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Surveying public opinion in Burma

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The freedom under president Thein Sein to conduct large-scale public opinion surveys in Myanmar should have resulted in more accurate analyses of the popular mood and more informed decision-making. Unsurprisingly, early polls revealed that democratic systems of government were poorly understood and major political issues like constitutional reform were less important to people than the problems encountered in daily life.

For years—decades even—professional Burma-watchers, activists and other commentators have been making assessments about developments in Burma (Myanmar) on the basis of very little hard information. Government statistics could not be trusted, official spokespeople rarely gave away anything of value and the state-run press largely peddled propaganda. Reports generated outside Burma were often highly politicised and had to be treated carefully.

There were some notable exceptions to this rule, but even well-informed analysts tended to refer to Burma as an intelligence black hole.

In such circumstances, gauging the popular mood in Burma was always fraught with risk. Structured surveys of public opinion were forbidden. There were occasional attempts by embassies and international organisations to informally sound out certain target groups, but access to different parts of the country was difficult and the regime's coercive apparatus was so pervasive that the likelihood of gaining an accurate picture was low.

As a result, Burma-watchers of all kinds were heavily reliant on fragmentary information derived from relatively small numbers of personal contacts, anecdotal sources and gossip. Whenever there was a major incident of any kind, the Rangoon rumour mill went into overdrive. This did not prevent educated speculation about what people in Burma felt about certain issues, but such judgements usually lacked hard evidence.

Since the advent of President Thein Sein's hybrid civilian–military government in 2011, however, the atmosphere within Burma has changed dramatically. There is now much greater freedom of speech, of association and of movement. As a result, it has been possible to conduct comprehensive surveys that give reliable snapshots of public opinion. Two such exercises, both conducted by US institutions with the support of foreign governments, stand out.

The first was published in April this year by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and enjoyed the backing of the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Entitled *Survey of Burma Public Opinion, December 24, 2013 – February 1, 2014*, it canvassed the views of 3,000 adult men and women from 208 rural and 92 urban locations in all 14 states and regions of Burma.¹

Not surprisingly, the survey showed there was overwhelming support for democracy as the most desirable form of government, although understanding of what 'democracy' actually meant seems to have differed widely. Those surveyed were also generally supportive of the government's reform programs, although their views seem to have been influenced by the optimism then prevailing about Burma's future economic development.

Interestingly, when asked to identify the three biggest problems facing Burma as a whole, respondents identified unemployment, ethnic or sectarian violence and high prices.² Almost all other issues raised related

1 *Survey of Burma Public Opinion, December 24, 2013 – February 1, 2014* (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, 3 April 2014), www.iri.org/sites/default/files/flip_docs/2014%20April%203%20Survey%20of%20Burma%20Public%20Opinion,%20December%2024,%202013-February%201,%202014.pdf.

2 'IRI Survey: Burmese Strongly Support Democracy, Express Satisfaction Over Country's Current Trajectory' (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, 3 April 2014), www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-survey-burmese-strongly-support-democracy-express-satisfaction-over-country-s-current [page discontinued] [now at iri.org/resource/iri-survey-burmese-strongly-support-democracy-express-satisfaction-over-country-s-current].

to daily life, such as poor health care, the lack of electricity and inadequate transportation. Politics only featured at the far end of the scale, with the need to amend the constitution scoring lower even than natural disasters.

The second survey has just been released. It was conducted by the Asia Foundation with help from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. Entitled *Myanmar 2014: Civic Knowledge and Values in a Changing Society*, it was conducted in May and June this year.³ It, too, sought the views of 3,000 respondents across all 14 states and regions—once again, through personal interviews.

The Asia Foundation survey was more comprehensive than the IRI exercise and has yielded more nuanced results. It found, for example, that there is very limited knowledge in Burma about the structure and functions of the country's multilevel system of government, particularly at the subnational level. Respondents still hoped for real democracy, but there was little understanding about the principles and practices that underpin a democratic society.⁴

Also, the survey suggests that Burmese are generally positive about the situation in the country and welcome the results of the reform programs introduced since 2011, as far as they go. However, there is a pervasive underlying uncertainty about the future, particularly in the peripheral areas where most of the ethnic minorities live. Governments are still viewed with suspicion, political disagreements are deeply polarising and social trust is low.

Once again, the country's economic fortunes figured prominently in the thinking of those surveyed. As the IRI project also found, economic performance not only serves as a key indicator of how the country is seen, but also strongly affects popular attitudes towards the central government. There is a high expectation that the government will play a strong role in ensuring economic growth and an equitable and inclusive society.

None of these conclusions will be surprising to those who have followed Burma closely. Also, there is still a dearth of reliable information about many critical issues, such as the political views of the armed forces

3 *Myanmar 2014: Civic Knowledge and Values in a Changing Society* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2014), asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MyanmarSurvey20141.pdf.

4 'The Asia Foundation Releases Results of Nationwide Myanmar Public Opinion Survey', Press release (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 12 December 2014), asiafoundation.org/news/2014/12/the-asia-foundation-releases-results-of-nationwide-public-opinion-survey-in-myanmar/.

leadership. However, these and other surveys can provide the basis for more reliable judgements about the public mood in Burma and the wishes of the Burmese people. They should also result in better-informed policy decisions.

If there is an underlying message in both surveys, it is that, since 2011, Burma's reforms have had a positive impact. The country is still facing serious problems, resulting in attendant caution, but there are now palpable hopes for a more democratic system of government and (in particular) a higher standard of living. These trends are to be welcomed and encouraged. That will require not just moral support, but also technical advice, practical assistance and patience.

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