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Support for Myanmar: Can Poland Do More?

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The visit of Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to Poland on 11-13 September puts the major challenges of the transformation in Myanmar in the spotlight, and calls for an evaluation of Poland's engagement in the country. Having successfully gone through transition to democracy, Poland can do more to share its lessons learnt in transitional justice, writing a constitution, strengthening civil society, and local administration reform. This would, however, require a substantial increase in funds, a permanent mission in Myanmar, and reliable partners for trilateral cooperation.

Challenges Before 2015. After two years of reforms, Myanmar (formerly Burma) has entered a decisive period of its transformation en route to the general election in 2015. The first major risk that could derail the transition are the simmering conflicts with ethnic groups and the growing sectarian tensions between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority. Since a peace deal was struck with the Kachin Independence Army—the last ethnic armed group—in May, the prospects for lasting peace have improved. Such peace will, however, depend on the will of all sides to agree to some kind of federalism or stronger decentralisation.

The second challenge relates to the necessary constitutional reforms and preparation for free and fair elections amid questions over transitional justice. Some provisions of the current constitution (from 2008) block full democracy. For example, the constitution maintains a guiding role in the country for the army, reserves 25% of seats in parliament for the military, and creates a power imbalance in favour of the executive. One article (59) bans citizens married to foreign nationals from running for presidency, which excludes Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League of Democracy (NLD), from the presidential race. Although there have recently been more signs of willingness among the ruling elites to change this provision, the constitutional amendment under the current rules (requiring the support of 75% members of parliament and approval in a national referendum by at least 50% of eligible voters) seems extremely difficult. Former generals who fear repercussions for their roles in the old regime may resist the reforms and deeper democratisation.

Moreover, the country needs to develop its capacity in almost all fields if it is to manage transition properly. For example, it must empower members of parliament, strengthen judicial independence, train administration officials, and create strong regulatory and control institutions. Reform of the educational system and creating conditions for strong and inclusive growth are other important tasks that will affect transformation greatly.

Poland's Support for Myanmar. Prior to 2011, Poland did not provide assistance to internationally isolated Myanmar, except for small projects for refugees (worth €110,000 between 2007 and 2009) run by the Polish Embassy in Thailand. However, Poland was fast to respond to regime changes in Myanmar. The Polish deputy foreign minister was one of the first among high-ranking EU diplomats to visit the country, in 2011. One month after free by-elections to parliament and suspension of most of the EU sanctions in April 2012, the Polish foreign minister visited Myanmar, and the speaker of the upper house went there in October 2012 to convey an invitation to Myanmar's parliamentarians. Poland also organised three study visits for Myanmar activists, administration officials and parliamentarians, in December 2011, 2012, and July 2013. Most of the assistance to Myanmar flows through democracy support and development cooperation agency Solidarity Fund PL, established in 2011. In 2012 and 2013 the fund sponsored seven projects (worth approx. €250,000) run by four Polish NGOs in partnership with local counterparts in the areas of media and civic education. In total, Polish aid to Myanmar between 2011 and 2013 amounted to €470,000. A similar level of financing is likely to continue in the coming years.

Despite the political will to engage more strongly in the country, Myanmar was not listed as a priority partner of the Multiannual Strategy of Polish Development Cooperation 2012–2016, and was subsequently excluded from the annual programmes of Polish aid in 2012 and 2013. Therefore, assistance for Myanmar has been held back to modest levels and has had a low profile. There are at least four reasons for this. First, the modest Polish aid budget has forced it to concentrate on its eastern neighbours. Second, Poland has no diplomatic presence in Myanmar, which increases the costs of operations in the country and makes it a less attractive partner for government or other donors. Third, despite Poland's expertise in democratic change, it lacks experts on Myanmar who could facilitate assistance effectively. Finally, the rapid inflow of foreign aid to the country and competition from more experienced donors such as the United States, Japan and Germany further limit room for Poland to play a more visible role.

Sharing Polish Experiences. Having taken the first steps, it seems that Poland could do even more to respond to the challenges that Myanmar is facing. First of all, transition in Myanmar resembles some changes in Poland after 1989 (the peaceful transfer of power, contractual parliament, strong opposition leader, etc.), hence it could learn from both Polish successes and mistakes. These similarities also create sympathy for Myanmar among Polish society, making any increase in aid spending easier to accept. Moreover, Poland, through help for a distant and poor country in Asia, would improve its image within the EU as a trusted and reliable donor, not focused only on its own neighbourhood. In fact, the new EU policy for Myanmar from July calls on the Member States to share “European experiences and lessons learned regarding political transition and democratisation”, and Poland could prove its added value in this area. Concurrently, more active engagement in development cooperation with Myanmar would help build expertise that may eventually pave the way for Polish business. With the pressure on Poland to increase its aid budget in the coming years, Myanmar seems to be a good choice for a new direction for foreign aid.

Despite Poland's inability to respond to all Myanmar's needs (for example, Poland is a homogenous country and does not have the practical knowledge on how to deal with ethnic conflicts), there are fields in which Polish experience could be useful. One area is a faculty for hammering out an agreement between the democratic opposition and ruling elites. Of special value in this regard is Polish experience stemming from the Round Table agreements, which enabled, under some conditions, the participation of members of the former regime in systemic reforms in Poland. Second is Poland's experience in writing a new constitution. Despite the fact that constitutional reform in Poland took a relatively long time (the new constitution was adopted in 1997), it was a success because it meant that the political players became more likely to compromise. Third, is Poland's know-how on building a vibrant civil society, which nowadays benefits from favourable legal environments that provide tax deductions to donors, functioning consultation channels with government officials, and nurturing media. Finally, Poland has good practical experience of conducting local administration reform that strengthened the role of local and regional governments in building local democracy.

Conclusions. Poland plays a positive although still modest role in supporting the ongoing transition in Myanmar, but plans to stay engaged there for the foreseeable future. However, continuation of assistance at the current levels minimises its visibility and can bring only limited benefits to both Myanmar and Poland. There are sound arguments as to why Poland should include Myanmar as a priority partner for its development cooperation and gradually increase its aid budget accordingly. The experience and contacts gained in last two years mean that Solidarity Fund is already capable of effective handling of an aid budget ten times bigger than its present size. A bigger budget for Polish aid for Myanmar and administered by the MFA would in turn make Poland a more attractive partner for Myanmar and other donors. This would enable Poland to participate actively in the ongoing exercise of joint programming and division of labour of EU aid, and take a lead in areas of its own expertise.

The ongoing Polish projects in Myanmar should be continued, but new, more systemic programmes, agreed in cooperation with Myanmar's government, could be developed. Poland can keep organising workshops for political activists, representatives of government, parliament and the opposition, including not only NLD but also other groups. To use increased funding in an effective manner, Poland would need to address some of its current weaknesses. First and foremost, Poland should start some kind of permanent presence in Myanmar (a small diplomatic mission, aid office, Solidarity Fund contact point, or similar). Another solution would be to set up an institution modelled on the Information Centre for Local Authorities in Moldova (co-financed by Poland and the U.S.). Poland should also look for a partner closer to Myanmar, for example Australia or Mongolia, in order to add a regional component and more credibility to its democratic transformation experience; it may alternatively cooperate with those Visegrad countries already present on the ground. Finally, Poland could build a coalition in the Board of Governors of the European Endowment for Democracy, to convince its members to include Myanmar on the list of its geographical mandate, which would open another source of financing projects in Myanmar.