

No ideal democracy for Burma

Written by Jacqueline Menager

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JACQUELINE MENAGER, MAY 6 2011

Burmese history shows us a series of complex transformations. The government has changed its name and approach multiple times, from socialism to economic liberalisation, from isolation to engagement, and most recently from outright political suppression to something that they hope is democratic in the eyes of the world. It is understandable to search for commonalities through each of these transitions, or to judge one based on the other; however, it is crucial to maintain a line between contextualisation and unsupported pessimism. The study of Burma has tended to be a field without much optimism, for legitimate reasons, but this has resulted in unfortunate judgments including those surrounding sanctions and engagement. This is out of keeping with the fairly well established scholarly pursuit of objectivity. Here I look at the recent establishment of parliaments, following the passing of a new constitution in 2008 and elections that were held late last year. While these transitional events have been conducted under dubious conditions, they mark a change in the approach taken by the country's military rulers.

The military government of Burma has undergone several transformations since it took power with a coup d'état led by General Ne Win in 1962. Ne Win implemented the "Burmese Way to Socialism", effectively insulating the country from external influence and condemning the population to poverty. Socialism was abandoned following significant protests in 1988. These led to a greater economic liberalization. Following this transformation, the country underwent almost two decades of slowly improving political and economic conditions. This period came to a sudden halt in 2004, when current military strongman Than Shwe effectively eradicated the progressive faction of his government. In 2007 the country saw another wave of popular protest, this time led by the country's monks, dubbed the Saffron Revolution. In the years since the 2007 protests, the government has attempted to execute another transition.

The government has adopted a "Roadmap to Discipline Flourishing Democracy". The official trajectory is: reassemble the National Convention adjourned since 1996; implement necessary foundations for establishing democratic system; draft a constitution based on principles decided at National Convention; hold a national referendum endorsing constitution; hold elections; build a "modern, developed and democratic nation". The elections last year marked the achievement of the sixth step and now, the new parliaments are implementing the seventh and, perhaps vaguest, final step.

This task is being undertaken by 882 members of the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party and 272 members of other parties who won seats in the 2010 elections. While it is difficult to gather detailed information about the parliamentary sittings, it has been reported that questions regarding by-elections, pensions, transportation, rice trading and telecommunications have been raised. Another indication of the parliaments' efforts at legitimate proceedings regards the provision for by-elections. The 2008 Constitution set out the directive that no government members can be part of the parliament. Accordingly, President Thein Sein has announced by-elections, to replace the almost 70 seats filled by government members, are scheduled to take place in October or November this year.

Of course, the parliament is not a model democracy. For now, some Burmese take heart from their "discipline flourishing democracy".

Indeed, many argue that concepts of democracy are both incompatible with Burmese society and disproportionately favoured by the west. Burmese-American academic Michael Aung-Thwin disparagingly labeled the phenomenon of Western preoccupation with democracy as the solution to all political problems and the proselytising the developing

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world as “parochial universalism, democracy jihad”. Democratic institutions are reputed to be a hallmark of the West, a result of the individual material self-interest prevailing in those societies. Burma, and other non-western societies, do not necessarily share these social and political values and the assumption that they should is problematic.

For now, the parliamentary structure relies on military tolerance; in time it will likely become more resilient. As a new generation of leaders and democracy is gradually taking hold of Burma, international commentary needs to enter a new period of analysis, shedding its overly pessimistic stance about Burma’s political prospects.

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Jacqueline Menager is a PhD candidate in the College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.