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Burma's fractious polity: The price of democracy?

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While understandable in certain contexts, the use of short descriptive titles for large, diverse and changing groups of people in Myanmar sometimes led to inaccurate or misleading descriptions of internal developments. There was a need for the careful use of language and, as far as possible within the constraints of various reporting mediums, clear recognition of the complexity and dynamism of the country's political scene.

It has often been said that one of the greatest challenges faced by academics, journalists and others who write about international affairs is to describe complex and unfamiliar issues succinctly, and in ways that can be understood by lay readers, while remaining accurate and objective. A recent visit to Burma has brought home the truth of this observation.

It has long been the case that, in speaking about developments in Burma, observers have referred to various institutions and political groupings by using short descriptive titles. Thus, we have read about 'the government', 'the armed forces', 'the opposition', 'the monks' and so on. This is an easy and economical way of referring to large bodies of people who appear to have common backgrounds or share certain characteristics.

There is a real danger, however, that in using such shorthand terms, observers will paint a picture that is inaccurate or misleading. For each of these brief descriptors disguises large, diverse and constantly changing bodies of people with widely differing views. While their members may

identify publicly with specific organisations, they are rarely a homogeneous mass, but more a loose collection of groups clustered around particular policies or personalities.

For example, since forming the majority in Burma's national parliament in 2011, the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) has revealed a range of attitudes towards President Thein Sein's ambitious reform program and the role of elected MPs. Even the 25 per cent of parliament made up of serving military officers has demonstrated a surprising degree of flexibility.¹ It cannot be taken for granted that these officers will always vote as a bloc in favour of the government.

Indeed, Burma's large armed forces appear to hold views of the government's reforms that range from unconditional support to total rejection. Given the dearth of reliable information, it is not possible to be certain, but most seem to lie somewhere between these two extremes, with members supporting some aspects of Burma's democratisation process, while opposing others.² The point is that there is no uniform 'military' view.

The opposition movement is even more diverse, with myriad parties and organisations, each following its own path, and often owing their allegiance to powerful patrons. The NLD, for example, has always been riven by factional disputes, some of which continue to test its cohesion and unity.³ There are also tensions between the NLD and other groups, including the 88 Generation and some ethnic-based parties.

For its part, the Buddhist clergy—usually described simply as 'the monks'—is also a very mixed bag. During the 2007 'Saffron Revolution', for example, few commentators pointed out that Burma's 400,000 or so monks represented a wide range of views. Most were sympathetic to the

1 Rangoon Correspondent, 'Burma's Parliament Emerges from the Shadows', *Inside Story*, 26 March 2012, insidestory.org.au/burmas-parliament-emerges-from-the-shadows/.

2 Andrew R.C. Marshall and Jason Szep, 'Special Report: Myanmar Military's Next Campaign—Shoring Up Power', *Reuters*, 15 November 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/16/us-myanmar-military-idUSBRE8AF02620121116.

3 Phyto Wai Kyaw and Than Naing Soe, 'NLD Facing More Unrest Over Assembly', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 28 January 2013, www.mmtimes.com/national-news/3936-nld-facing-more-unrest-over-assembly.html.

initial aims of the demonstrators, who sought relief for the country's poor. But many monks declined to join the street marches and others were reportedly unhappy when the protests took on a strong political tone.⁴

Another sector frequently misrepresented is that of Burma's ethnic minorities. According to the government, there are 135 'national races'. Even if this contentious claim is accepted, bald references to 'the Kachin', 'the Karen', 'the Shan' and so on fail to take into account the many different viewpoints and often deep divisions found within these communities.⁵ Nor is it necessarily the case that the country's ethnic minorities are faithfully represented by the armed groups that bear their names.

At times, certain political figures and institutions in Burma have been reduced to caricatures. Perhaps the most obvious example of this phenomenon is the treatment routinely accorded to Aung San Suu Kyi and the security forces. Luc Besson's 2011 movie *The Lady*, for example, raised the Nobel Peace Prize winner to the level of a secular saint, while portraying Burma's military leaders as brutal and superstitious oafs, lacking any real concern for the country or its people. The same crude approach has been taken towards Burma's police force.

There is no denying Aung San Suu Kyi's many qualities, but uncritical biographies and adulatory articles in the news media do not assist the public to understand the complexities either of the person or of Burmese politics.⁶ She has long been an active player in Burma's power games and, as such, deserves to be judged against the same criteria as those applied to other major political figures.⁷

Similarly, an effort needs to be made to try to understand the mindset of Burma's military leaders. Before 2011, for example, it was easy to question their idiosyncratic notions of internal and external security threats, but

4 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Challenging the Authoritarian State: Buddhist Monks and Peaceful Protests in Burma', *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol.32, No.1, Winter 2008, pp.125-144, ui04e.moit.tufts.edu/forum/archives/pdfs/32-1pdfs/Kyaw.pdf [page discontinued] [now at dl.tufts.edu/concern/pdfs/qf85nn79h].

5 Ashley South, 'Karen Nationalist Communities: The "Problem" of Diversity', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.29, No.1, April 2007, pp.55-76, www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/25798814?uid=3737536&tuid=2129&tuid=2&tuid=70&tuid=4&sid=21101745551823.

6 Rowan Callick, 'Touched by the Divine, Suu Kyi is Set Apart by Her Goodness', *The Australian*, 14 February 2013, www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/touched-by-the-divine-aung-san-suu-kyi-is-set-apart-through-her-goodness/story-e6fmg8nf-1226577272972 [page discontinued].

7 Billy Tea, 'Suu Kyi's Fading Glory', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 9 February 2013, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/OB09Ae01.html [page discontinued].

such views appear to have been genuinely held, and probably still inform aspects of state policy. Dismissing the old regime as simply a collection of thugs played well with the activist community at the time, but to continue to do so risks perpetuating some serious misperceptions and, as a consequence, flawed policies.⁸

Arguably, the fractiousness and volatility of modern Burmese politics is evidence of a more democratic system of government, with all its strengths and weaknesses. With the more relaxed atmosphere under President Thein Sein has come increased space for the population to join political parties and civil society organisations and to openly discuss new approaches to the country's future. However, there is a danger that, should the domestic political climate become too heated, it will prompt a backlash from conservative elements. This has happened before.

One of the main reasons why General Ne Win engineered a military 'caretaker government' in 1958, and mounted a coup in 1962, was that Burma's civilian politicians were considered dangerously incompetent and corrupt.⁹ The armed forces leadership feared that the politicians' internecine squabbles and pursuit of personal gain would reduce the country to chaos and make it vulnerable to its enemies. Times have changed, but it would not be surprising if some members of the armed forces hierarchy still hold such views.

All these factors argue not only for the careful use of language when speaking about Burma, but also, as far as possible within the constraints of the various reporting mediums, for clear recognition of the complexity and dynamism of the country's political scene.

8 Colin Powell, 'It's Time to Turn the Tables on Burma's Thugs', *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 2003, 2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/21466.htm.

9 Mary P. Callahan, *Democracy in Burma: The Lessons of History*, NBR Analysis, Vol.9, No.3 (Washington, DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 1998), pp.5-26, www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=96.

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