

## Burma: Beware of unrealistic expectations

(10:03 AEDT, 18 June 2015)

*Speakers at The Australian National University's 2015 Myanmar Update conference were almost unanimous in warning against being too optimistic about Myanmar's democratisation process and reform programs. With national elections in Myanmar due in November 2015 and the election of a new president early the following year, this seemed a timely warning.*

The spirit of Kevin Rudd seemed to be stalking the lecture theatres of The Australian National University earlier this month, when it staged the latest Myanmar/Burma Update conference. This was not because the former Australian Prime Minister had showed any particular interest in, or understanding of, Burma when in office, but because of his 2013 injunction to overexcited journalists that 'everyone should take a long, cold shower'.<sup>1</sup>

The Australian National University is one of only two academic institutions around the world that regularly stages international meetings to discuss developments in Burma (officially known since 1989 as Myanmar).<sup>2</sup> Over the past 25 years, 13 conferences in Canberra have canvassed a wide range

---

1 Gemma Jones, Simon Benson and Wires, 'Take a Cold Shower, Says Former PM Rudd as He Denies Leadership Challenge Claims', *News.com.au*, 5 February 2013, [www.news.com.au/national/take-a-cold-shower-say-former-pm-kevin-rudd-as-he-denies-claims-leadership-challenge-claims/story-fcynjr2-1226570317321](http://www.news.com.au/national/take-a-cold-shower-say-former-pm-kevin-rudd-as-he-denies-claims-leadership-challenge-claims/story-fcynjr2-1226570317321).

2 '2015 Myanmar/Burma Update: Making Sense of Conflict', The Australian National University, Canberra, 5–6 June 2015, [asiapacific.anu.edu.au/asiapacific-region/2015-myanmarburma-update](http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/asiapacific-region/2015-myanmarburma-update).

of subjects of current interest, producing nine major research publications that captured the knowledge and judgements of dozens of foreign and Burmese scholars.<sup>3</sup>

The conference on 5–6 June was of particular interest, staged as it was before Burma's national elections this November and the election of a new president early in 2016.<sup>4</sup> The peace negotiations between Naypyidaw and ethnic armed groups have reached a critical stage,<sup>5</sup> while some economic and social reforms appear to be stalling. Other issues have attracted international attention—notably, the plight of the Muslim Rohingyas<sup>6</sup> and the resurgence of Burma's narcotics production.<sup>7</sup>

It was in relation to all these matters that Kevin Rudd's remark came to mind. For, despite high hopes for the future and optimistic forecasts by journalists and commentators, most speakers at the ANU conference presented sobering accounts of the obstacles facing democratisation in Burma and the likely pace of reform over the next few years. Not counting the keynote address by the Speaker of Burma's upper house of parliament, which was predictably upbeat,<sup>8</sup> the consistent message was to beware of unrealistic expectations.

This message was directed primarily at foreign observers and activists, but it could equally have been aimed at the Burmese population. Despite, or perhaps even because of, decades of crushed hopes and disappointed dreams, many people in Burma still seem to think that genuine democracy

3 '2015 Myanmar/Burma Update', *Update Publications* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 2015), [asiapacific.anu.edu.au/asiapacific-region/2015-myanmarburma-update#acton-tabs-link--qt-2015\\_myanmar\\_burma\\_update\\_quickt-ui-tabs4](http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/asiapacific-region/2015-myanmarburma-update#acton-tabs-link--qt-2015_myanmar_burma_update_quickt-ui-tabs4).

4 Larry Jagan, 'Parties Brace for a Bitter Election Battle', *Bangkok Post*, 7 June 2015, [www.bangkokpost.com/news/special-reports/584481/parties-brace-for-a-bitter-election-battle](http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/special-reports/584481/parties-brace-for-a-bitter-election-battle).

5 Min Zin, 'Why There's Less to Burma's Peace Process Than Meets the Eye', *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2015, [foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/26/why-theres-less-to-burmas-peace-process-than-meets-the-eye-burma-myanmar/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/26/why-theres-less-to-burmas-peace-process-than-meets-the-eye-burma-myanmar/).

6 'Southeast Asia: Accounts from Rohingya Boat People', *News* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 27 May 2015), [www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/27/southeast-asia-accounts-rohingya-boat-people](http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/27/southeast-asia-accounts-rohingya-boat-people).

7 Tom Kramer, *The Current State of Counternarcotics Policy and Drug Reform Debates in Myanmar*, TNI Burma Project Report (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 1 May 2015), [www.tni.org/briefing/current-state-counternarcotics-policy-and-drug-reform-debates-myanmar?context=70443](http://www.tni.org/briefing/current-state-counternarcotics-policy-and-drug-reform-debates-myanmar?context=70443).

8 U Khin Aung Myint, 'Future Lies in Reconciling Present with the Past', *New Mandala*, 5 June 2015, [asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/06/05/myanmars-future-lays-in-reconciling-the-present-with-the-past/#respond](http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/06/05/myanmars-future-lays-in-reconciling-the-present-with-the-past/#respond) [page discontinued] [now at [www.newmandala.org/myanmars-future-lays-in-reconciling-the-present-with-the-past/](http://www.newmandala.org/myanmars-future-lays-in-reconciling-the-present-with-the-past/)].

is just around the corner. There is also a widespread belief that, once Aung San Suu Kyi becomes president (as large numbers of Burmese confidently expect), all the country's problems will somehow be solved.

As most speakers at the ANU conference warned, none of these things is going to happen, at least not soon and not without considerable difficulty.

There are still a few naysayers who deny any progress has been made since 2011, when a hybrid military–civilian government took over the country and President Thein Sein launched an ambitious program of reforms. These may not have gone as far or as fast as most would have liked, but it is undeniable that the country has changed dramatically over the past four years, and for the better. Burma is still not free, but it is hard to see it returning to the bad old days of direct military rule and widespread repression.

That said, it is important to put these developments into perspective and to keep in mind the enormous problems that Burma still needs to overcome to achieve real and lasting change. Quite apart from the constraints imposed by the armed forces, transforming the country from an internally fractured, economically challenged and diplomatically isolated military dictatorship to a stable, modern, prosperous and respected member of the international community was always going to be difficult. Above all, it was going to take time.

On present indications, even if they are free and fair, this year's elections are unlikely to result in the landslide for the NLD that many have predicted. Aung San Suu Kyi's chances of becoming Burma's next president are slight. While they have stepped back from day-to-day government, the country's armed forces have no intention of surrendering their national political role.<sup>9</sup> The ethnic and religious divisions plaguing the country are far from resolved, and abuses of power will still occur.

The economic and social reforms that have been pursued under President Thein Sein will continue after 2016, but not at the pace, or with the scope, that everyone would like to see. The process will be held back by a continuing lack of infrastructure, insufficient technical and managerial expertise, a weak bureaucracy and the absence of a respected legal

---

9 Larry Jagan, 'Army Set for Top Brass Shift Before Polls', *Bangkok Post*, 16 May 2015, [www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/563043/army-set-for-top-brass-shift-before-polls](http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/563043/army-set-for-top-brass-shift-before-polls).

system.<sup>10</sup> Also, as Sean Turnell has pointed out, corruption and financial irregularities underpin almost all major transactions in Burma and this situation is unlikely to change soon.<sup>11</sup>

These harsh realities need to be understood and accepted. Inflated expectations already pose major challenges for Thein Sein's government, but widespread disappointment over the election results, the choice of a new president and setbacks in the peace negotiations would seriously undermine confidence in the reform program. Failure to deliver anticipated economic and social benefits could also lead to popular protests. Widespread communal unrest, particularly if accompanied by violence, may invite a military response.

Most foreign governments understand the enormous challenges faced by Naypyidaw and the difficulty of implementing such a wide range of major reforms over a relatively short period. As a result, countries like the US and the UK have cut Naypyidaw considerable slack and (in private, at least) supported the government's calls for patience. However, if events in Burma do not go as many in the West hope, the democracies will come under greater pressure to publicly criticise Naypyidaw, further complicating the reform process.

It does not help that, over the past 25 years, Burma has been held to a higher standard of behaviour than any other regional country, including North Korea.<sup>12</sup> Despite the scarcity of ASEAN examples, a liberal Western-style democracy and a socially responsible capitalist economy were adopted long ago as goals by many inside and outside Burma. Inspired by these ideals—personified by charismatic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi—popular expectations were raised to levels that were always difficult to justify when measured against objective criteria.

---

10 Larry Jagan, 'Myanmar in Transition', *Bangkok Post*, 8 June 2015, [www.bangkokpost.com/business/news/585797/myanmar-in-transition](http://www.bangkokpost.com/business/news/585797/myanmar-in-transition).

11 Thomas Fuller, 'Profits of Drug Trade Drive Economic Boom in Myanmar', *The New York Times*, 5 June 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/06/06/world/asia/profits-from-illicit-drug-trade-at-root-of-myanmars-boom.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/06/world/asia/profits-from-illicit-drug-trade-at-root-of-myanmars-boom.html).

12 David I. Steinberg, 'Disparate Sanctions: US Sanctions, North Korea and Burma', *East Asia Forum*, 23 June 2011, [www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/06/23/disparate-sanctions-us-sanctions-north-korea-and-burma/](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/06/23/disparate-sanctions-us-sanctions-north-korea-and-burma/).

There are no magical solutions to Burma's myriad problems, which, as Timothy Garton Ash once wrote, are 'fiendishly complex'.<sup>13</sup> Some pre-date the colonial era and most have bedevilled Burma since it regained its independence in 1948. Others have been caused, or at least exacerbated, by 50 years of inept and repressive military rule. No single group, let alone individual, has it within their power to solve them. Foreign assistance can help, but ultimately Burma's problems will require agreed Burmese solutions, and that will take time.

---

13 Timothy Garton Ash, 'Beauty and the Beast in Burma', *The New York Review of Books*, 25 May 2000, [www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/Beauty\\_and\\_the\\_Beast\\_in\\_Burma.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/Beauty_and_the_Beast_in_Burma.htm) [page discontinued] [now at [www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/05/25/beauty-and-the-beast-in-burma/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/05/25/beauty-and-the-beast-in-burma/)].

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.