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Baby Steps for Burma

To the outside world it seems as though Burma/Myanmar is gradually engaging in democratic reform. Are these baby steps going to lead to great strides forward, or will things fall flat on their face?

By Simon Roughneen for ISN

Speaking in Bangkok prior to his visit to Burma in January, US Senator John McCain described the array of recent reforms undertaken by the country's government as "unimaginable a year ago."

Since September last year, the Burmese government has amnestied around five hundred political prisoners, relaxed media restrictions, passed laws allowing the formation of trade unions and public protests, and - in apparent concessions to public unease - put the brakes on two controversial multibillion dollar infrastructure projects backed by Chinese and Thai investors.

On the streets of Yangon, shops openly sell Aung San Suu Kyi T-shirts, an act impossible a few months ago and perhaps testimony to a tentative new openness. Even the Sauron-like eye of Burma's pervasive spy network seems to have been relaxed, with recently-released political prisoner Min Zeya telling me, "We are being watched, but it's not like in the past, when it would not be possible to be interviewed by a foreign journalist in a public place."

However there are many laws still in place that would be deemed draconian by any standard, and the country's reforms cannot be examined in isolation from the controversial 2008 constitution railroaded through in a rigged referendum.

"We cannot accept many points in the 2008 constitution," says Ko Ko Gyi, another well-known former political detainee who was freed in the most recent amnesty in January. The constitution gives the military a veto on any future changes, despite a new nominally-civilian government being established almost one year ago.

Burma was run as a military dictatorship from 1962 until early 2011 and the army now has a 25% bloc of seats in the parliament; almost 80% of the remaining seats were won in November 2010 by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in elections widely-dismissed as fraudulent. Unsurprisingly, the USDP has ties to the military.

Transition: positive or perfunctory?

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, government officials such as President Thein Sein and parliament speaker Shwe Mann claim a transition to democracy is in place.

Significantly, iconic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is backing the Thein Sein reforms, after what seems to have been a watershed meeting between the two last July. Her National League for Democracy (NLD) won Burma's 1990 elections, only for the military to annul the result and put her (and many supporters) in jail or under house arrest.

Speaking at the NLD's office in Yangon, deputy leader U Tin Oo, an 85 year old former political prisoner, said that the party believes the reforms to be genuine and the NLD will back the government. "Daw Aung San Suu Kyi gave a clear message that she will give a helping hand," he says.

Despite boycotting the 2010 elections, this year the NLD will contest 48 vacant seats in the April by-elections for Burma's various houses of parliament. "We expect the upcoming elections to be free and fair," he says, "and we expect to win most if not all of the seats."

If Aung San Suu Kyi wins a parliamentary seat, which seems certain going by the tens of thousands of supporters who turned out to greet her at four rally locations outside Yangon in recent weeks, it is possible she will then be offered a government position, adding greater international legitimacy to the Burmese transition.

To some extent, Western governments take their cue from Suu Kyi when formulating policy toward Burma, and her rubber-stamping Thein Sein's reforms has been crucial in persuading Western governments that the changes are genuine and worth supporting.

Western Promise?

European countries and the US have been seeking an angle to engage with the Burmese government since at least 2009, when Washington began making covert overtures to the military junta. If the reforms continue, the US and EU will likely relax and ultimately remove economic sanctions on Burma, allowing Western companies to invest in the country's oil, gas and gemstones - and gain access to a hitherto-closed consumer market of around 60 million people.

For the US, engagement with Burma means another avenue to confront a rising China in Beijing's backyard. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Burma in December, the first such visit since 1955. It came weeks after the Burmese government announced the suspension of a \$3.6 billion dam project in Kachin state in the north of the country, close to China's booming southwest.

90% of the power generated was to go to China - though only 25% of Burmese homes have electricity - and the dam would have flooded an area the size of Singapore. Burmese voiced their opposition to the project and in a surprising development, the government responded not by jailing the dissenters, but by halting the project until at least 2015 when the next government will be formed.

China has backed Burma at the UN Security Council when the former junta was criticized over human rights abuses and is the single biggest investor in Burma: A port and pipeline project running from Kyaukpyu on Burma's west coast will see around \$30bn worth of gas piped from Burma's offshore Shwe field to China over the coming years, and will allow China to divert oil and gas imports coming from Africa and the Middle East away from the US Navy-dominated waters to the south.

Farewell, brother?

But Burma's government appears to want to loosen the 'pauk-phaw' (brotherly) relationship which exists between the two countries - one which has become more like Big Brother in recent years, according to U Tin Oo. "There is a concern that our resources are being given to China," he says, "and they have a lot of influence economically and otherwise".

However, despite what seems likely to be an increased Western presence in Burma, China's influence is likely to diminish only somewhat. Aung San Suu Kyi has acknowledged the need for Burma to maintain a good relationship with its giant neighbor, and such pragmatism is being echoed elsewhere among dissidents. "We cannot move our neighbors," says Ko Ko Gyi, referring to China.

However, while Burma's government has tried to re-set its relations with China and the West, long-running, off/on civil wars between the Tatmadaw (the name for the Burmese army) and a slew of ethnic minority militias remain unresolved although the government has come to apparent truces with some of the groups - such as the Karen National Union - in recent weeks. Fighting is still ongoing in Kachin state between the army and the Kachin Independence Army; around 50,000 people have been forced to flee their homes.

Western countries have put reconciliation between the government and the ethnic minorities on their to-do list of reforms that the government should undertake if sanctions are to be lifted. "Many ethnic nationalities are suffering, even though their lands have most of Burma's natural resources," says Tin Oo.

Ethnic minorities have long called for some form of federal system of government in Burma, but it remains doubtful that any military-backed government in Naypyidaw would consent to this. But those outside government believe that national reconciliation is needed if Burma is to make good on its pledges to make a transition to democracy. "We have to work on resolving these issues, as without peace between the government and the non-Burman people, Burma will not progress," concludes Tin Oo.

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