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Is Reform in Burma Real?

By Philip Bowring

No one can doubt that Burma has moved forward over the past 18 months, and however skeptical one may reasonably be about the motives and goals of those behind the changes, there is still momentum towards reform.

By Aung Zaw

Despite moves toward reform, there are many vested interests in Burma that could derail the process — the army, the government bureaucracy, moneyed cronies, and so on. The one thing that is certain is that things remain uncertain.
The Certainty of Uncertainty

By Aung Zaw

AFTER 24 YEARS OF living in exile following the democracy uprising in 1988, I was finally able to visit Burma again in February this year when the government granted me a five-day journalist’s visa. During my brief stay, I met government officials, opposition leaders, activists, journalists and businessmen. I came away feeling that the reform process begun when President Thein Sein came into power last year has real momentum. However, there is also good reason to be skeptical.

In Rangoon, people now talk openly about the political situation, but there was also a deep current of unease, as if no one knows how long this will last. And while many people say they respect Thein Sein, cynicism about the government and corrupt cabinet ministers runs deep. I asked a restaurant owner in Rangoon what she thought of Thein Sein, bureaucracy, the moneyed cronies, the cabinet. “It’s all just for show.”

At one point, I passed by Rangoon University, where I had been a student in 1988. My heart sank to see the state it was in. The dormitories were empty and tall bushes have grown up around the buildings. Its decrepitude was a sad legacy of military rule — the former ruling generals had systematically destroyed Burma’s proud tradition of higher learning because they feared student unrest. This, too, will take a long time to repair.

Another product of military rule was the rise of the junta’s rich cronies. Businesspeople I spoke to said that these multi-millionaires, who thrived under the junta’s rich cronies, are also wondering how fast and how far the reforms can go.

I also met some senior officials from the ministry of information and the president’s office. They are keen to finally be able to engage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the West. But they are also not settled. They worry about Suu Kyi and whether her popularity will eventually derail the government.

I met with a number of journalists and they are far from ready to trust the government — with good reason. They said censorship would likely remain in some form because the government, despite now appearing more press-friendly, is not ready for a free media. Of particular worry is a new press law being drafted without input from key editors. Ludu Sein Win, one of Burma’s most respected senior journalists, was cautious and critical — of Thein Sein but also opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. He warned that it is never a good idea to put too much faith in one person — whether that person is the current president or “the lady,” as Suu Kyi is sometimes known. Burma’s military leaders, he said, remain cunning and manipulative. They will not easily yield power.

Some of the activists I met had spent many years in prison and are justifiably relieved finally to be free, and they want to stay that way. The leader of the so-called 88 Generation, Ko Ko Gyi, was a student activist in 1988; he is now 50 and was released from jail in January. He and others from that time have toured the country and been warmly received and honored for the sacrifice they have made. Ko Ko Gyi spent nearly two decades in prison, and Min Ko Naing, perhaps the best known of the 88 student leaders, was jailed for 16 years after the uprising was crushed; he was rearrested in 2007 and only freed this year. They say much remains to be done, but they want to stay out of jail and prepare for the next national elections in 2015. They are also wary of the government and its long record of broken promises. Several hundred political prisoners, including Buddhist monks, are still in Burma’s gulag, and the government has yet to allow the International Committee for the Red Cross to visit these prisons.

In Naypyidaw, the purpose-built capital north of Rangoon, I also met some senior officials from the ministry of information and the president’s office. Over dinner, I found them confident and willing to talk about the country’s relationship with China and the United States. They are keen to finally be able to engage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the West. But they are also not settled. They worry about Suu Kyi and whether her popularity will eventually derail the government.

I also met Suu Kyi and she explained that the political situation is changing every day, and that that was reason enough for her National League for Democracy to reverse the boycott stance it took during the 2010 elections.

On my last day in the country I followed one of her campaign sorties as she toured the impoverished Irrawaddy Delta township where she is running for a seat in parliament. There is no doubt that for many Burmese, Suu Kyi is the greatest hope for change. Everywhere her supporters came out in force to greet her.

Suu Kyi, in a recent interview, told The Nation newspaper in Bangkok, “I do not know whether the army is behind the reform. We do not know where the army stands in regard to the reforms, and I’ve always said that until we know that the army is solidly behind the reform movement, we cannot say the process is irreversible.”

One could say that about the government bureaucracy, the moneyed cronies, the cabinet. The 2008 constitution is a particular problem in this regard. It bars the prosecution of former regime personnel for past crimes, guarantees the army 25 percent of the seats in the legislature and can only be amended with a 75 percent majority vote in parliament. Moreover, hard-line elements in the ruling pro-military Union Solidarity Development Party continue to resist reform.

Nevertheless, credit must be given to Thein Sein. Like most of the men who have ruled my country since World War II, he spent almost his entire adult life as an army officer. In 2010, he took off his uniform and led the ruling party to victory in an election denounced by most international observers as a sham. As the head of the first ostensibly civilian government in Burma since 1962, he said he would lead the country to democracy.

Since taking office, his government has freed hundreds of political prisoners, initiated discussions about legalizing trade unions, and loosened censorship. It has reached out to Suu Kyi, armed ethnic groups and surprised many people by suspending the China-funded Myitsone dam project, which was seen as a sign that it does not want Burma to remain an economic satellite of China.

Where will it lead? From the government down to the street, the one thing that is certain is that things remain uncertain.

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