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Introduction

In 2000, Myanmar/Burma was one of the least known countries in Southeast Asia, despite its history as a long-time British colony, and its place as a scene of significant and sustained international military action during World War II. Decades of self-imposed isolation by military-dominated governments, followed by over a decade of international sanctions, contributed not only to this lack of understanding and knowledge, but also to the prevalence of a variety of international stereotypes about the country and its people. It was seen as a 'backwater', as being of little economic or cultural significance, and its people were believed to be uncomfortable with foreigners.

Myanmar/Burma was best known as a country of military dictatorship and political repression, and attempts by the international community to develop effective policies to change this situation were often presented in mainstream analyses as being either misguided or without focus. Internationally, relatively few academics thoroughly studied the nature of politics, the military, or the state in Myanmar/Burma, and media reporting tended to be superficial and trivial.

This situation was not helped by the tendency for politics in Myanmar/Burma, and responses to political dilemmas, to be highly and unnecessarily polarised. The international community was always under enormous pressure to take sides in international debates over political issues in Myanmar; and, conversely, the government of Myanmar/Burma was expected to accept the majority international

line on human rights, forced labour, economic development options, democratic institutions, and socio-economic choices. The situation was not helped by the lack of sustained, enquiring, and objective international journalism, given that the only foreign journalist based in Myanmar was from China's Xinhua News Agency.

Any visitor to Myanmar/Burma at the time soon discovered how wrong most of these stereotypes were. In fact, Myanmar/Burma is a country of substantial natural resources, with a long and rich cultural and artistic heritage. I found Myanmar people to be genuinely friendly and hospitable towards foreigners, with a proud and independent way of thinking, who complained little, and had developed many creative and innovative 'coping mechanisms'. Politically, Myanmar/Burma was a complex and complicated country facing physical, psychological, and financial obstacles in dealing with its many long-term problems, which the rest of the world seemed to prefer not to confront directly by providing assistance or relevant expertise. Many of the solutions that were offered by the international community — especially through the United Nations — were simplistic and tendered on a 'take it or leave it' basis.¹

Probably only three Burmese individuals were well known in the rest of the world: U Nu, the non-aligned prime minister in the period after independence (various times between 1948–62); General Ne Win, the ruthless dictator whose xenophobic policies had virtually destroyed the country (1958–60, 1962–88); and Aung San Suu Kyi, whose winning of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and whose subjection to years of house arrest by a ruthless military had transformed her into an

1 By 1999, relations between Myanmar and the World Bank had broken down over unauthorised disclosure of World Bank documentation about Myanmar; the US Congress had determined that no US Ambassador would be appointed to Myanmar/Burma; the West (as represented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)) had severed practical cooperation with and training of the Burmese military, although the United States retained its defence attaché positions in Yangon; other international agencies (such as the International Labour Organization and the International Committee of the Red Cross) were experiencing difficulties establishing working relationships with Myanmar/Burma. But the UN Security Council — because of the veto powers of China and the Soviet Union/Russia — never imposed mandatory sanctions against Myanmar/Burma.

‘icon’ of democracy. Yet some Burmese diplomats and economists were famous in their fields, and some Burmese philosophers and historians produced original approaches to region-wide issues.²

Myanmar/Burma clearly presented the international community with a serious challenge, which was very hard to ignore given the prominence accorded Aung San Suu Kyi after she won the Nobel Peace Prize. Whenever the situation in Myanmar/Burma took a turn for the worse, whatever the cause, it seemed to highlight the inability of international pressure to force the military regime to change its approach and adopt a more conciliatory approach. (In fact, of course, it would have needed a bit more patience than either the international media or the US Congress could muster, both being impatient and one-sided in their attitudes.) Moreover, scholars at that time tended to transform any discussion into a debate about sanctions versus ‘engagement’, especially in the United States, where sanctions were always a favoured option of the US Congress or US administrations, even though the success of most sanctions regimes was highly questionable. Much of the academic argumentation about sanctions and engagement was also flawed — it was often highly ideological, sometimes plainly one-sided, and in general did not focus on benefits from engagement or damage from sanctions. The academic debate, like the policy ‘debate’, failed to take a strategic or multi-disciplined approach. Furthermore, everyone underestimated the determination of the Burmese military to hold onto power and to stay on their preferred course, which was later outlined in their 2004 ‘Seven-Point Road Map’.

While Australia was unmistakably a supporter of sanctions, and therefore only partially and occasionally ‘friendly’ towards the regime through its policy of ‘limited engagement’, officials in the Myanmar/Burma Government and the ordinary Burmese people were unfailingly polite and civil about this difference of viewpoint. There was clearly a strong legacy of goodwill and trust towards Australia, even many years after the Colombo Plan finished. (However, many Burmese — who became friends — were open in interchanges I had with them about their opposition to sanctions, which they saw as only harming poor people and the country, and having little or no impact on the

2 Here one thinks of UN Secretary-General U Thant; development economist Professor Hla Myint; Aung San Suu Kyi herself on pacifism; and Dr Thant Myint-U on history.

military leadership.) Their opinions influenced me into thinking the same way, though as ambassador I always had to support Australian policy. This is why I wrote about the 'collateral damage' being caused by sanctions in 2007, long after I ceased being ambassador.

In hindsight, one can see that the period between 2000–03 was an experimental reform period. What was in play then were numerous ideas and changes that took their time to take root and to develop fully, but which included some measures that would eventually prove not only successful but also popular. Looking back, it is interesting to identify any indicators of how and why certain changes were effective, or at least non-threatening, and what reforms might be important for a successful political transition.

One issue that had long provoked debate, and which would remain a topic for debate for many years, was what name should be used for Myanmar/Burma. Obviously, the way the incoming State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) changed the name to Myanmar in 1989 was a political action. While it might not have been their first action, it was clearly made in such a way as to indicate the defining nature of the change. On the other hand, it can hardly have been a surprising move, since the term 'Myanmar' had been in widespread official and day-to-day use for many years. The decision by the democracy movement to object to the change of name is equally a political action, and some of the reasons they cite for objecting to it do not seem very persuasive. Most people from Myanmar who take up the issue are arguing from a political perspective, whatever they say, so it is hard to pinpoint the objective case for or against 'Myanmar' or 'Burma'.

Interestingly, the debate over nomenclature was conducted mostly outside the country, not inside; it mattered more to the exiles and refugees from 'Burma' than to the residents of the country. The names became highly politicised after 1988, when the newly formed democracy movement used 'Burma' without exception: for example, the 'Free Burma Campaign', the National Coalition Government for the Union of Burma (NCGUB), and the 'Burma Campaigns' in the United States, the UK, and Australia.

Since my letters of credence as ambassador referred to the country as 'Myanmar', for reasons of protocol I always maintained that the name 'Myanmar' was correct, and then found it was by far the most commonly used name inside the country. Indeed, the only residents of the country who always used 'Burma' at this time were National League for Democracy (NLD) members and the elderly, who had been accustomed to saying 'Burma' for most of their lives. In Australia, I did not always insist on 'Myanmar' if my interlocutor was clearly more comfortable with 'Burma', but I did deliberately use 'Myanmar' when being interviewed by Voice of America, just as they deliberately used 'Burma' when questioning me.

Otherwise, I was relatively unconcerned about what the country should be called, and tended to avoid becoming embroiled in the ongoing debates about this, which I still regard as an issue of little consequence.³ In a practical sense, most Western diplomats — including my successors and I — would have followed the custom that prevailed in the environment in which they were speaking (or writing). Australian governments of both persuasions have more than once changed their position on nomenclature, and then sometimes reversed that position, which did not increase clarity, certainty, or understanding on the part of the Australian public.⁴ However, since so many people and organisations made an issue of the name used for the country, the Australian Embassy resorted to using two different letterheads, one using 'Yangon' and 'Myanmar', and another using 'Rangoon' and 'Burma'.

Australia did not follow the military regime, or the United Nations, when they switched to 'Myanmar' in 1989. In late 1995, then Foreign Minister Gareth Evans decided to move to use 'Myanmar', after Burma/Myanmar started being raised (as 'Myanmar') in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings which Australia attended, but this policy did not last very long. When the conservative Coalition Government assumed power in March 1996, they supported the name

3 Andrew Selth probably provided the most balanced and objective account of this in his 27 November 2013 piece on the Lowy Interpreter blog: www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/27/Australia-and-the-BurmaMyanmar-name.aspx?COLLCC=178848935&.

4 For an example of a media release Gareth Evans issued as foreign minister, see: foreignminister.gov.au/releases/1995/ml115.html.

'Burma'.⁵ (This did not stop the new minister Alexander Downer developing his own innovative approach to engaging with the military regime in Burma/Myanmar.) After 2007, as foreign minister and then prime minister, Kevin Rudd used 'Burma'. Thus Australian financial sanctions were legislated in 2007 using 'Burma'. (They were originally drafted under Alexander Downer and then taken up by Kevin Rudd.) However, when Bob Carr became foreign minister in the Gillard Labor Government and visited the country in mid-2012, he initiated a complete shift to 'Myanmar', which the Australia media and others eventually followed. Official Australian usage remained 'Myanmar' until late 2013, when Foreign Minister Julie Bishop quietly ordered a complete change, and all entries on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) website were changed.⁶ (For a time, examples of both terms could be found on the DFAT website, with historical references to 'Myanmar' on the former Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) website being among the last to be removed.) By this time, most of the world media were using 'Myanmar', and the country was in the public eye as the host of ASEAN and East Asian Summit meetings as 'Myanmar'. (Australian Government ministers attended most of these meetings.)

The Australian media were among the last in the world to change to using 'Myanmar'; even the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* had adjusted their terminology in 2012, after the by-elections for the Myanmar Parliament, in which the National League for Democracy participated, thereby acknowledging the correctness of the usage by the military regime and its successor, the Thein Sein Government. I and other 'experts' on the country, who were often interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), had long urged the Australian media to adopt an apolitical approach and to follow the United Nations practice, but such arguments were to no avail. Both the ABC and the SBS seemed to be in the thrall of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, and instinctively and stubbornly followed democracy movement wishes.

5 See Alexander Downer's firm response to repression of NLD activities by the military regime as the new foreign minister: foreignminister.gov.au/releases/1996/fa102.html.

6 No public explanation of this change was issued, but, when asked, DFAT explained the policy along the lines of: 'The [Australian] Government will use the term "Myanmar" in communications with and public statements about the Myanmar Government, but "Burma" in other contexts.' Private communication from DFAT.

When the new President of Myanmar, Thein Sein, visited Australia officially in early March 2013 and the Australian Government for protocol reasons had to use 'Myanmar', it was obviously awkward for the media to ignore this. When the ABC finally changed its practice in early 2013, they could not resist having a special radio item on the subject (for which they conspicuously did not interview me).⁷

Some of the arguments used in the name debate to make the case for 'Burma' are blatantly wrong and misleading. For example, it is not correct that 'Burma' was chosen through a democratic process in 1947 in contrast to the way the military regime changed the name in 1989; nor is it true that the name 'Burma' is more acceptable to the ethnic minorities in Myanmar; if anything, 'Myanmar' is more acceptable to ethnic groups because it carries no racial or ethnic overtones, in contrast to 'Burma', which plainly derives from the majority ethnic name 'Bamar'.

Common international usage is not necessarily much of a guide to what is 'best' or 'correct' practice in using such terminology. Governments were always influenced by political factors, producing the undesirable result of Asia and the Third World using 'Myanmar' and the West using 'Burma'. Foreign travel companies, not surprisingly, opted for the least risky option of sticking with 'Burma'. Scholars started to choose, citing a variety of reasons — some adopted a historical approach, using 'Myanmar' from 1989. Many writers used 'Burma' without disclosing a political reason for doing so, occasionally without understanding the political significance of what they were doing. Fortunately, the internet can easily be programmed to accept both Burma and Myanmar equally and as equivalents.

Making the name of the country a high-profile policy issue and provoking debate that is not always well-informed is at least a distraction and at worst not helpful in terms of substantive relationship and activities. A former British Ambassador to Thailand, Derek Tonkin, who has become a 'realist' activist on Myanmar, has been quite scathing about the negative effects of recent reversion to the terminology 'Burma' by a few:

7 See Liam Cochrane's 22 March 2013 story on Radio Australia: www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/program/connect-asia/is-it-burma-or-myanmar/1105814.

The policies of those Western countries which maintain this unedifying dichotomy reflect a veritable schizophrenia in dealing with what is very much a self-imposed dilemma. 'Myanmar' is all too often an operational necessity — not a mere diplomatic courtesy as the US State Department would have us believe — where all matters of diplomacy, trade and international relations are concerned, while 'Burma' is still used in a domestic context, to pander to the activist lobby and to respond to the entreaties of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The reality is that 'Myanmar' is essential on all matters that count, since governmental and commercial business would otherwise grind to a halt. But 'Burma' can be used when there is supposedly nothing at stake. What a quaint way to conduct inter-state relations!

The recent [2013] change in Australian policy, if confirmed, will neither advance reconciliation between Suu Kyi and the Generals, nor help Australian national interests. It is a classic example of the folly of politicians succumbing to short-term interest on a wave of emotion when a cool head, reliability as a prospective partner and support for the reform process in Myanmar should be primary considerations. How counterproductive can you get!⁸

8 See Derek Tonkin's Network Myanmar website: www.networkmyanmar.org/.

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