Going Its Own Way: Regime Change, Myanmar-Style
By Nicholas Farrelly

Myanmar’s ongoing democratic transformation has been driven by a dizzying number of factors: internal forces in the military, democratic activism, domestic struggle and both soft pressure and hard sanctions from countries abroad. There is no one template for change, writes Nicholas Farrelly, and Myanmar’s unique and fragile transition needs continued support.

MAKING SENSE OF MYANMAR’S transformation from an entrenched military dictatorship to nascent democratic success story is not straightforward. Questions about the motivation and ambition of the country’s top leaders, especially President Thein Sein, have dogged analysts since a clearly rigged general election in November 2010 was quickly followed by the release from house arrest of pro-democracy heroine Aung San Suu Kyi and a series of other reforms. In the months after these historic events, Myanmar’s leaders went about the business of systematically unraveling some of the legacies of military rule. Political prisoners were released, first in a trickle and then a flood. Restrictions on the media that put Myanmar’s rulers in the worst class of despots were incrementally lifted. Civil wars that had simmered in border areas for decades were taken in new directions by renewed government negotiations.

Such rapid change in a country that had been under the heel of the military since 1962 took many analysts by surprise. The idea that military dictators can simply change their old ways is so unusual that it tends not to be given much credence. The fact that most military dictatorships survive until a major shock — usually a violent upheaval boots them from office — ensures there is widespread reluctance to bet on anything else.

THE STORM AND DISCONTENT
In Myanmar’s case there was indeed a shock, but its real impact was not generally understood at the time. In September 2007, rumblings in towns across Myanmar coalesced into a popular pro-

test movement known as the “Saffron revolution.” Tough-minded Buddhist monks calling for a better economic deal helped galvanize a movement that brought tens of thousands of brave protesters onto the streets. For weeks the momentum behind these demonstrations grew, reminding observers of the rapid onslaught of protest that accompanied the last such outpouring, the ill-fated 1988 student-led democracy uprising that was put down with brutal force, killing thousands.

In October 2007, the crackdown began. It was a chaotic affair, with large numbers of dissidents arrested and many others forced to find sanctuary across the border in Thailand. The world looked on with horror as yet another opportunity for Myanmar to turn a corner was lost. The government once again turned the screws on the people and left little room for democratic voices to be heard. Aung San Suu Kyi was kept out of sight under continued detention in her home. At the same time, the government was working quietly, and with much critical derision, towards its goal of a constitutional transition. A referendum was scheduled for May 2008.

Then a storm literally rolled over the horizon. Cyclone Nargis struck on May 2, 2008, battering Myanmar’s shoreline with such ferocity that it left the people of the Irrawaddy Delta with nowhere to hide. The catastrophe saw an estimated 140,000 lives lost, and countless villages, roads and bridges destroyed.

The government was shell-shocked. For days it sought to delay the arrival of international assistance. Access to the delta region, always tricky in the rainy season, was severely restricted by government fiat. Some members of the international community thought the outrageous blocking of international aid deserved a forcible response under the untested rubric of “responsibility to protect.” Tense negotiations followed, but ultimately humanitarian assistance began to flow. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was crucial to this process. Once the international operation had swung into action the authorities sought to claim some of the credit. Their people, disbeliefing and traumatized, were mostly just content to see somebody lend a helping hand.

At the time, the internal regime dynamics were impossible to pin down. Why did Senior General Than Shwe and his immediate subordinates in the ruling State Peace and Development Council so fear international assistance? We can only conjecture that they worried that a humanitarian foothold in the country would quickly experience “mission creep,” leading to pressure on the junta. Regime change, they must have figured, had long been on the international agenda for Myanmar. They tried to play it safe. But they still learned from what happened next. In the months of high-profile international assistance they forged stronger links with their fellow ASEAN members and also became more familiar with a wide array of international bodies, including the Western democracies that had for so long been considered enemies.

Senior decision-makers may also have seen firsthand the frailty of their own system and its lack of capacity to protect and support their people. In a system where nationalism had long justified the dominance of the military elite it must have been chastening to discover that the robust rhetoric failed to defend the nation in its time of need.

In the period after the cyclone, those generals who were most committed to reforming the country’s political institutions began working on a foundation for the changes to come. They replaced their khaki slacks with longyi, the traditional male sarong worn by civilians, and harnessed their prospects to the military-dominated...
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but nominally civilian Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). The party evolved from an old mass membership organization that existed purely to support military rule into a vehicle that could carve out a new trajectory for the country. There was never any doubt that its leaders would hold power after the November 2010 election — the rules were written in its favor — the real question was: what would they do next?

AFTER THE STORM
The answer continues to surprise the world. Aung San Suu Kyi was followed by more extensive tours of Europe, for instance, Susanne Prager-Nyein (2013), “Aung San Suu Kyi between Biographical Myth and Hard Realities”, Journal of Contemporary Asia, forthcoming.

7 There is an increasing effort to understand the realities rather than simply the mythologies that surround Aung San Suu Kyi. See, for instance, Susanne Prager-Nyein (2013), “Aung San Suu Kyi between Biographical Myth and Hard Realities”, Journal of Contemporary Asia, forthcoming.


The overall goal for Myanmar’s international advocates has been to engineer the rightful assumption of power by the country’s democrats. They have yet to fully succeed, but the indications in mid-2013 are so promising, and the progress over the past five years so breathtaking, that astonishment now infuses the standard analytical perspectives. Images of Aung San Suu Kyi are now plastered the length and breadth of the country, with NLD paraphernalia a marketplace staple.8

WHO MADE THIS HAPPEN?
It is human nature that many people claim credit for the reforms. Pro-sanctions hawks, “apologetic” engagement advocates, foreign governments, domestic forces, ethnic militias, Arab Spring zealots: everyone has their favorite claim to the success. It seems fair to apportion some of the credit to all of these players, and more. Inevitably, the battle to claim credit for Myanmar’s transformation will continue for years to come. There is a general reluctance to accept that ideologically polarized positions could have worked together so effectively. More specifically, with the prevailing winner-takes-all mentality, there is little tolerance of the possibility that the entire system in Myanmar has been nudged, prodded and goaded from a multitude of directions in unpredictable and non-replicable ways.

This is where future opportunities to draw grand conclusions from Myanmar’s experience will need to be carefully judged. Clearly there are plenty of relevant aspects to this story that deserve full analytical treatments, and there is much that should be carefully studied and probed. The conclusions of such studies will not, however, result in any simple playbook for engaging dictatorial regimes. The factors that led Myanmar into its current phase of increased openness are varied and in many ways unique.

Put simply, they do not conform to the expectations of regime change that have been popularized over the course of a post-9/11 decade. Nor do they suggest that allowing rogue governments to continue on their destructive paths is necessarily the way to go.

What emerges instead is a case where an unwieldy and haphazard process, fuelled by dissonant and often-distrustful political players, operating at every level from modest villages and refugee camps up to the highest global offices, came together, with help from history, and a dose of hubris, to achieve positive outcomes where any single policy approach would have failed. It was this medley of different engagements with the old Myanmar military regime, some warm and considerate, others harsh and critical, that gave the entire country a chance to find a new arrangement for its political life.

THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA
International actors will need to recognize that after so many decades when entrenched military rule appeared rock solid, Myanmar’s current transformation cannot be considered permanent. It will be many years before the prospect of a coup, renewed ethnic conflict, further sectarian battles, or all three, can be completely removed from the equation. In the meantime, Myanmar’s democrats will need to be patient, and its military leaders will require courage and vision to surrender their remaining authority to an emerging civilian government.

Managing this process is ultimately the job of the people of Myanmar, but there will be plenty of opportunities for the international community to offer support.

First, the world should not be shocked when things do not go according to plan. Myanmar will experience turbulence as it comes to grips with the opportunities ahead. The best bet is that a disproportionate amount of the hardship, and future violence, will occur in ethnic minority regions. Humanitarian and other assistance will remain essential.

Anti-Muslim violence in 2012 and 2013 suggests that there are new social fault-lines that could disrupt even the best-conceived plans. Such violence taps into long-festering resentments and prejudices, including the idea that Myanmar is an innately Buddhist society that must repel the invasion of alien creeds and peoples. Some outspoken monks have fronted the widespread “969” movement, which takes its name from numerology supposedly espousing pure Buddhism, against what they consider Muslim encroachment. Fuelled by 969 rhetoric, towns across Myanmar have witnessed Buddhist mobs violently purging Muslim neighborhoods. In the westernmost Rakhine State, such anti-Muslim campaigns have seen around 100,000 people displaced, with many fleeing into neighboring Bangladesh or onto boats bound for Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia or Australia. Reports that the Rakhine State government is seeking to
implement a “two-child policy” for Muslim families has been taken as a further sign of official feeling. While there are strong pronouncements of concern, and regular commitments of humanitarian aid, the international community still isn’t quite sure how best to respond.

Second, Myanmar’s neighbors, especially India, China, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia will have a hefty influence on the country’s future success. All of these nations were enmeshed, to one extent or another, with the old military dictatorship. They will now need to develop new protocols for the rapidly changing political and economic realities. Their positive involvement has been warmly welcomed, but direct meddling, or any perception of fomenting disruptive influences, will lead to unpredictable problems. The chance of a more free, more prosperous and more peaceful Myanmar should surely be sufficient compensation for any loss of earlier influence any of these countries had with the old junta.

In this context, China has perhaps the most to lose. Its tight relations with the former military government quickly soured under Thein Sein’s regime, and the security and economic nexus that reinforced Sino-Myanmar interactions for a generation is starting to unwind. It is far too early to expect that there will not be a reconsolidation of relations, but right now the Chinese have to work harder than ever to maintain their residual influence. Some assert that the Chinese lost favor with nationalist elements in the Myanmar armed forces that are looking to hedge their bets with stronger links to Western militaries. The Chinese, for their part, remain active players along the mountainous border the countries share. Their support for ethnic armed groups, most notably the Wa, has not gone unremarked in Naypyidaw or in Washington. China’s future engagement with Myanmar may not prove a benign prospect.

Third, at some stage the realization that Aung San Suu Kyi alone cannot save the country from itself will need to be publicly recognized in foreign capitals. Aung San Suu Kyi herself has been forced to take awkward positions now that she is facing the reality of political life. She is now challenged by former supporters who query her rapprochement with the former military leadership and others who say she has not done enough to stop the anti-Muslim violence.

Efforts to bolster the NLD are crucial, but the need to work closely with former military officers, and their allies still in uniform, is arguably a far more immediate concern. The undoing of recent reforms is much more likely to come from within the army than from anywhere else. Until the chance of a coup is removed from the calculus of political risk, this probably requires more attention than it has tended to receive.

With these suggestions and observations in mind, the world can move on in its productive engagement with Myanmar mindful that there are no simple lessons to be drawn. Myanmar will continue to infuriate those who want to impose a template for planning political futures. But the country gives us hope that even implacable dictatorships may retain within themselves the seeds of a peaceful transformation.

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