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EXPLORING ASIA:

POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Not Possible A Year Ago

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For more than 20 years I have traveled to Burma — now called Myanmar — to research its military politics and civil wars since independence in 1948. I never imagined I would debate democratic civilian control of the military with 50 senior military officers. But in July 2012 I did, in the government-sponsored workshop “Good Governance in Political Transition Countries” in Nay Pyi Taw. Later, in Rangoon, I discussed this topic with 25 recently released political prisoners.

A year ago these discussions were impossible. The prisoners of conscience were in jail, and the colonels had a monopoly over such lectures. Hundreds of similar previously unthinkable conversations now occur openly every week in post-junta urban Myanmar.

How did this happen?

“*The Previous Government*,” as the Burmese call it, was run by a few army generals who exercised de facto martial law from 1988–2011. Anything that happened outside (and often inside) one’s home constituted “politics” and, therefore, was a threat to national security.

Research opportunities during my studies from 1988–2009 were scarce and fraught with anxiety. A military intelligence agent observed me daily at the university; a senior colonel lectured me weekly about “true facts”; my dormitory warden locked us in around 7 p.m. nightly. I worried that what I read, asked and wrote might land someone in jail. I stayed as far off the military’s radar as possible.

Year after year, I visited friends in Myanmar, and each time they said, “Things here cannot possibly get any worse.” The next year, they reported that social, political and economic conditions were significantly worse. For 21 years, Burmese activists and academics predicted the inevitable end of one of the world’s most reviled regimes. Just one more well-targeted economic sanction, one more international prize for opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, one more round of street protests would do it.

Yet I sensed something wrong with these assumptions that the longest-running dictatorship in the last 50 years would collapse due to sanctions, isolation and UN General Assembly resolutions against it. My research in Burma suggested the military was far from demise. True, *tatmadaw* (Burmese for “armed forces”) rule was obviously weakening, and vibrant political, literary, artistic and civil societies weren’t crushed by political oppression. But the coercive relations dominating Burma had deep historical roots.

“*The New Government*,” as most Burmese call it, is not entirely new. No major shift has occurred in who rules: male Burman retired or active-duty military officers. However, direct rule by the military-as-an-institution ended in 2011, since the inauguration of President Thein Sein (a former general). The prerogatives of the military-as-a-privileged-institution have diminished. The post-junta constitutional government has established a non-military terrain of non-threatening, business-as-usual “politics” in both formal legal forums and informal decision-making processes.

Tatmadaw leaders have controlled these changes from a position of strength, not because of destabilizing popular movements or institution-threatening leadership factions. The interests of military officers, their families, and the military as an institution are protected by the new 2008 constitution and by senior positions of authority being dominated by (mostly) retired senior military.

However, in the first 25 months of President Thein Sein’s government, public political life is no longer subject to draconian “national security” mandates. Myanmar is early in this process; causes, implications and potential for reversal of these changes remain unclear.

Yet much that was not possible is possible now. Expansive but long-underestimated organizations in major cities’ domestic civil society have seized the political opening; Aung San Suu Kyi is now an elected member of the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House of Parliament). Local groups and democratic political parties have made previously unthinkable demands. The Burmese-language media report without censorship; cabinet ministers (mostly ex-military)



Aung San Suu Kyi, from Wikipedia Commons

respond sensibly to some criticisms; a degree of responsible governance now seems possible.

Myanmar’s political developments do not remotely approach “democracy,” yet with each passing week, previously unthinkable political actions, conversations and policies materialize. Much is still not possible: the president has not stopped the army from fighting in northern Shan and Kachin states (despite issuing two ceasefire orders); the economy remains dominated by wealthy cronies; and little political reform has trickled down to the everyday lives of ordinary Burmese.

It is, nonetheless, a historic moment of possibility — one long overdue.



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