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## Australia and the Burma/ Myanmar name debate

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*When Thein Sein's reformist government came to power in Myanmar in 2011, the Australian Government formally acknowledged the change in the country's official name, which was made by the former military regime in 1989. There were strong rumours in late 2013, however, that the incoming Abbott Government would reverse this decision and go back to calling the country 'Burma'.*

Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to Australia this week will throw into sharp relief several aspects of Australia's relationship with Burma. One will be the name by which her country is known.

Ever since 1989, when Burma's military government changed the English name of the country to Myanmar, there have been heated arguments over the decision.<sup>1</sup> The Australian Government shuffled from one to the other to suit the competing demands of policy, popular preference and diplomatic etiquette. It finally accepted the country's new official name last year, but some observers suspect the Abbott Government plans to revisit this issue.

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1 Swe Win, 'A Burmese Tug of Words', *The New York Times*, 6 July 2012, [latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/neither-myanmar-nor-burma-is-a-good-name-for-my-country/?\\_r=0](http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/neither-myanmar-nor-burma-is-a-good-name-for-my-country/?_r=0).

The name ‘Burma’ derives from the ethnic Burman (or Bamar) majority and, following local custom, was adopted by the British colonialists in the nineteenth century. Yet the more formal indigenous name, ‘Myanmar’, has been used for titles, in literature and on official documents for centuries. The English-language version of the 1947 constitution, prepared the year before the country regained its independence, referred to the ‘Union of Burma’, while the Burmese-language version used the name ‘Myanmar’.<sup>2</sup>

The adoption of the more formal name by the military government was part of a wider move to rid the country of the vestiges of the colonial era. At the same time, a range of other names was introduced, which conformed more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. Thus, Rangoon became Yangon, the Irrawaddy River became the Ayeyarwady River, and so on. In this, the regime was following the practice of many other governments in many other countries.

Internal names are a purely national concern. The international community, however, is required to take a formal position on the name of a country in English.

The name Myanmar was accepted by the UN and most other countries. However, some governments—notably, the US and the UK—chose not to do so. The EU adopted the rather clumsy compromise ‘Burma/Myanmar’.<sup>3</sup> These countries wanted to show support for Burma’s opposition movement, which clung to the old name as a protest against the military regime. The opposition felt that the country’s name could only be decided by the people.<sup>4</sup>

The new name was also controversial at another level. ‘Myanmar’ can be traced back to the precolonial period when successive kings ruled the central lowlands of Burma and periodically clashed with the states and societies around them. It implies the continuing political dominance of the major ethnic group living within the geographical boundaries inherited from the British in 1948. This is anathema to many among the country’s ethnic minorities.

2 Derek Tonkin, ‘“Burma” versus “Myanmar”: A Touch of Desperation’, *Mizzima News* [Yangon], 23 November 2013, reprinted by the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, 20 October 2013, [www.rohingya.org/burma-versus-myanmar-a-touch-of-desperation/](http://www.rohingya.org/burma-versus-myanmar-a-touch-of-desperation/).

3 ‘Should it be Burma or Myanmar?’, *BBC News*, 26 September 2007, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7013943.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7013943.stm).

4 Min Zin, ‘Burma or Myanmar: The Name Game’, *Foreign Policy*, 5 July 2012, [transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/07/05/burma\\_or\\_myanmar\\_the\\_name\\_game](http://transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/07/05/burma_or_myanmar_the_name_game).

To some, the use of either 'Burma' or 'Myanmar' represented a political position. To call the country Myanmar was deemed by activists to denote sympathy for the military regime. To the government, continued use of the old name was considered insulting.

Yet, many who preferred to use 'Burma' after 1989 did so without wider connotations. Many commentators, myself included, still feel that 'Burma' is more easily recognised than 'Myanmar'. Besides, it lends itself to 'Burmese'; 'Myanmar' does not have an equivalent adjective in English.

Like all other countries, Australia used the name Myanmar in formal diplomatic exchanges, but in public it continued to refer to Burma. Indeed, Kevin Rudd made a point of doing so—for example, when he issued a press release in 2011 announcing 'Foreign Minister to Visit Burma'.<sup>5</sup> In June 2012, however, Bob Carr made an important symbolic gesture to the new civilian–military government in Naypyidaw by publicly calling the country Myanmar.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, official Australian statements and press releases have referred to Myanmar, not Burma. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has a *Myanmar Country Brief* on its website.<sup>7</sup> During President Thein Sein's visit to Australia in March this year, it was evident that Prime Minister Julia Gillard's numerous public references to Myanmar were in keeping with a high-level decision to refer to the country by its formal name.<sup>8</sup>

There are now concerns that the Abbott Government might change this policy. In a recent press release, both names were used,<sup>9</sup> suggesting that Burma may once again become the preferred term. If so, this would probably be in deference to the views of Aung San Suu Kyi, who insists on

5 Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Foreign Minister to Visit Burma', Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 24 June 2011, [foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2011/kr\\_mr\\_110624a.html](http://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2011/kr_mr_110624a.html) [page discontinued].

6 Dan Flitton, 'Burma Name Change Signals Symbolic Shift by Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 2012, [www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/burma-name-change-signals-symbolic-shift-by-australia-20120605-1zsq8.html](http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/burma-name-change-signals-symbolic-shift-by-australia-20120605-1zsq8.html).

7 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Myanmar Country Brief* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2016), [www.dfat.gov.au/geo/myanmar/myanmar-country-brief](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/myanmar/myanmar-country-brief).

8 Tom Allard, 'Australia to Forge Closer Ties with Myanmar', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 March 2013, [www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/australia-to-forge-closer-ties-with-myanmar-20130318-2ga3x.html](http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/australia-to-forge-closer-ties-with-myanmar-20130318-2ga3x.html).

9 The Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Aung San Suu Kyi to Visit Australia', Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 5 November 2013, [foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2013/jb\\_mr\\_131105a.html](http://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2013/jb_mr_131105a.html) [page discontinued] [now at [www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/aung-san-suu-kyi-visit-australia](http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/aung-san-suu-kyi-visit-australia)].

calling her country ‘Burma’. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has admitted to being ‘in awe’ of the Nobel laureate, who she says inspired her to become involved in national politics.<sup>10</sup>

The former British diplomat Derek Tonkin has argued<sup>11</sup> that the debate over whether to call the country Burma or Myanmar is at root a clash between international protocol and political correctness. Since the advent of Thein Sein’s reformist government in 2011, the former has been in the ascendant. ‘Burma’ is heard less frequently in official UK circles and the EU looks set to abandon its hybrid nomenclature.<sup>12</sup> Even the US is now using the name ‘Myanmar’ in public, albeit with the explanation that it is a ‘diplomatic courtesy’.<sup>13</sup>

If the Abbott Government should revert to the old name—at least outside diplomatic exchanges—it would be in the face of this clear trend. It would also risk isolating Australia on an issue that, however trivial it might first appear, has the potential to complicate not only recent efforts to get closer to Naypyidaw, but also the wider bilateral relationship. The outcome of any policy review should be evident when Aung San Suu Kyi meets senior Australian officials later this week.

Confucius wrote in *The Analects*: ‘If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.’<sup>14</sup> This is as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago.

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10 ‘Women in Politics: Julie Bishop, Deputy Leader of the Federal Liberal Party’, *Australian Women Online*, 13 August 2013, [www.australianwomenonline.com/women-in-politics-julie-bishop-deputy-leader-of-the-federal-liberal-party/](http://www.australianwomenonline.com/women-in-politics-julie-bishop-deputy-leader-of-the-federal-liberal-party/).

11 ‘Commentaries by Derek Tonkin’, *Network Myanmar*, [www.networkmyanmar.org/index.php/commentary](http://www.networkmyanmar.org/index.php/commentary) [page discontinued] [now at [www.networkmyanmar.org/Blogs.html](http://www.networkmyanmar.org/Blogs.html)].

12 Banyan, ‘Bye-Bye, Burma, Bye-Bye’, *The Economist*, 21 May 2013, [www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/05/what-s-name-myanmar](http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2013/05/what-s-name-myanmar).

13 Max Fisher, ‘Why It’s Such a Big Deal that Obama Said “Myanmar” Rather than Burma’, *The Washington Post*, 19 November 2012, [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/11/19/why-its-such-a-big-deal-that-obama-said-myanmar-rather-than-burma/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/11/19/why-its-such-a-big-deal-that-obama-said-myanmar-rather-than-burma/).

14 Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), Ch.13, p.171.

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