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Entrenching Change in Burma

Since its general election fourteen months ago, Burma (officially known as Myanmar) may actually be on the road to democracy. The small steps taken so far should not however be blown out of proportion.

By Graham Ong-Webb for ISN

Despite the country's notorious human rights record, the government under President Thein Sein appears to have embarked on a series of political, economic and social reforms that have prompted the international community to [ease sanctions](#) and adopt a more conciliatory tone (see, for example, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's [landmark visit to Burma](#) last December, after more than 50 years of Western estrangement).

Certainly, genuine reforms in Burma should be encouraged. At the moment, however, no one should get carried away. So far, as detained activist [Ashin Gambira](#), a Burmese Buddhist monk, has [observed](#), "the tiniest rights awarded [by Thein's government] are being blown out of proportion." While international encouragement, pressure, and support are vital for Burma's transformation, the situation calls for realism and patience from the international community.

Beware the mixed record

Policy-makers will be mindful that any positive developments in Burma occur against the backdrop of tight-fisted rule by a military junta whose overall conduct has been appalling.

The 2010 election is supposed to mark the fifth of seven steps on the "roadmap to democracy" proposed in 2003 by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) — which is the official name of the military regime that seized power in 1988. The junta claims that the election marked Burma's transition from military rule to a civilian democracy. However, it was [boycotted](#) by Aung San Suu Kyi's political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and was considered [fraudulent](#) by the international community.

On the one hand, Burma's military dictatorship has relinquished all but 25 per cent of [previously held seats](#) in parliament; President Thein is heading a government established in March 2011 through the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which supposedly [won 76.5 per cent](#) of parliamentary seats in the general election.

On the other, Burma analysts may be right to [describe](#) President Thein and his ministers as "snakes shedding [their] skin" — implying that the USDP founders, who resigned their military positions to

form a civilian government, have undergone a transformation in appearance only. It remains unclear if changes in the form of Burma's government reflect substantive changes as well.

Even now, a repressive volte-face by Burma's pseudo-civilian government cannot be ruled out and the ["occasional backsliding"](#) that some diplomats expect is probably inevitable; Burmese leaders can be quite rational and calculating. Moreover, the capriciousness of developments in Burma should not be underestimated. In 2005 the junta unexpectedly decided to relocate the country's capital 340 kilometers from Yangon to Naypyidaw, following the [advice of an astrologer](#).

Triangulating Naypyidaw's agenda

[One observer](#) has attributed the series of changes in Burmese politics to the rise of a reformist camp led by President Thein. According to this view, the reformers may be in the process of displacing the hardliners inside the military leadership, which is still controlled by former President Than Shwe. Despite officially stepping down in March 2011, Than continues to ["exercise absolute power"](#) behind the scenes.

Another commentator has countered this view by offering a ['good cop/bad cop'](#) explanation of the Thein-Thaw working arrangement, particularly in regard to the handling of the longstanding conflict with Burma's ethnic minorities. This theory may also be useful in explaining the government's current political strategy in general.

A case in point is the reported [surge](#) in Burmese troops in the state of Karen despite the signing of an initial ceasefire agreement with the rebels last month. One possibility is that Thein has no control over the military, and is therefore weak. The other [possibility](#), according to journalist Sai Wansai, is that he is simply "playing the good cop, while the military is taking the role of a bad cop; while hood-winking all the stakeholders, posturing as a reformist, when in fact he is representing a handful of military top brass, both retired and active."

On balance, the latter proposition is the more plausible one. In the 2008 Constitution (which then-Lieutenant General Thein had a hand in drafting), parliament wields [very little](#) power. While President Thein presides over the body, his office is beneath the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) — which reports to the military. Ultimately, the military can exercise a constitutional veto over any government actions deemed to jeopardize national security and unity.

This is why Aung San Suu Kyi's likely victory in the parliamentary constituency of Yangon in the April by-elections — along with the other 47 seats that the NLD are expected to win — is of no real consequence to the Burmese government in the short- or medium- term.

It means that the Burmese government can undo any of the recent reforms and initiatives just as easily as it put them into place. There is no reason—in the eyes of President Thein, ex-President Than, and their coterie—why parliament cannot be dissolved, why Suu Kyi cannot be re-detained, recent general amnesties withdrawn, press controls reinstated, new labor laws (allowing unions) revoked, and political promises broken.

For now, such a clampdown is unlikely, at least until the Burmese government determines its course of action geopolitically. According to [some observers](#), the recent spate of reforms is likely to be part of a plan to court Western support as a [counterweight](#) to China's political and economic designs on the country. In all likelihood, the Thein administration has yet to decide whether its interests are better served in a Western or Chinese orbit.

International strategy

The Thein administration's decision to embark on the path of reform may be more about entrenching its power than improving the lives of the Burmese people. However, this must not stop the international community from striving to ensure that the Burmese government stays the course of political, economic, and social reform.

Strategically, the international community should take a long-term view, based on the kind of democratic Burma that Burmese citizens (and their true champions, the NLD) want to see. Indeed, that desired result may only be possible in a generation, when the military old guard literally passes away.

In the meantime, the international community should link the easing of sanctions and the distribution of aid to tangible positive outcomes rather than the announcement of reform alone. Here, constant media scrutiny may be a better tool than the megaphone diplomacy that has more often hardened the hardliners than softened them. In particular, media pressure should be applied to support and protect Suu Kyi's political career and those of other NLD members.

This would be particularly critical should Suu Kyi occupy a ministerial post — from which she could directly influence Burmese politics. It might also be a point from which we could start to expect more in Burma than a “ [flicker of progress](#).”

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