition to Democracy |
|--|---|---|
| Creation of an open and transparent political system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxation of official censorship but a legislation that encourages self censorship • Relaxation of Internet laws but low web penetration and ongoing surveillance in Internet cafes • A constitution that allows for a military backed majority in parliament and a strong political block that can prevent any opposition making constitutional changes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redraft the constitution to, among other actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - remove the 25 percent guarantee of military seats - remove restrictive barriers to contesting elections • Repeal of the electronic transmissions act • Removal of restrictions on blogging sites • Repeal of the printers and publishers registration act • Relaxation of censorship on all areas of the press including coverage of current affairs and politics |
| Release of all political prisoners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Release of political prisoners on conditional release • No legislative change to repressive laws that lead to political prisoner being incarcerated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience • Repeal of all laws related to political affiliation or unlawful association • Fair trial for all political prisoners interned for crimes involving violence |
| Cessation of ethnic conflict and HRVs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ceasefire negotiations with individual ethnic groups • Human Rights Commission that talks the language of the international community but has demonstrated a lack of autonomy from the Government and to date built little or no trust with international organizations or ethnic communities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement in a political process towards political equality for all ethnic groups • Include the UNFC in the negotiation process • Security sector reform of the military • Autonomous Human Rights Commission recognised by the international community and operating to internationally acknowledged norms and standards |

The legislative reforms and institutional changes outlined in the “Real Transition to Democracy” column are some of the critical thresholds that must be met if Myanmar is to be considered truly on a path to democracy.

In his book *Virtual Politics*, Wilson posits that there are not just two versions of events – the false and the true – in post-Soviet space, but that the politics of the region are instead characterized by intertextuality.⁵⁸ This theory applies to Myanmar. The intricate power structure, the constantly changing and rebalancing of relationships with other states and the complex ethnic situation all contribute to the intertextuality of the situation. The ruling powers exploit this complexity, to their advantage, to disorient international observers and to confuse their own population in order to protect their power base with a veil of virtuality. What is being witnessed in Myanmar is a ruling elite attempting a balancing act in order to see how close a relationship they can develop with the West while doing their best to maintain a managed democracy at home.⁵⁹ The question is, as the world becomes more connected and more globalized, how long this situation can endure.

Despite the fact that the reforms are being stage-managed to protect the interests of a core group at the centre of power, there is no doubt from the evidence that there is a sizeable group of reform-minded people within the Government. The situation is currently so fragile and so much is, as discussed in this paper, virtual as opposed to real transition to democracy, that even the slightest unseen event could disturb the reforms or spook the ruling elite that they are losing their grip on power too quickly, bringing a return to authoritarian rule. Foreign governments and international organizations interacting with Myanmar should continue to actively assess the Government's performance, particularly with regards to the three key indicators outlined in this paper, not taking information at face value, basing future policy decisions only on information once it has been carefully deconstructed and verified. This small space that has been created needs to be used effectively and wisely to make a contribution to this fragile process towards democracy.

The Government of Myanmar is not going to become an open democratic system in the Western model overnight. Based on their behaviour since the election, the elites will continue to do all they can to protect themselves, their assets and their power structures using clever stagecraft and virtuality to influence and shape the perception of both its own people and foreign observers. External actors must remain rigorous in their dealings with Myanmar. They must strive to see the real story and react appropriately, rather than allow financial interests to influence foreign policy to the detriment of the population of Myanmar. If given the proper attention, what is currently a curious blend of need for reform, a desire for protection of the status quo and a tightly woven web of virtuality and reality could eventually develop into a real transition to democracy.

⁵⁸ Wilson, *op.cit.*, p.46.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

List of Interviews

NB: Due to the ongoing sensitivity of the issues surrounding Myanmar many of the interviews requested anonymity.

| Name | Affiliation | Position | Date of interview |
|------------------|---|--|--------------------------|
| Benjamin Zawacki | Amnesty International | Asia researcher | 25 Jan. 2012 |
| Debbie Stothard | ASEAN | Political analyst – Myanmar | 2 Feb. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Backpack medics | Aid worker Thai Burma border | 15 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | British Embassy Rangoon | British Embassy, Rangoon | 24 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Burma Issues | Karen activist | 15 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Burma Issues | Karen specialist, journalist | 17 Jan. and 4 April 2012 |
| Anonymous | Christian Solidarity | Burma specialist | 1 March 2012 |
| Anonymous | DCAF | SSR specialist | 30 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Ex political prisoner in Myanmar | Ex political prisoner in Myanmar | 18 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Ex political prisoner in Myanmar | Ex political prisoner in Myanmar | 23 Jan. 2012 |
| Bertil Lintner | Freelance journalist | Journalist, long term Myanmar observer | 19 Jan. 2012 |
| Martin Smith | Freelance journalist | Journalist, long term Myanmar observer | 5 March 2012 |
| David Steinberg | Georgetown University | Long term Myanmar expert, academic | 6 Feb. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Kachin Women's Association | Kachin activist | 21 Jan. 2012 |
| Maung Zarni | London School of Economics | Academic, Myanmar specialist | 22 Jan. 2012 |
| Derek Tonkin | Network Myanmar | Myanmar observer and expert | 26 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Peace Way Foundation | Karen activist | 20 Jan. 2012 |
| Kyaw San Wai | S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies | Academic, Myanmar specialist | 2 Feb. 2012 |
| Anonymous | The Arakan Project | Rohingya specialist | 10 Feb. 2012 |
| Anonymous | Transnational Institute | Myanmar specialist, especially ethnic issues | 5 March 2012 |
| Anonymous | UNHCR | UN worker – Myanmar | 18 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | UNOCHA | UN worker – Myanmar | 18 Jan. 2012 |
| Anonymous | US State Department of-ficer – Myanmar border | US State Department | 30 Jan. 2012 |

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