

## Democracy in Myanmar: Who can claim victory?

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*Despite all the claims made by foreign governments, activist organisations and others, credit for the creation of an NLD government in 2016 goes to the Myanmar people. This must include the armed forces, which consciously permitted the carefully controlled, top-down transition to a 'disciplined democracy' to occur. It did so not as a sign of weakness, however, but as a sign of strength.*

Paraphrasing the Roman historian Tacitus, US president John F. Kennedy said in 1961 that 'victory has a thousand fathers but defeat is an orphan'.<sup>1</sup> This aphorism springs to mind as Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD prepare to assume power as the first popularly elected government in Myanmar for more than 50 years.

There is no shortage of foreign governments, activist organisations and individuals claiming credit for the extraordinary events of the past five years:<sup>2</sup> the paradigm shift that saw Myanmar's armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*)

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1 While this version is the one most often quoted, Kennedy actually said: 'Victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan.' See 'President Kennedy's News Conference, No.10', Washington, DC, 21 April 1961, US Information Agency, *You Tube*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYx6MG6NkjU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYx6MG6NkjU).

2 Andrew Selth, 'Burma Reforms: Foreigners Can't Take Much Credit', *The Interpreter*, 30 January 2012, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/01/30/Burma-reforms-foreigners-cant-take-credit.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/01/30/Burma-reforms-foreigners-cant-take-credit.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-reforms-foreigners-cant-take-much-credit/](http://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-reforms-foreigners-cant-take-much-credit/)].

step back and permit the creation of a hybrid civilian–military government; the launch of an unprecedented reform program; and the elections in 2015 that resulted in a landslide victory for the NLD.<sup>3</sup>

Despite some early scepticism about the *Tatmadaw's* motives and the validity of President Thein Sein's reforms,<sup>4</sup> it is now accepted that Myanmar has undergone a remarkable transformation. There are still many difficult issues to be resolved, not least the continuing political role of the armed forces, economic problems, religious tensions and ethnic insurgencies, but the Myanmar of 2016 is a far cry from the Myanmar of 2011.

Following the 1988 prodemocracy uprising, governments, international organisations, activist groups and others worked long and hard to achieve such an outcome. They threw much needed light on a country that had long been in darkness and a population that had suffered for decades. Looking back, however, it is difficult to see any evidence that external factors contributed significantly to the evolution of a new era in Myanmar.

The Myanmar people themselves deserve most of the credit for the transition and, like it or not, that includes the armed forces. It may seem a harsh judgement, but examined objectively, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are forming a new government this week largely because the generals have allowed them to do so, as part of a long-term plan formulated by the former military regime.

Despite 25 years of international action, economic sanctions and other measures designed to isolate and punish Myanmar's military government, it just kept growing stronger. In strategic, political, military and economic terms, it was more powerful in 2011 than at any time since 1988, possibly even since the 1962 military coup. Granted, it was very unpopular and faced serious domestic problems, but when it eventually handed over the reins to Thein Sein, the regime was firmly entrenched in power.<sup>5</sup>

3 Stephen Collinson, 'Hillary Clinton Celebrates Myanmar Vote and Her Role In It', *CNN Politics*, 12 November 2015, edition.cnn.com/2015/11/12/politics/hillary-clinton-myanmar-election-role/.

4 Bertil Lintner, 'Burmese Change Aplenty but It's Only Skin Deep', *The Australian*, 17 October 2011, www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/burmese-change-aplenty-but-its-only-skin-deep/story-e6frg6ux-1226167961805?nk=44baf9d25c180cf6a9855726ee7cfd27-1458696390 [page discontinued].

5 Andrew Selth, *Civil–Military Relations in Burma: Portents, Predictions and Possibilities*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.25 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2010), www.griffith.edu.au/\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0016/215341/Selth-Regional-Outlook-25.pdf [page discontinued].

There are still diehard proponents of sanctions, but most governments now acknowledge that, in Myanmar's case, they had only a marginal effect.<sup>6</sup> They did not change the regime's thinking or policies on a single key issue. Indeed, they made it more resentful of external interference, strengthened its bunker mentality, inhibited the development of civil institutions in Myanmar and made daily life even harder for its people.<sup>7</sup>

Also, while the regime saw internal threats everywhere, its hand was not forced by civil strife or military defeat. Its readiness to allow a more liberal form of government was not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. As part of a 'seven-point roadmap' announced in 2003,<sup>8</sup> it promulgated a constitution in 2008 that guaranteed the *Tatmadaw's* central place in national affairs and heralded a controlled transition to a 'disciplined democracy'.

This transition may have gone further and faster than anticipated, but the 2015 elections were held, were relatively free and fair and produced an accurate result, because the armed forces leadership permitted them to occur and did not interfere. As history attests, it could have intervened at any stage of the process and ensured that the elections were cancelled, postponed or manipulated to give a different outcome.

Also, given their intelligence sources and control of Myanmar's internal affairs, the generals must have known that an honest election would result in a decisive victory for the NLD. The final statistics may have come as a surprise (before the poll, some analysts were doubtful the party could achieve a landslide)<sup>9</sup> but the outcome could not have been in doubt.

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6 Thihan Myo Nyun, 'Feeling Good or Doing Good: Inefficacy of the US Unilateral Sanctions Against the Military Government of Burma/Myanmar', *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, Vol.7, No.3, 2008, [openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1117&context=law\\_globalstudies](http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1117&context=law_globalstudies).

7 US Government, 'Myanmar: Prepared Testimony by Dr Thant Myint U Before the East Asia Sub-Committee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee', *ReliefWeb*, 30 September 2009, [reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-prepared-testimony-dr-thant-myint-u-east-asia-sub-committee-senate-foreign](http://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-prepared-testimony-dr-thant-myint-u-east-asia-sub-committee-senate-foreign).

8 David Arnott, *Burma/Myanmar: How to Read the Generals' 'Roadmap'—A Brief Guide with Links to the Literature*, Geneva, 2004, [www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/how10.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/how10.htm) [page discontinued] [now at [www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs/how10.htm](http://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs/how10.htm)].

9 Andrew Selth, 'Burma: Beware of Unrealistic Expectations', *The Interpreter*, 18 June 2015, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/06/18/Burma-Beware-of-unrealistic-expectations.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/06/18/Burma-Beware-of-unrealistic-expectations.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-beware-unrealistic-expectations](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-beware-unrealistic-expectations)].

This being the case, it can be assumed that, before the election, the *Tatmadaw's* senior leadership, in consultation with Thein Sein, collectively decided to accept the final result. There is no tradition in Myanmar of sharing political power, but the leadership must also have faced the prospect of negotiating the future governance of the country with the NLD.

Aung San Suu Kyi has apparently agreed a *modus vivendi* with Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing that permits the NLD to form government and the *Tatmadaw* to retain certain powers and privileges. She did not get everything she wanted—notably, a constitutional amendment that would have let her become president. However, both sides seem to have set aside their differences for the time being.

It remains to be seen whether this arrangement survives the test of time. The NLD is certain to adjust the former government's priorities for attention and funding and to propose more far-reaching reforms. Also, Aung San Suu Kyi's blunt dismissal of the President's constitutional position and determination to make all major policy decisions herself is likely to cause other problems.<sup>10</sup>

The generals will be reluctant to accept the constraints on the *Tatmadaw's* power that are required for Myanmar to become a genuine democracy. As Robert Taylor has written: '[O]nly the army can end its own role in Myanmar's politics, and that decision is dependent on its perception of the civilian political elite's ability to manage the future.'<sup>11</sup> He might have added, 'and protect the *Tatmadaw* as a national institution'.

This being the case, the question arises: why did the armed forces initiate a reform process that was bound to increase the NLD's power and reduce its own?

The military regime's decision to permit far-reaching changes to Myanmar was not forced upon it. Nor was it a miscalculation or the result of astrological predictions. Rather, it was the outcome of a careful assessment

10 Min Zin, 'Burma's Puppeteer-in-Chief Takes Charge', *Foreign Policy*, 12 March 2016, [foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/12/burmas-puppeteer-in-chief-takes-charge-aung-san-suu-kyi/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/12/burmas-puppeteer-in-chief-takes-charge-aung-san-suu-kyi/).

11 Robert Taylor, 'Myanmar Military Preserves Its Autonomy, For Now', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 16 March 2015, [asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Perspectives/Myanmar-s-military-preserves-its-autonomy-for-now](http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Perspectives/Myanmar-s-military-preserves-its-autonomy-for-now).

of the political state of the country, its complex security problems, its needs in terms of economic and social development and, of course, the future role and requirements of the armed forces.

It may not fit the accepted narrative, but over a decade ago the generals seem to have decided that Myanmar's interests would be best served if it became more modern, more liberal, more prosperous, more open to the outside world and more respected internationally. This was most likely to be achieved if the *Tatmadaw* allowed a more democratic government to evolve, which could undertake the necessary reforms.

Albeit with qualifications, it is a decision that Aung San Suu Kyi and the new NLD Government would probably find easy to endorse.

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