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## ANALYSIS

### BURMA'S DRAMATIC YEAR: HARBINGERS OF TRANSITION?

*Priscilla Clapp*

Political transition anywhere in the world is marked by dramatic, often painful events, both man-made and natural. After a year of almost unremitting drama in Burma, it is instructive to examine the net effect of these events on the country's political climate and whether they may, in fact, be early signs that transition is underway.

First came the two-month Saffron Revolution, triggered by a precipitous government decision in mid-August to remove subsidies from the price of fuel, adding significantly to the cost of daily life for urban populations already stretched to the end of their economic rope by years of 30-50 percent inflation. This move mobilized an unexpectedly well-organized protest with Buddhist monks and student groups in the lead. Although the government suppressed the demonstrations with force, jailing student and monk leaders, there is no question that both groups retain an extensive underground organization.

Second, after moving at a languid pace for several years, the regime suddenly began to accelerate its seven-step program for political transition to military-dominated parliamentary government. The National Convention to formulate the principles for a new constitution was called back into a final session in July 2007 some six months earlier than originally announced and brought to a speedy conclusion in August. National Convention participants were brought to Naypyitaw, the remote new capital, in early September to endorse the conclusions. A constitutional drafting committee was quickly formed in October and the constitution was completed by early 2008. In February, the government announced that a referendum would be held in May to approve the constitution and parliamentary elections would be held in 2010.

Third, the most powerful cyclone in Burma's living memory, Cyclone Nargis, hit the country without warning on May 2, flattening the Irrawaddy delta with a huge wall of water. The storm caught everyone unprepared and the government's refusal to receive the assistance of international emergency relief teams for nearly a month left a vacuum that was immediately filled by Burmese civilians. With assistance from international NGOs and UN agencies already in the country, Burmese citizens organized an impressive stream of relief into the outskirts of Rangoon and onto the delta. Once again the monks came forward as the central pillar of the citizen relief effort, providing a network and facilities for sheltering, feeding, and ministering to survivors and helping relief convoys move through government blockades.

The intervention of ASEAN foreign ministers and the UN Secretary General's visit to Burma in late May finally broke the logjam on international access to the delta and ASEAN joined forces with the UN to enlist the Burmese government in an international relief effort

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coordinated by a Tripartite (UN, ASEAN, Myanmar) Core Group. The damage assessment produced by the TCG in July suggested that a substantial international effort would be necessary for another six months to a year to assist recovery from the storm and put in place coping mechanisms to deal with future storms. Nevertheless, the government's hostile initial response left no doubt both inside and outside the country that it cared far more about its own welfare and survival than that of the people it governed.

Several interesting developments emerging in the course of these events suggest that we will continue to see further politically significant movement for at least the next two years. The military leadership's single-minded pursuit of its seven-step program, in spite of the country's turmoil, indicates that it has become preoccupied with how to secure its own future as it fulfills its promise to install "disciplined democracy." In fact, there are actually two transitions in governance underway in Burma: the much vaunted transition to a quasi-parliamentary government and a less visible generational transition in the military leadership itself. The older generation is retiring and a younger group is taking its place, raising the possibility that the last of the older generation, Generals Than Shwe and Maung Aye, are preparing to step back. While it's difficult to say exactly who will wind up on top, there is likely to be a period of uncertainty, if not instability, within the military leadership and we're sure to see new faces emerge eventually out of the shadows that shroud the regime today.

The generational transition in military leadership will be complicated by the transition to a new constitution, which appears to create additional centers of political power and give them legitimate competing interests with the military. Most significant is the USDA (Union Solidarity Development Association), the military regime's mass organization established to extend its control over civil society and civilian organizations, including the civil service. The USDA will form political parties to compete for parliamentary seats, it will manage the elections, and it will control appointments to senior parliamentary and government positions. At the same time, there will be a parallel uniformed military presence in the parliamentary structures, appointed by the army leadership and answering directly to it. The head of the military forces, and not the President, will be Commander in Chief, while the President is likely to come from the USDA. The constitution gives the Commander in Chief authority to take control of the government away from the President under certain circumstances— a sure formula for constitutional crisis. Competition for power and resources will become far more complex than it is today with only two generals holding all the power.

The ethnic nationalities are likely to become another competing center of power with specific roles in the national parliament, as well as state and territorial parliaments in their own designated areas. To the extent that the ethnic groups manage to coordinate and work together, they could eventually achieve greater control over their own resources than the constitution appears to grant, particularly in the relatively autonomous cease-fire areas. In any case, the national government's efforts to disarm the cease-fire groups and install uniformed military in local parliaments are not likely to go smoothly in all areas.

The constitution has been designed, of course, to minimize the influence of the country's democratic forces and they are likely to be discriminated against in the electoral process, not to mention in the new government itself. However, the move to parliamentary government will of necessity expand the space for political activity and debate, which will with time present democratic parties and groups with new opportunities. The monks and students will remain powerful supporting forces behind the scenes, particularly if economic conditions continue to deteriorate in the absence of economic reforms. With rising prices and commodity shortages worldwide, which may well be compounded in Burma by rice shortfalls in the coming year due to Nargis, the economy will remain the dry forest that could be easily ignited by an unexpected spark.

Furthermore, both the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis have energized Burmese civil society by expanding and consolidating popular disgust with the military regime because of its attack on monks and its hindrance of aid to cyclone victims. Nargis gave rise to many new civic organizations, demonstrating the power of civilians to take matters into their own hands. It also strengthened the bonds between overseas Burmese and groups inside the country, such as doctors. The continuing presence of international aid operations in the country will help preserve and spread the space for these organizations to operate.

When we put all of these trends together, it begins to look like the early stages of political transition. At the very least, we are likely to see a continuing series of events over the next two years as the regime implements the new constitution, as transition in military leadership takes place, as people continue organizing in many different quarters to expand self-help efforts, as political activity intensifies in connection with the 2010 elections, and as economic conditions remain ripe for hardship, widespread discontent, and public protest.