

Burma: Eyes on the prize

(10:14 AEDT, 18 December 2012)

When Myanmar's president Thein Sein was awarded a number of major prizes and stories began to appear suggesting he may even be nominated for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize, many activists and human rights campaigners were outraged. Yet, judged against the historical record and Thein Sein's achievements, these honours did not seem completely out of place.

Last Friday, *Foreign Policy* magazine named Burma's President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as the two top global thinkers for 2012.¹ On the same day, Thein Sein was named Asian of the Year by the Singapore-based *Straits Times*.²

These days, few people are surprised when Aung San Suu Kyi receives such accolades, but this level of public recognition for Thein Sein has prompted a range of comment, both about the former general and about the current status of Burma's 'disciplined democracy'.

Before the inauguration of its new parliament in March 2011, and the launch of Thein Sein's ambitious reform program, Burma's government was condemned as a brutal military dictatorship, guilty of appalling

1 'The FP Top 100 Global Thinkers', *Foreign Policy*, 26 November 2012, www.foreignpolicy.com/2012globalthinkers.

2 'Multimedia: 90 Seconds with Thein Sein', *The Straits Times*, [Singapore], 14 December 2012, www.straitstimes.com/through-the-lens/story/90-seconds-thein-sein [page discontinued].

human rights abuses and nefarious dealings with pariah states like North Korea. The only prize it ever won was to be labelled one of the world's most repressive and corrupt regimes.

For her steadfast and nonviolent opposition to this regime, Aung San Suu Kyi was given the Nobel Peace Prize, the US Congressional Gold Medal of Honour, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and numerous other prestigious awards.³

Yet Aung San Suu Kyi is now an elected member of Burma's new parliament and its government is winning warm (albeit still guarded) praise from the international community. President Thein Sein is playing host to a stream of world leaders, most recently Barack Obama. He in turn has been invited to make state visits to numerous countries, including the US and the UK, which were once the strongest opponents of Burma's military regime.

In addition to those announced last week, Thein Sein has been considered for several other honours and awards. For example, he is soon to be presented with the In Pursuit of Peace Award by the International Crisis Group (ICG). He has been tipped to be *TIME* magazine's Person of the Year (along with Aung San Suu Kyi). And, in what can only be described as a supreme irony, it appears he was a nominee for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize.⁴

The mere suggestion of such high-level recognition for the President has provoked protests from human rights campaigners and other activists, who point to Burma's continuing harsh treatment of political prisoners, Muslim Rohingyas, members of the ethnic minorities and civil protesters. One British MP recently queried whether, during Thein Sein's visit to the UK, the President could be arrested and charged with war crimes.⁵

3 Mary Hathaway, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Picks up Congressional Gold Medal', *ABC News*, 19 September 2012, abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/09/aung-san-suu-kyi-picks-up-congressional-gold-medal/.

4 'Nobel Peace Prize 2012: PRIO Director's Speculations', *PRIO* (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2012), www.prio.no/About/PeacePrize/PRIO-Directors-Speculations-2012/.

5 'Thein Sein Prosecution Raised in UK Parliament', *Burma Campaign UK*, 7 December 2012, www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/news-stories/thein-sein-prosecution-raised-in-uk-parliament/142.

Discussions of honours and awards tend to generate more heat than light. To put the current public debate into perspective, it is worth looking briefly at the nature of these awards, why they are given and, in particular, who has received them in the past.

The ICG has always been forward leaning in its assessments of developments in Burma. While not blind to the former regime's record of abuses and the current government's shortcomings, the ICG has consistently based its policy recommendations on the principle of positive reinforcement. While this has attracted some strong criticism, granting an award to Thein Sein for his 'visionary leadership' is consistent with this broad approach.⁶

Like other media outlets, *TIME's* interest is in people who have been particularly newsworthy over the past 12 months. The magazine's editors claim to take into account the views of their readers, but they do not apply any test for high ideals, observance of democratic values or contributions to world peace.⁷ Past Man (now Person) of the Year covers have featured Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Chiang Kai-shek, Yuri Andropov, Ayatollah Khomeini and Vladimir Putin.

For its part, the Nobel Peace Prize is no stranger to controversy.⁸ While many of the Nobel Committee's decisions have been popular and widely respected—as was the case when Aung San Suu Kyi received the award in 1991—others have been greeted with much less enthusiasm. Past recipients have included several leaders of authoritarian governments, two former terrorists and at least one statesman accused of crimes against humanity.⁹

One of the notable characteristics of the Nobel Peace Prize, however, has been its recognition of world leaders and other public figures who have been prepared to take political risks and embrace bold change, despite their personal histories or official positions. Thus, the committee has

6 'In Pursuit of Peace Award Dinner 2013', International Crisis Group, New York, 21 April 2013, www.crisisgroup.org/en/support/event-calendar/annual-award-dinner-2013.aspx [page discontinued].

7 Hannah Beech, 'Who Should Be *TIME's* Person of the Year 2012?', *TIME*, 26 November 2012, www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2128881_2128882_2129196,00.html [page discontinued] [now at content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2128881_2128882_2129196,00.html].

8 Jamie Frater, 'Top 10 Controversial Nobel Peace Prize Winners', *Listverse*, 17 October 2007 [Updated 27 July 2014], listverse.com/2007/10/17/top-10-controversial-nobel-peace-prize-winners/.

9 Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London: Verso, 2002).

felt able to recognise characters like Menachem Begin, F.W. De Klerk and Yasser Arafat—none of whom enjoyed a reputation as a conciliator or peacemaker.¹⁰

At times, dramatically changing the political climate and offering hope for real improvements in people's lives seem to have been sufficient grounds for the Nobel Committee to make its choice. Barack Obama was awarded the 2009 Peace Prize less than a year after taking office, more on the basis of his lofty aspirations and more idealistic approach to world affairs than as the result of any specific achievements.¹¹

There is no denying that Burma still faces difficult problems and that, measured against widely accepted international standards, its reform program has a long way to go. This would argue for caution in handing out bouquets to the current government or any of its representatives.¹² Yet, given the precedents, the choice of Thein Sein for international recognition—even a prestigious award—does not seem as surprising, or out of place, as it might at first appear.

10 'All Nobel Peace Prizes', The Nobel Prize, www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/.

11 'The Nobel Peace Prize for 2009: Barack H. Obama', The Nobel Prize, Oslo, 9 October 2009, www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html.

12 Benedict Rogers, 'Thein Sein and the Nobel Peace Prize', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 2012, www.dvb.no/analysis/thein-sein-and-the-nobel-peace-prize/24204 [page discontinued].

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.