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## Assessing Burma's reform program

(15:04 AEDT, 24 January 2012)

*Nine months after president Thein Sein took office on 30 March 2011, it was possible to look back and make an assessment of his unexpected reform program and its chances of success. Was he, as some claimed, 'Myanmar's Gorbachev'? Inevitably, there was a wide range of opinion expressed, but most observers agreed that his relationship with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was critical to achieve his aims, whatever they were.*

Burma's hybrid civilian–military government is not yet one year old but already it has been the subject of countless blogs, op-eds and academic articles. These works have covered the full spectrum of political opinion, from enthusiastic plaudits to anti-regime diatribes. In one way or another, however, they have all tried to answer the questions: is President Thein Sein a genuine reformer and, if so, what does this mean for Burma?

Most commentators have highlighted the President's constructive relationship with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who, with other members of her party, will contest by-elections for the national parliament in April. There have also been promising negotiations with ethnic Karen and Shan insurgents, the release of hundreds of political prisoners, the lifting of restrictions on the press and internet access and other encouraging signs of political, economic and social reform.

More pessimistic observers have noted the promilitary bias of the 2008 constitution, the conflict with Kachin insurgents, continuing human rights abuses, the government's failure to release all dissidents from prison and the lack of substantive progress on many of the promised reforms. They distrust Thein Sein's motives and question Aung San Suu Kyi's judgement in joining the formal political process.<sup>1</sup>

There are also differences of view over the blossoming of relations between Naypyidaw and other governments—notably, the Obama administration. Most analysts have welcomed the increased diplomatic contacts—albeit accompanied by a degree of cynicism over the number of politicians making the pilgrimage to Aung San Suu Kyi's house. A few diehard opponents of the regime, however, have seen the concessions and assistance offered to Burma as dangerously premature.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the more open atmosphere, it is still difficult to know precisely what is happening in Burma and why, so these differences of view are to be expected. Also, so momentous was last year's paradigm shift that it is taking some veteran Burma-watchers a while to absorb.<sup>3</sup> Now that Thein Sein has been in office for nine months, however, it is possible to take stock and see last year's dramatic developments in a broader perspective.

Within self-imposed limits, the reform process appears to be real. Close observers with direct access to key players, including Thein Sein himself, are convinced the President is genuine in his wish to introduce a wide range of new and more enlightened policies and to bring greater peace and prosperity to Burma. Significantly, this view is shared by Aung San Suu Kyi, who perhaps more than anyone else has reason to be cautious about accepting the government's statements at face value.

The changes seen in Burma during 2011 are largely the result of internal developments—notably, Senior General Than Shwe's retirement, the advent of the Thein Sein Government and Aung San Suu Kyi's willingness to work with the new President. Despite the rather unseemly scramble by

1 Bertil Lintner, 'The Limits of Reform in Myanmar', *Asia Times*, [Hong Kong], 18 January 2012, [www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/NA18Ae03.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NA18Ae03.html) [page discontinued].

2 'Ros-Lehtinen Urges Administration to Stop Talks with the Burmese Regime: Says "Any Concession to Dictatorship Would be Grossly Premature"', US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Washington, DC, 13 January 2012, [foreignaffairs.house.gov/press\\_display.asp?id=2161](http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press_display.asp?id=2161) [page discontinued].

3 Andrew Selth, 'Thein Sein as Myanmar's Gorbachev', *Asia Times*, [Hong Kong], 19 October 2011, [www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/MJ19Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/MJ19Ae01.html) [page discontinued].

some foreign governments, activist groups and individuals to claim credit for aspects of the reform program, forces outside Burma have contributed only marginally to this outcome.<sup>4</sup>

The task facing Thein Sein is daunting. After more than 50 years of brutal, inept and ideologically distorted military rule, there is hardly a single sector of Burma's government, economy and civil society that is not begging for reform and desperate for financial, technical and other kinds of assistance. Some steps can be taken quickly and relatively painlessly, but the depth and complexity of the challenges faced by Burma are such that fundamental reform will take considerable time, effort and resources.

The most intractable problem confronting Thein Sein is the gulf between Naypyidaw and the country's ethnic minorities. Generations of war, human rights abuses, economic exploitation and broken promises have left the minorities deeply distrustful of the Burman-dominated central government. For their part, the government and armed forces remain determined not to compromise—as they see it—Burma's unity, stability and independence. Some progress has been made but a durable solution to this problem seems a distant prospect.<sup>5</sup>

Another important question is whether Naypyidaw can manage popular expectations. After decades of hardship and disappointment, few Burmese are taking anything for granted, but according to recent visitors to Burma the population is increasingly hopeful of real reforms and an improvement in their standard of living.<sup>6</sup> Having Aung San Suu Kyi on side should help Thein Sein keep these hopes within realistic limits but already there have been demands for faster and more far-reaching changes.

Given Burma's recent history and current problems, Naypyidaw's critics will be able to point to issues of concern for some time yet. In parts of the country, military operations are continuing. Officials used to wielding unbridled authority will not change their behaviour overnight. Corruption, discrimination and the abuse of power have become deeply

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4 David I. Steinberg, 'Myanmar: On Claiming Success', *The Irrawaddy*, 18 January 2012, [www.irrawaddy.org/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=22875](http://www.irrawaddy.org/opinion_story.php?art_id=22875) [page discontinued] [now at [www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=22875](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=22875)].

5 *Myanmar: A New Peace Initiative*, Asia Report No.214 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 30 November 2011), [www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-new-peace-initiative](http://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-new-peace-initiative).

6 Graham Reilly, 'The West Must be Patient as Burma Changes', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 January 2012, [www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/the-west-must-be-patient-as-burma-changes-20120120-1q8yv.html](http://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/the-west-must-be-patient-as-burma-changes-20120120-1q8yv.html).

embedded in Burmese society. And in some ways Naypyidaw is being held to a standard higher than that applied to other regional governments. Even if he had a firmer power base and greater resources, Thein Sein would not be able to satisfy everyone.

The reform program has considerable momentum and even if it falters it will be difficult to turn the clock back to 2010. But the President needs to balance competing political pressures while taking account of Burma's limited ability to implement and absorb rapid change. His aim, in the short term at least, seems to be something along Chinese lines—namely, a prosperous and independent country with a measure of individual freedom, exercised within the framework of a restrictive constitution.<sup>7</sup>

For her part, Aung San Suu Kyi is facing the challenge posed to all popular leaders, of making the transition from political icon to effective politician. For the time being, she seems prepared to work with Thein Sein in achieving national reconciliation and incremental reform. This is a pragmatic strategy, but it carries risks. It has already upset some of her supporters. It will also be difficult to sustain. For there will come a time when pressure will build for Burma's 'disciplined democracy' to give way to a genuinely representative system of government. That may prove the real test of the President's reform program.

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7 Lally Weymouth, 'Burma President Thein Sein: Country is on "Right Track to Democracy"', *The Washington Post*, 19 January 2012, [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/burma-president-thein-sein-country-is-on-right-track-to-democracy/2012/01/19/gIQANeM5BQ\\_story.html?wprss=rss\\_economy](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/burma-president-thein-sein-country-is-on-right-track-to-democracy/2012/01/19/gIQANeM5BQ_story.html?wprss=rss_economy).

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,  
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian  
National University, Canberra, Australia.