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Australian Ambassador to Myanmar

I had never been to Myanmar, and knew relatively little about the country when I took up my position in May 2000. But some one-off contacts in the early 1990s might have been a foretaste of things to come. A delegation of Australia-based Burmese activists called on then Foreign Minister Senator Gareth Evans in 1995, while I was working as his senior advisor. They left a very positive impression: they were intelligent, reasonable, and spoke excellent English. Unlike some who called on the minister, they did not seek to use their meeting with him for their own publicity, although the Australian Government could do very little for them at that time. I was to meet some of them again during consultations that Australian ambassadors normally have before, during, and after their overseas postings.

A further one-off contact arose in 1995–96 during my work with Senator Gareth Evans, who — as an ‘activist’ foreign minister — tried to establish benchmarks for progress as guidelines for the international community’s responses to liberalising steps made by the Myanmar military regime.¹ Almost no other members of the international community were interested in relaxing their sanctions

1 Gareth Evans’s proposals were presented in confidential sessions of the 1995 ASEAN-Plus ministerial meeting, and mentioned only in general terms in his public statement to the meeting: ‘We should make clear to that leadership that the region will respond in a measured and positive way to the benchmark steps it takes towards that reconciliation, but that those steps need to be taken.’ See: gevangs.org/speeches/old/1995/020895_evans_address_aseanpmc.pdf.

or 'engaging' more closely with the military regime at that stage, even though the policies — of trying to isolate the regime and backing a democracy movement that could only claim a single effective leader — were manifestly not working. On the other hand, the difficulties of advancing the concept of 'benchmarks', which seemed entirely logical, exposed me to some of the problems in encouraging Burma towards the goal of reconciliation. The 'benchmarks' were attacked from all sides, mostly for ideological or political reasons, as if the activist community wanted nothing less than complete capitulation by the military regime and its humiliation. The 'benchmarks' quickly disappeared from the international agenda; perhaps they were too complex, and politically unrealistic. At the very least, they were ahead of the times. But, much later, the indicators of genuine change or progress in Myanmar were much the same as those laid down by Gareth Evans; and the responses from the international community were also similar, although not really coordinated. So, with Myanmar/Burma, ideas can be condemned, even if they are good ideas.

In contrast to these brief glimpses, the overall tone of my official pre-departure briefings was intended to lower any expectations that the posting to Burma had any chance of achieving results. With sanctions firmly in place, and scarcely questioned, most of the normal aspects of relations between two countries were not present or existed in a rudimentary state, or, worse, it was insisted that generally no ambitions were held for improving relations, or for Australia playing a distinctive role in politically influencing Myanmar. The main official pre-posting briefings I received in Canberra in April/May 2000 had a common central theme: Burma had been downgraded as a priority for Australian policy, and trade, investment, tourism, and education were not considered to be areas where relations could be developed or enhanced because of Australia's sanctions against the military regime, which had existed since 1988. The ambassador's role was apparently to maintain a presence only. The most senior DEAT officer with line responsibilities for Burma in the department was explicit: there should be no effort put into 'political reporting', the normal mainstay for policy officers. Curiously, this was reinforced by a recent Australian Government decision to downgrade Burma as a lower priority of intelligence interest for the main Australian intelligence community.

All of this proved to be quite unrealistic, of course, and demands from Canberra (or elsewhere) for information or assessments were received quite frequently, regardless of this 'downgraded' ranking of the Yangon post. (This system of ranking posts by their 'importance' seemed to disappear at a later stage.) Even at the time, the 'downgrading' of Burma seemed to contradict some quite specific Australian interests: Australian police and immigration officers were as interested as ever in Burma as a potential source of criminal or immigration violations. Moreover, later — perhaps in 2002 — analysts from Australia's Office of National Assessments (ONA) made brief visits to Yangon to follow up various questions in which they remained interested, as was their normal practice around the world. There was no indication from them that Burma/Myanmar was a much lower priority than before.

One useful meeting before my departure was with the highly competent and personable Myanmar Ambassador U Aye, who, as is sometimes the practice, kindly invited me to lunch. U Aye was one of Myanmar's best diplomats, going on later to be Ambassador to South Africa. Although I was not aware at the time, he had considerable experience working with Myanmar's military intelligence. He would later retire in Australia — as had some Burmese diplomats before him, and where his daughter had received her university education — and led a quiet life of seclusion. In Myanmar, his brother, U Myint, was a prominent economist who had worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and would later become an economic advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi and — in 2011 — to the reformist president, Thein Sein. Like previous Australian ambassadors, I got to know U Myint very well, and I met him quite often later whenever I returned to Myanmar.

In preparing to take up the position of ambassador, it was essential to consult members of the Burmese community in Australia, and members of the pro-democracy movement based in Australia. Not all members of the Burmese community in Australia were associated with the activist movement, which was represented mainly by the Burma Campaign Australia. Some, such as the Anglo-Burmans, who had migrated in the 1950s, and others who had come before (and sometimes after) the 1988 disturbances, did not wish to be involved in political activity. Certain ethnic groups did not like to mingle with others. So in my 'consultations' I usually needed to arrange several meetings with the Burmese community, rather than a single meeting.

The influence of the activist movement in Australia in support of the restoration of democracy in Myanmar was not as great as that in counterpart countries, such as the US and the UK. I met a number of their leaders during my briefings, and remained in occasional contact with Dr Myint Cho, one of the 1990 MPs resident in Australia, and undoubtedly their most effective public ‘voice’ in Australia.² There was a representative of, but never a formal office of, the government-in-exile in Australia, although some senior members of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) were full- or part-time residents in Australia.³ There was never an official representative of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in Australia, although some NLD supporters rather late in the piece declared themselves a ‘liberated zone’ — it is not clear whether they had any authority for this. It is hard to pinpoint the reasons for this lack of more visible support, but the difference in impact is — in hindsight — noticeable. Sympathy in response to the repression of Burmese democracy was certainly strong and consistent over time in Australia, and relatively large numbers of Burmese were accepted as refugees — across the main ethnic groups — and later as asylum seekers. But this did not translate into the sort of significant government policies one might have expected, despite many years of active lobbying for their cause. Why was this?

Australian Labor Party (ALP) support for the Burmese democracy movement was quite overt: the Australia Burma Council formerly had its office in the Sussex Street headquarters of the New South Wales (NSW) ALP.⁴ But in the various parliaments around Australia, parliamentary groups supporting Burmese democracy went across party lines, and the minor parties — the Democrats and subsequently the Greens — have been particularly strong supporters. For example, at the federal level, Australian political parties resisted economic sanctions against the Burmese military regime until its response to the ‘Saffron Revolution’ in 2007, when financial sanctions were adopted and quickly won strong bipartisan support. But they did not last long. Australia was one of the first countries to suspend its economic

2 Members of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma Cabinet residing in Australia include Foreign Affairs Spokesman Teddy Buri, and Information Spokesman Daniel Aung. Dr Myint Cho was affiliated with the Australia–Burma Council.

3 Amanda Zappia was Australian representative of the NCGUB until February 2000, when she stepped down for personal reasons. She was never replaced as representative of the NCGUB, although other members of the Australia Burma Council acted as spokesmen.

4 The Burma Campaign Australia, successor to the Australia Burma Council, is located in the NSW Trade Hall building.

sanctions after political reforms progressed in Myanmar after 2011. Support for Burma's pro-democracy movement reached all Australian political parties and most parliaments, but core support was possibly split between the Australian Labor Party and the Greens. Some key members of the ALP were highly influential on Burma, but the ALP was not really the strong 'fraternal' party of the NLD that it might have been. Later, it was noticeable to me that Aung San Suu Kyi herself did not visit Australia until the end of 2013, three years after her release from house arrest.

The Burmese community in Australia was generally as committed as it could have been to democracy, and participated in every manner of community-based protest activity — such as mass rallies in capital cities and outside the Myanmar Embassy in Canberra — but some former MPs were under warrants for 'absconding' after the 1990 elections and adopted a low-key public profile. Support for democracy was, to a certain extent, fragmented across the Australian states, and some leading figures (such as those associated with the government-in-exile resident in Australia) spent a considerable amount of their time in Thailand. In other parts of the Australian community, however, support for democracy in Myanmar was not as directly connected to the NLD as elsewhere, although when Suu Kyi did visit Australia in late 2013, the crowds that came out and attended functions in her honour in Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne were large and enthusiastic. Many members of the Burmese community were strongly apolitical, and preferred not involve themselves in political activism, especially if they were in the habit of visiting their families in Myanmar. Interestingly, the Myanmar Embassy in Canberra seemed to maintain contact with quite a wide range of Burmese residents of Australia, including some who no longer had Burmese citizenship.

The Australian trade union movement was always one of the strongest areas of support for the democracy cause in Myanmar, and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)-affiliated organisation Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA) was one of the more effective Australian support groups.⁵ While many Australian church groups were also very sympathetic,

5 According to APHEDA's website: 'Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's international program has developed from a rights based approach. Our work aims to build self-reliance through support to educational and training projects for workers and their organisations. See: apheda.org.au.

their direct involvement seemed to be channelled through counterpart church groups and needy communities in Burma rather than through the NLD. Larger Australian humanitarian international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) focused very effectively on the humanitarian aspects of their work, both in fundraising in Australia and program delivery in Burma, rather than on seeking greater political support in Australia or Myanmar. Australian tourists — who might have provided some impetus for more assertive government policies — tended to stay away from Myanmar, preferring other Southeast Asian destinations until recent years.

The overall picture of Australian interest in the plight of the Burmese people is not clear-cut and is somewhat mixed. The thinking of the Australian media — particularly the national media such as the ABC and SBS — was considerably influenced by the pro-democracy cause, as was international media anywhere, which certainly contributed to greater awareness and sympathy among Australians generally. But the Australian media did not give prominence to any single representative of the activist community in Australia, which did not have a high-profile leader. However, Australian academics made some notable and distinctive contributions to the overall democracy cause, including some working directly with the NLD. Australians have probably been as sympathetic on the Rohingya problem as the international community anywhere. Australia has long been one of the main sources of humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya through international agencies such as the World Food Programme and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Another problem may have been that Australian support efforts were focused on the affected displaced Burmese on the border with Thailand — in refugee camps and the armed resistance — where progress arising from political changes inside Myanmar was slowest to materialise.

Reflecting this persistent downplaying of Australia's interests in Burma/Myanmar, the staffing levels of the Australian Embassy in Yangon were very modest. In particular, representatives of Australian Government departments in the Australian Embassy had been drastically reduced since 1988, and were confined to DFAT and the Australian Federal Police (and the latter only arrived in 1999, the year before I assumed my duties in the embassy). There was no representative from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), which in 2013 reached eight Australia-based people. The defence attaché had

long been withdrawn; the Australian Defence Attaché to Thailand was accredited to Myanmar from Bangkok and usually visited Yangon twice a year. The Austrade office consisted of one local staff officer, with a commercial counsellor from Austrade occasionally visiting from the Australian Embassy in Bangkok (although these visits became less and less frequent). Australian immigration staff from the Bangkok Embassy visited regularly for operational reasons, and in 2003 the Department of Immigration (unilaterally) offered the Myanmar Government training in detecting passport fraud, a problem that Australia took seriously and hoped to encourage regional authorities to pursue more systematically. The Myanmar Ministry of Immigration and Population — whose minister was, of course, a general — eventually accepted the offer, which was for them rather unusual and, at first blush, slightly surprising.

DFAT annual reports from between 1998 and 2002 illustrate how thin the official relationship was during this period, repeatedly referring euphemistically to ‘carefully balanced’ policy or ‘carefully judged’ approach. Despite the 1997 dispatch of Special Envoy John Dauth (the senior departmental officer responsible for Southeast Asia at the time) to make direct personal representations about Myanmar’s need to pursue reforms, little hope was really held that such changes might occur. Thus, when Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer launched a human rights training initiative in 1999, it was always stated that the Australian Government did not expect the program would necessarily bring immediate or detectable improvements. Outside government-to-government relations, nothing else merited mention in DFAT’s annual reports during this period. In a real sense, with or without direct Australian Government support, many projects and instances of Australia–Myanmar cooperation flourished. Sanctions did not stop all forms of (or desire for) collaboration. But it can hardly be said that relations were reaching their full potential.

The condition of the Chancery of the Australian Embassy on Strand Road in downtown Yangon was arguably another sign of the low priority Burma was being accorded by DFAT at this time. Just over \$1 million had just been spent on a refurbishment of the fairly unpromising embassy building, which had formerly been an outbuilding of the famous Strand Hotel next door. While the building had some charm, it was not designed to be an embassy. An Australian contractor had been on site as foreman for the last part

of the refurbishing project, but it seems to have been done ‘on the cheap’, and many problems remained after its supposed completion in 2000, especially in relation to ‘rising damp’ — exacerbated because no tropical-grade dehumidifying equipment had been installed in the air conditioning system. (The residual moisture in the ambassador’s office was so high that a stalactite-like fungus began to grow out of a gap in the ceiling as soon as it was repainted.) Embassy staff patiently reported these problems to Canberra as they appeared, but we received little response, even when we pointed out the health implications for embassy staff. When we sent a report by cable listing the outstanding problems, we were admonished for showing lack of judgement. Yet less than five years later, DFAT was proposing to build a completely new chancery in Yangon on the grounds that the old (refurbished) one was ‘no longer’ suitable and ‘no longer’ complied with Australian health and safety standards.⁶

It is not necessarily unusual to discover a gap between the expectations of Canberra’s bureaucracy — which normally compromised any ambassador’s instructions — and the expectations that exist in the Australian community or in the country to which one is assigned. It would not normally be a good sign if this gap were too large. I knew of many instances in which an Australian ambassador had fought against limited or confining official guidelines issued from Canberra, but also knew that such situations could be professionally and personally detrimental. I was not really surprised when local expectations seemed quite a mismatch with my very unambitious official briefings, but on the whole managed to live with this, while always trying to ensure I informed Canberra clearly what any expectations were, whether or not they were welcome.

Coordination of policy with like-minded counterpart countries was an important part of the Australian Embassy role in Myanmar, but Australia’s profile was not consistently in the front line. Australia had been a member of UN Special Envoy Alvaro de Soto’s ill-fared ‘Friends of Burma’ group in 1998, but this group had become

6 In its submission to the Parliamentary Public Works Committee at the end of 2006, DFAT stated: ‘Although extensively refurbished over the years, the chancery no longer satisfies security set-back, access, building services or efficient work space needs, or current Australian building code and occupational health and safety requirements. A purpose-built chancery will meet these requirements and provide an efficient and safe working environment.’ Senate Hansard, 6 November 2006.

moribund by 2000. Australia was not invited to the Chilston Park meetings organised by the UK Government during 2001–02. However, Australia did participate in less-focused meetings of an informal Walker Hill (Seoul) group, and it proved most informative for me to attend one of these meetings alongside my predecessor as ambassador, Lyndall MacLean, in Seoul in early 2000. When UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon revived the ‘Friends of Myanmar’ group after 2007, Australia was again a participant. Whenever UN envoys visited Myanmar, Australia routinely attended the briefings provided at the end of their visits.

Australia’s formal status in relation to such groups did not seem to matter much in Yangon, where we were still taken seriously by the Myanmar Government and by representatives of the international community with whom there was regular interaction. Australia was expected to participate in such arrangements involving regional countries; indeed, non-participation by Australia might even have been seen by some as a sign that Australia was not playing its part. In part, Australian participation in multilateral consultations arose directly from Australia’s role as a regular donor to the relevant international agencies — United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, UNHCR, World Health Organization (WHO), etc. Between 2000–03, Australia only played a leading role in one multilateral program, namely the so-called ‘Mini-Dublin Group’ of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (then United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP)). By convention, Australia and Japan took it in turns to chair the monthly meetings of this group, although much of the initiative for setting the agenda remained with UNDCP. The main Australian initiative on the ground during this period was to invite the Myanmar Police Force to provide an advance briefing for the group on the Myanmar Government’s proposed money laundering legislation. At this time, it was still rare for the home government, Myanmar, to participate in such multilateral consultations in Yangon.

It was not apparent to me that whatever role Australia played was the product of a deliberate or specific strategy by Canberra. We rarely received specific briefing from Canberra for these meetings, and did not often receive routine background information that might have been relevant. Despite the value of any information sharing and policy consultation that occurred, it is hard even now to point to these groups as a source of major initiatives or breakthroughs,

although they certainly performed less ambitious roles quite well, and occasionally got the ear of the military regime. One constant problem with these consultative groups was that the military regime was never represented, so the meetings inevitably created an 'us and them' atmosphere, and the military regime never felt unduly pressured to take them seriously; or, to put it differently, the military regime could hardly have been said to have anything to fear from these groups. It goes without saying that Myanmar opposition groups were not party to any of these discussions, although some Western countries (such as the US and the UK) may have consulted Aung San Suu Kyi and her party separately.

Australian ambassadors normally have an opportunity to refresh their working strategies with Canberra by returning to Australia for mid-term 'leave and consultations'. Mine were due to occur around the end of 2001, but as a federal election was scheduled for November 2001, all leave and consultations by our ambassadors overseas were deferred, and my mid-term consultations eventually occurred in February 2002. This was very useful, as it enabled two-way conversations about the expectations of our Yangon Embassy, although from memory it was more valuable for me for the additional opportunities to interact with Australian and Burmese 'constituencies' in Australia than for any new or substantial adjustment to my official briefings. I remember discussing the 60th anniversary of the Burma–Thailand Railway with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Returned and Services League, who both very reasonably indicated they would be responsive to the level of public interest in the anniversary to determine what official involvement would be appropriate. (The then Director of the Australian War Memorial, Gary Beck, encouraged me to see if it would be possible to acquire an engine from the Burma–Thailand Railway for their collection.)

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