

80

All change: Election result may see another round of the Burma/Myanmar name game

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The Australian Government's incomprehensible flip-flopping over the question of what name to call Myanmar looked like taking another turn when Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD won the November 2015 elections.

Shortly after the Abbott Government took office in September 2013, it overturned the decision by Labor foreign minister Bob Carr in 2012 to recognise Burma's new official name, Myanmar. This had long been the country's traditional name, but it was only adopted as the official name in English by the military government in 1989.¹

The new name had been accepted by most countries, the UN and other major international organisations. However, a few governments, some political groups and certain high-profile individuals (notably,

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].

then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi) clung to the old name as a protest against the military regime's failure to consult the people about the change.²

The Abbott Government decreed that, in all official communications with Naypyidaw, Australia was to refer to 'Myanmar' and 'the Government of Myanmar', as required by diplomatic protocol. In all internal correspondence, however, and on the DFAT website, the name 'Burma' was to be used.³

The word around Canberra at the time was that this was another 'captain's call' by Tony Abbott, who insisted the old name be used despite concerns expressed by the Australian Embassy in Rangoon (Yangon), DFAT and possibly even the foreign minister's office.

The new policy led to some strange results. In some media releases, both Myanmar and Burma were used, depending on the context.⁴ The DFAT website also used both terms, but, because it was often difficult to differentiate between so-called internal and external communications, it was often not clear why one name was used in preference to the other.

The situation was made more confusing by the policy's inconsistent application. For example, during the visit to Australia in November 2013 of Aung San Suu Kyi, Prime Minister Abbott publicly referred to 'Burma' and 'the Government of Burma'. Repeated requests for clarification of the policy were ignored.

The decision to revert to the old name took observers in Australia and elsewhere by surprise, as it seemed to lack any rationale, let alone any benefit to Australia. As I told Dan Flitton of the *Sydney Morning Herald* earlier this year, it was 'an inexplicable retrograde step that can only have harmed Australia's interests, both in Burma and the region'.⁵

2 Gwen Robinson, 'Suu Kyi Refuses to Use "Myanmar" Name', *Financial Times*, [London], 3 July 2012, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/2db68340-c51e-11e1-b6fd-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3r1iMqulW.

3 Andrew Selth, 'Myanmar Becomes Burma, Again', *The Interpreter*, 14 January 2014, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/01/14/Myanmar-becomes-Burma-again.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-becomes-burma-again].

4 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/Pages/2013/jb_mr_131105a.aspx?ministerid=4 [page discontinued] [now at www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/aung-san-suu-kyi-visit-australia].

5 Daniel Flitton, 'Australia Urged to Change Official Names for Macedonia, Burma', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 2015, www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/australia-urged-to-change-official-names-for-macedonia-burma-20150331-1mcg3q.html.

There are now rumours circulating that, under Australia's new and less idiosyncratic Prime Minister, it has been decided once again to use the name Myanmar in all official publications, statements and correspondence. Such a decision would be welcomed by all those trying to work, and develop better relations, with the government in Naypyidaw.

However, the picture is still unclear.

Media releases issued by the foreign minister⁶ refer only to Myanmar and the Myanmar Government,⁷ but the DFAT website still has a country profile for Burma.⁸ Other links on the site refer to both Burma and Myanmar. For example, there is an 'Overview of Australia's Aid Program to Burma'⁹ linked to a publication titled *Aid Investment Plan Myanmar: 2015–2020*.¹⁰

Ironically, a question may now arise over the preferred terminology of the new government elected on 8 November. Already there has been speculation that the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD may see a more relaxed attitude towards the use of Burma, or possibly even another formal name change. The issue could even be put to the people for a final decision.

If a decision has already been made for Australia to use the name Myanmar again, then, like the 2013 decision to revert to Burma, it seems to have been made without any public announcement, let alone explanation. This leaves observers both in Australia and abroad to speculate about the possible reasons for the change.

One can only imagine what the people of Burma/Myanmar make of all this.

6 The Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Signing of Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar', Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 16 October 2015, foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2015/jb_mr_151016.aspx?w=tb1CaGpkPX%2FIS0K%2Bg9ZKEg%3D%3D [page discontinued] [now at www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/signing-nationwide-ceasefire-agreement-myanmar].

7 The Hon. Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Myanmar Elections Observation', Media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 5 November 2015, foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2015/jb_mr_151105.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/myanmar-elections-observation].

8 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Burma* (Canberra: Australian Government), dfat.gov.au/geo/burma/Pages/burma.aspx [page discontinued].

9 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Overview of Australia's Aid Program to Burma* (Canberra: Australian Government), dfat.gov.au/geo/burma/development-assistance/Pages/development-assistance-in-burma.aspx [page discontinued].

10 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Aid Investment Plan Myanmar: 2015–2020* (Canberra: Australian Government), dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/aid-investment-plan-aip-myanmar-2015-20.aspx.

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