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Myanmar becomes Burma, again

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The Abbott Government's unannounced and unexplained decision to revert to use of the name 'Burma', after the previous government finally accepted widespread international practice and started calling the country 'Myanmar', needlessly complicated Australia's relations with Naypyidaw and possibly other regional governments.

There has been no official announcement but, as foreshadowed on *The Interpreter* last year, the Abbott Government seems to have decided to revert to using Burma's old name.¹

In 2012, former foreign minister Bob Carr declared that Australia would join the overwhelming majority of countries, international organisations and regional institutions that publicly called Burma by its official name, the Union of Myanmar, which was adopted by the country's military regime in 1989.

1 Andrew Selth, 'Australia and the Burma/Myanmar Name Debate', *The Interpreter*, 27 November 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/27/Australia-and-the-BurmaMyanmar-name.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-and-burmayanmar-name-debate].

This step was part of a comprehensive new policy approach by Australia, which included the suspension of political and economic sanctions. It was time, Bob Carr said during a visit to Burma in June 2012, that Australia ‘moved beyond coercion’. Such measures had been found ‘no longer to contribute to the reform process’.²

The decision to call the country Myanmar was timely, given the creation of a new Burmese government in 2011, Naypyidaw’s announcement of a sweeping reform program and Canberra’s plans to develop closer bilateral relations. As Dan Flitton observed, it was a significant symbolic shift in Australia’s position.³ It was also in keeping with clear global trends.

Following last September’s federal election, it was rumoured that the Coalition Government planned to change this approach and, outside official exchanges, once again call the country ‘Burma’.

During the visit to Australia of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi last November,⁴ the Prime Minister referred publicly to ‘Burma’ and ‘the Government of Burma’.⁵ Inquiries about these comments made to the Prime Minister’s office, the foreign minister’s office and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) failed to elicit any clear response.

In December 2013, however, DFAT’s public website was revised. The ‘Myanmar Country Page’ is now called the ‘Burma Country Page’.⁶ The name ‘Myanmar’ still appears in a few places—for example, on the page referring to the Australian Embassy in Rangoon (Yangon)—but the relevant DFAT ‘fact sheet’ is clearly headed ‘Burma’.⁷

2 Hamish McDonald, ‘Carr Lifts Sanctions Against Burma’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 2012, www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/carr-lifts-sanctions-against-burma-20120607-1zz2j.html.

3 Daniel 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.

4 Andrew Selth, ‘When Aung San Suu Kyi Comes to Call’, *The Interpreter*, 3 December 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/12/03/When-Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-comes-to-call.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/when-aung-san-suu-kyi-comes-call].

5 Tony Abbott, Prime Minister of Australia, ‘Joint Press Conference with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’, Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 28 November 2013, www.pm.gov.au/media/2013-11-28/joint-press-conference-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi [page discontinued] [now at pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-23121].

6 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Burma Country Page*, (Canberra: Australian Government), www.dfat.gov.au/geo/burma/ [page discontinued].

7 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Burma: Country Fact Sheet*, (Canberra: Australian Government), www.dfat.gov.au/geo/fs/burm.pdf [page discontinued].

Just to confuse matters, on 7 January this year, the foreign minister issued a media statement welcoming the release of political prisoners—in ‘Myanmar’.⁸

While the Prime Minister’s public comments last year remain unexplained, the mixed messages coming from Canberra seem to reflect a wish by the Abbott Government to differentiate between perceived ‘internal’ and ‘external’ usages of the country’s name. In international diplomacy, however, such distinctions are always difficult to sustain.

Only the US and some EU countries still use the old name. This is largely a gesture to Aung San Suu Kyi, who feels the former military regime had no right to change the country’s name without a popular mandate. However, these countries seem increasingly uncomfortable with this legacy of the past, when they were far more critical of Burma’s government.⁹

Lest it be thought that this is a minor matter of diplomatic etiquette, the US Government was recently obliged to defend its use of the name ‘Myanmar’ in a public statement by John Kerry.¹⁰ In what former British ambassador Derek Tonkin has described as an ‘utterly unconvincing’ explanation,¹¹ a State Department spokesperson dismissed such usage (including at times by President Obama) as a ‘diplomatic courtesy’.¹²

This formula may satisfy the Burma lobby in the US and elsewhere, but Naypyidaw considers the continued use of ‘Burma’ by Western governments to be gratuitously offensive. Also, given the use of ‘Myanmar’ in all diplomatic correspondence and a wide range of other official exchanges, from visa applications to UN resolutions, the practice strikes many Burmese officials as faintly ridiculous.

8 The Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, ‘Australian Government Welcomes Release of Political Prisoners in Myanmar’, Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 7 January 2014, foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2014/jb_mr_140107.aspx?ministerid=4 [page discontinued] [now at www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/australian-government-welcomes-release-political-prisoners-myanmar].

9 Derek Tonkin, “Burma” Versus “Myanmar”: A Touch of Desperation’, *Mizzima News*, [Yangon], 18 October 2013, www.mizzima.com/opinion/commentary/item/10365-burma-versus-myanmar-a-touch-of-desperation [page discontinued].

10 ‘US Uses “Myanmar” Name as “Diplomatic Courtesy”’, *Channel News Asia*, [Singapore], 7 January 2014, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/us-uses-myanmar-name-as/945424.html [page discontinued].

11 ‘Myanmar’s Independence Day: Press Statement’, *Network Myanmar*, www.networkmyanmar.org/ [page discontinued].

12 Marie Harf, ‘Daily Press Briefing’, US Department of State, Washington, DC, January 2014, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/01/219353.htm#BURMA [page discontinued].

It is difficult to know what has prompted the Australian Government's unexpected policy shift. It could simply be a reflection of the foreign minister's longstanding support for Aung San Suu Kyi.¹³ Or it may herald a more critical approach to issues such as Burma's military-biased constitution and the harsh treatment of Muslim Rohingyas.

Whatever the reason, having formally opted for 'Myanmar' less than two years ago, it is curious that Canberra would knowingly—and, some would say, needlessly—complicate its relationship with Naypyidaw and adopt a position that is out of step with all other states in the Asia-Pacific region, including Burma's fellow ASEAN members.

13 Julie Bishop, 'Broken Promise on Burma', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 2010, www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/blogs/the-bishops-gambit/broken-promise-on-burma-20100217-ocll.html [page discontinued].

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