



## Thinking outside the Box A New Approach to Burma

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Between engagement and isolation, Burma, now known as Myanmar, is in a state of decline with an abysmal record in political, economic and social spheres, having grave implications for the future of its people and for a country which was at one time the richest in Southeast Asia but is now, the poorest. A vibrant civil society is a must for restoration of democratic political development, but is anathema to the junta's self-perception of role in politics and society in Burma and as a consequence has been completely debilitated.

Widespread grievances demonstrated during the uprising against the military junta in August 2007 notwithstanding, the realities in the country go against the grain of hope for any political change in Burma in the near future. The fact that the junta alone possesses the means of violence and is ready to use it at the slightest pretext against the unarmed people is a powerful factor against any dissent in the immediate future. By all accounts, the army regime is entrenched in power now more than ever before.

Even the Cyclone Nargis that devastated the country, killing almost 80,000 people and making many more homeless in the Irrawaddy delta, has not been able to weaken the army's stranglehold on power. On the contrary, the politicization of humanitarian relief to the cyclone victims, combined with the West's imposition of further sanctions and insistence on democratic change, and the parallel refusal by the Burmese to budge meaningfully from their xenophobic nationalist position, has further consolidated the army's hold on power, and complicated the process of rapprochement between the regime and the outside world. In the hours of Burma's gravest disaster all parties to the ongoing conflict should

have encouraged dialogue and communication among opposing parties in the name of rehabilitating the victims and their families and rebuilding the country.

### I TSUNAMI IN ACEH: A COMPARISON

In Aceh, Indonesia, after the 2004 tsunami, one of the key catalysts for peace was that the insurgent forces committed to a ceasefire, a move that made the Indonesian military more willing to permit aid into the country. Additionally, after Aceh's natural disaster no one blamed the Indonesian military for its past failures. A similar magnanimous gesture to the Burmese junta from the West and an agreement to cooperate with the junta to provide relief and rehabilitation to the Burmese people could have softened the attitude of the junta toward outsiders and lessened its suspicion vis-à-vis Western aid workers. Such an action could have also exposed the junta's vulnerability and its credibility to deliver in the face of such disasters. That, in turn, would have exposed its claim to be the only viable force in the country to rule the country and deliver goods to the people. One of the most important contributory factors in the declining political role of the Indonesian military, it has to be remembered, was its inability to deal with the economic crisis of 1997-98, when for the first time after the Suharto government took power, the myth of the armed forces as an omnipotent force in the country was exposed. The Indonesian people came to realize that the armed forces too had feet of clay and that it could be challenged.

Granted, the objective conditions and the character of the Burmese Tatmadaw differ from its Indonesian counterpart because of the international exposure that the latter's socialization

included as well as its experience with an economy that is globally and regionally integrated. Still, this is an approach that could have been tried as a catalyst for change in Burma, rather than helping the status quo continue and destroying the possibility of any change in the politics of the country in the near future.

## II

### DIFFICULTIES OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Burma's transition to democracy will be especially difficult. Apart from the fact that the country has been at civil war for the past sixty years, there are two historical factors that will make the transition difficult. The first is what the Burmese historian Thant Myint-U calls the long history of failed state-building and the lack of a long-term vision of the nature of the future state. The traditional order collapsed entirely with the onset of the British Raj, which tried to transplant familiar institutions – a civil service, a judiciary, a professional police force, an army, and eventually an elected legislature – but these institutions were largely unwedded to local society, and the abrupt end of colonial rule meant that they did not long survive its withdrawal. Any

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institution requires time and nurturing to take root.

Today, the military machine is all there is, with only the shadow of other institutions remaining. Civil bureaucracy is completely dominated by the military and imbued with an authoritarian civic and political culture. So the problem in Burma is

not only getting the military out of the business of government; restoring democracy in Burma will require creating political institutions that can replace the existing military state as well as overhauling the existing bureaucracy and establishing a new one with values, norms, rules and an orientation that ensures civilian supremacy over the military.

The second factor that will complicate

democratic transition is more in the realm of ideas. The collapse of royal institutions led to the rapid loss of many earlier notions of kingship and the relationship between government and society based on centuries of court and monastic scholarship. Militant nationalism replaced tradition, reconciling at different periods with diverse visions of the future. In the absence of institutions and visions of a new Burma that includes concern for the ethnic groups in the country, any political change, even with a new civilian government, will be meaningless, for the army would still be lurking in the wings and waiting to take over if a political crisis emerges.

There are no easy solutions to the intractable problems of Burma that will create democracy overnight or even in several years. Neither twenty years of Western sanctions or constructive engagement by Burma's neighbours have worked. The regime has only hardened its attitude toward both the democratic movement and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. It is time to try another approach. Only a comprehensive path of institution building, social change and economic development can lift Burma from a history of dictatorship.

This decades-long process can begin by reviving Burma's connections with the outside world, bringing in new ideas, providing fresh air to a stale political environment and, in the process, changing long-set mentalities. Possibly, if Burma were less isolated and more economically integrated with the outside world and the government desired to reform the economy, rebuild state institutions and slowly open the public space for civil society, then perhaps the conditions for political change would emerge over the next decade or two. This may not be particularly acceptable to those like Aung San Suu Kyi and thousands of political activists, who have grown impatient with a system that is becoming unbearable politically and economically, and have sacrificed so much to see at least some results in their own lifetimes. However, given the objective reality in the country and the junta's dogged determination to stay in power defying both domestic opposition and international pressure through sanctions, bargaining for gradual and incremental change over a period of time, rather than gaining nothing at all, could be a realistic option.

### III THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

In the absence of any political movement in Burma, the world is calling on India and China to use their leverage to make the junta to see reason. However, neither country has so far shown any inclination to abandon its pragmatic strategic engagement with the regime for moral principles. The UN Secretary General's envoy to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, despite his best efforts to establish a reasonable relationship with all the key players in Burma and abroad, has also not brought back any good news. However, he must continue with his efforts at political reform and national reconciliation between the government, the democratic opposition under Aung San Suu Kyi, and the ethnic groups.

Gambari's diplomatic and mediation efforts need to be complemented by informal regional talks for maintaining the second channel of communication with the Burmese junta by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The organization now has an activist Secretary-General in the person of Surin Pitsuwan, who in the past was in favour of even abandoning the organization's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of a fellow member. Regional talks on Burma, based on the prospect of its reintegration into the region, should address the need for long-term stability, democratic reforms, and a transparent economic policy. Without joining the generals in their paranoia, the participants will need to reassure them that Burma's stability and territorial integrity are not threatened. Indonesia, the largest country in ASEAN is keen to lead the regional effort, and it could be effective because it carries weight in the region and in Burma. Indonesia is also particularly suited for this role because its recent transition to democracy accompanied by the gradual reduction of the military's political role and its experience in dealing with separatist conflict has obvious relevance for Burma.

In the absence of formal and informal institutions, progress toward political reform will require close cooperation with the army. The junta's so-called road map to democracy, though wholly inadequate, could be viewed as an initial offer for discussion. Yet, to be adequate, the roadmap needs to include the NLD and other political groups that the junta has thus far barred. It is here India, as the largest democracy in the world and

experienced in nation-building in a multicultural and multi-racial society, must use its influence with the junta to make their constitution as broad-based as possible and help in the process of drafting it. Indian Minister of State for Commerce, Jairam Ramesh's comment at an international pledging conference in Yangon on 25 May that India "salute(s) the people and the Government of Myanmar for their resilience and fortitude in facing [the] devastation" caused by Cyclone Nargis, will surely endear India in the eyes of the regime especially when it suspects the West's demand for entry to its aid workers as part of a plan to engineer the junta's downfall in the wake of the disaster. This could offer India some leverage in its back-room diplomacy to seek change in Burma. Change will require compromises, and will be slow at best.

The integration of Burma's economy with its neighbours' economies is also a necessary condition for economic interdependence and ending Burma's political isolation. The success of Burma's transition to democracy hinges to a large extent on viable economic development that can create a growing middle class, which can then seek greater reform and political change. This has already happened in the case of Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan and South Korea in the last decade. Growing economic interdependence has changed the pattern of economy in the Mekong region, comprising, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and this is something that Burma could conceivably benefit from. From 2002 to 2006, Vietnam registered an annual average economic growth rate of 7.8 percent, Cambodia 10 percent and Laos 6.5 percent. As these figures show, countries in the Mekong sub-region are deepening their economic interdependence with the help of economic and infrastructure development and at the same time fashioning

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new and better relations with other countries in the region as well as outside it.

To realize the goal of integrating Myanmar into the regional economy, assistance should be extended for human resource development and the construction of the Asian Highway by extending the north-east and east-west corridors from Bangkok to India via Myanmar. In the long run such measures will facilitate socioeconomic and political change in Myanmar. China, India and ASEAN must act in concert offering certain incentives to the junta in return for their readiness

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As a first step, Myanmar should be urged to free Aung San Suu Kyi immediately in return for lifting economic sanctions, followed by the beginning of political reconciliation based on a framework whereby the interests of the people and their democratic aspirations need to be matched and reconciled with the legitimate concerns of the armed forces. Lifting economic sanctions for a limited period could be tried to persuade the regime to give some matching concessions such as releasing all political prisoners. There is need for concessions from Suu Kyi's side as well. She can possibly do what Ramos Horta of Timor-Leste (East Timor) once suggested – dissociate herself from the NLD and emerge as a non-partisan leader, a mediator and a facilitator in the progress toward democracy – the Nelson Mandela of Myanmar. It is a difficult job but worth attempting to break the deadlock.

There is no guarantee as yet that such an option will succeed and that Burma will slowly move from authoritarianism to democracy even if the international community decides to do business with the junta and lift sanctions in order to induce it to relax its brutal grip over society. Still, it is an approach which is worth trying given the fact that sanctions and international pressure have not brought about the desired results. The West can take a major initiative in this process with India,

China and ASEAN acting as interlocutors.

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