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Working Under Military Authoritarian Rule

Official day-to-day dealings between Yangon embassies and the military regime in Myanmar involved a good measure of pragmatism on both sides. In effect, this represented routine dealings with the government that was in effective control. Nobody ever suggested this implied any degree of consent or condoning of Myanmar's military regime. The job of all diplomats everywhere is to build up networks of well-informed, independent, accessible, and reliable contacts inside and outside the host government, among political parties, opposition groups, and NGOs, so that they can report objectively, accurately, and in a timely way to their home governments on all manner of topics. Myanmar was no different, but the fact that it operated as a police state, with a highly visible and basically hostile intelligence service, presented some obvious problems. In the early 2000s, when the local people's movements and activities were closely monitored by their own government, it could be very difficult to gather information, although it is now much easier to do this in Myanmar. After I left Myanmar in 2003, I was able, even then, to remain in touch with some of my most valuable contacts through the internet, and through my occasional visits to Myanmar.

Australia maintained a very small embassy in Yangon: in 2000–03, we only had six Australia-based staff from DFAT and one officer from the Australian Federal Police (AFP), who had been assigned to Yangon

in 1999.¹ Working as an Australian diplomat in Myanmar at this time was interesting, sometimes challenging, and occasionally one encountered the unexpected. Any government maintaining an embassy in Yangon at this time accepted that this would in itself bring them into direct contact with the military regime. So there was no point in having scruples about dealing directly with a 'pariah regime'. Some Western governments chose not to maintain an embassy for this reason, while others, such as European Union (EU) members and Australia, chose not to develop military-to-military cooperation with the regime, and, to underline this, decided not to station a defence attaché in their embassy. Even this did not mean ceasing all contact with the military as such, because, as in Australia's case, defence attachés accredited from Bangkok could still visit Myanmar for occasions such as Armed Forces Day (held annually on 27 March), when the military regime organised a formal program for the visiting attachés. It was not clear that this very limited contact brought worthwhile results, other than allowing a few Australian military officers to become a little familiar with the Burmese Army. Of course, all Australian Embassy staff were constantly watchful for any attempt by the military regime to take advantage of their enormous police powers; this included being on the alert for signs that Australian or Myanmar Embassy staff were subject to any form of pressure or were in any way vulnerable. While this meant staff had to cope with more stress than would normally be the case, both at work and outside the office, these were understood as the conditions we had to live under. We assumed that all foreign diplomatic staff were under surveillance.

The martial law regime (SLORC/SPDC) established as a result of the 1988 coup had at least a public or 'in principle' commitment to handing over power to a 'multi-party democracy' after holding national elections. Arguably, the military regime would have ended much sooner if the NLD had not walked out of the National Convention in 1995, thereby leaving the whole constitutional process in a state of suspense until 2005. (The army could have resumed the National Convention process much sooner if they wanted to, and as they eventually did, but they must have hoped for NLD to return to the process earlier, albeit in

1 By contrast, in 2013, there was a big AusAID section, plus the AFP office, and a trade commissioner (appointed earlier in the year); by the start of 2014, a defence attaché also arrived, bringing the Australian official representation back to something like it was in 1988, 25 years earlier.

a subordinate role. The army never were any good at negotiations.) Inside the country, however, many still blame the NLD for making a strategic mistake when they walked out in 1995 — and again when they refused to participate in the elections held under that constitution in 2010.

Burma had been a centrally planned state since the 1960s. While the country was definitely under quite effective military rule in 2000, it still possessed a substantial bureaucracy, including a large number of experienced technocrats in areas in which the state traditionally played a leading role, such as education, health, and agricultural support. Although this meant a very large number of civilians were working as civil servants, they were always under strong military control, through having generals openly working (in uniform) as deputy ministers and in other leading positions, as well as a sprinkling of military officers throughout the ministries (often working in plain clothes). The civilian bureaucracy had some patches of technical competence,² but not any flair or innovativeness — and certainly not any ability to take on ‘risk’.³ Lack of effective authority had long been a major weakness in the bureaucracy, dating back to Ne Win times. Moreover, Burmese officials were not permitted to criticise the military regime, and were certainly not allowed to express support for the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, the army did not necessarily regard itself as the natural ruling party, even though it had long been groomed for a ‘nation-building’ role going well beyond preserving national unity and national security. In regional areas, for example, the local military commander also served as the regional governor, with de facto responsibility for all administration, with both soldiers and civilians (for example, from the General Affairs Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs) under his authority. In the early 2000s, army colleges offered the first MBAs in Myanmar, and civil administration still features in their curricula. Yet, most of the population regarded the army as incapable of running the country competently. (The official response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 provided compelling evidence for

2 Visiting Australian technical people would occasionally comment positively to me on the technical knowledge of officials in health, agriculture, and civil engineering.

3 The best description of the Burmese state at this time is David Steinberg’s *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001.

the people's assessment.) On the other hand, the Burmese generals dismissed politicians — including the NLD — as incapable of running the country. Senior military members of the regime, as well as the regime's own propaganda, constantly reminded people that the regime was committed to relinquishing power, even though many of its actions to suppress dissent by force (in 1996 and 2007, as well as 1988) might have suggested otherwise.

Although in many respects the Burmese army is not necessarily regarded highly by the people, and while to some extent it has developed its own separate socio-economic institutions (hospitals, universities), on the whole the army is an institution that is integrated into society: there have long been retired army people working across the bureaucracy, and this might become even more common as the army downsizes if and when insurgency ends; and many families would have one son who volunteered for the army (though this can lead to a breakdown in family relationships). There is no strong 'us and them' division between the army and the people. Although the army is — consistently — a source of human rights abuses and mistreatment of people, and is already widely blamed for many of the country's problems, it is also acknowledged as one of the few strong national institutions that has historically made great contributions to the formation of the state. There is no doubt, however, that by around 2000 the army was universally regarded as not competent to be the government, and was seriously mismanaging the country by its socio-economic policies. In many quarters, the army was despised, profoundly distrusted, and looked down on. All levels of Burmese society openly made jokes at the expense of the army, and directed at Than Shwe personally, which demonstrated that the army no longer enjoyed widespread popular support as a national institution.

On the other hand, while the Burmese Army naturally used any limited contacts it had with Australian entities to present itself in the best light, and to win some sympathy from their Australian counterparts, to my knowledge they made no attempt to exploit normal commercial contacts in unacceptable ways. Occasionally, Australian companies sent representatives to Myanmar to explore possible commercial opportunities. Sometimes these 'opportunities' involved dealing with the military regime or its state-owned enterprises, but the Australian Embassy could not be involved in assisting such efforts, and during my time in Myanmar the embassy was not involved. Knowing this,

around this time only a small number of Australian companies ever visited Myanmar in search of commercial opportunities. At the same time, it was assumed that the Burmese Army could be seeking to import dual-use (civilian/military) equipment from Australia.

Khin Nyunt's Office of Strategic Studies: Agent of or façade for change?

The main 'face' of the SPDC/SLORC was Secretary One, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, who was, in effect, Chief Cabinet Secretary and the regime's spokesman, and who could deal with all issues for all audiences. Formally, Khin Nyunt was head of the military intelligence organisation in the Burmese Army. He had advanced quite quickly through the ranks, but rightly or wrongly was always regarded as lacking front-line operational experience and support. He was seen as highly intelligent and articulate, and the international media portrayed him as being 'moderate' and reform minded. He was also seen as the driving force behind the regime's limited attempts at opening up the country.⁴ Under Khin Nyunt, Myanmar's military intelligence (generally known as 'MI') had a reputation for efficiency, ruthlessness, and (relative) openness. It had its staff placed in all arms of government, and had gathered a group of well educated, confident, and articulate officers with some experience of foreign countries, who accepted their intermediary role in bringing peace to Myanmar, both internally and externally. It was Khin Nyunt's staff that had negotiated and consummated ceasefire agreements with 17 ethnic groups between 1989 and 2000. They also controlled counter-narcotics policies through the government's Central Committee on Drug Abuse Control (CCDAC), and all aspects of internal security.

By 2000, it was widely accepted that Khin Nyunt had created his own 'change agency' inside the military intelligence organisation that he headed. Although called the 'Office of Strategic Studies' (OSS),⁵ it was not an 'office' in the sense of being a separate or independent body;

4 Some of his thinking was evident in his interviews with journalists at the time, such as one by *China Express*: www.burmafund.org/Research_Library/interview_with_khin_nyunt.htm.

5 An excellent description of how the Office of Strategic Studies functioned can be found in Andrew Selth's seminal work *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*, Norwalk, Connecticut: EastBridge, 2002.

it was staffed entirely by military intelligence officers who worked on both domestic and international policies under their leader Major-General Kyaw Win, Khin Nyunt's close associate.⁶ It had specific responsibilities for international relations, anti-narcotics policy, and ethnic affairs, where its authority exceeded that of the line government agencies. Importantly, it also had chief responsibility as the liaison channel for the dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, through Major-General Kyaw Win and other senior OSS officers. OSS staff tended to be well educated, had good policy skills, and spoke good English, and they were noticeably comfortable, indeed confident, in dealing with foreigners. Their military status was quite overt, and they were open about their lines of command. Among embassies, they came to be regarded as the best people to get problems 'fixed'. They were almost alone among anyone in the SPDC regime in having contact with Aung San Suu Kyi and being prepared to discuss her.

Khin Nyunt was *de facto* prime minister long before he was given the formal title in 2003. He was extremely competent, decisive, and demonstrably familiar with a wide range of policy issues. He spoke reasonably good English and understood it quite well, although (sensibly) when conducting formal business, he would use an interpreter. In person, Khin Nyunt was impressive and reasonable, although he could be tough and even ruthless, and was a formidable negotiator. He took his responsibilities seriously and seemed to enjoy his power and his role thoroughly. People recognised that he wielded enormous authority and that he could be counted on to deal with complex problems and any political issues that arose. It was accepted that he was prepared to take risks, and to consider new and unprecedented approaches. His leadership encouraged the international community to see him as showing a way forward. Burmese people were always conscious of his capacity to exercise the authority of a dictatorship. At this time, Khin Nyunt seemed to be domestically and internationally regarded as the military leader who might be able to lead the country towards national reconciliation, and who might be able to persuade the more conservative regime head, Senior General Than Shwe, to go along with some changes. While this might have been an optimistic scenario, it seemed to enjoy some

6 Major-General Kyaw Win was an extremely intelligent and affable military commander, and also quite an accomplished amateur painter. He was called on from time to time to 'negotiate' with Aung San Suu Kyi.

credibility even among members of the military, although senior ministers and generals often mentioned regretfully their inability to convince the top leaders of the virtues of new policies.

The Office of Strategic Studies was in many ways the international face of the military regime and, compared to some other parts of the Myanmar Government, was relatively accessible. At one level, OSS managed the regime's public relations; at another level they controlled dealings with the outside world, including foreign visa and Myanmar passport issue.⁷ On arrival in Yangon, it was normal to pay an initial courtesy call on OSS, as well as on other ministries. Like all military organisations, they were relatively formal and protocol-conscious, but they were reasonably friendly and gave the impression of being helpful. All embassies in Yangon adopted a pragmatic approach to dealing with the OSS and military intelligence.⁸ The bureaucracy and OSS were relatively open about the roles that each played, but this sometimes meant leaders of the mainstream army were not involved in many of the day-to-day affairs of state. Civilian parts of the Myanmar Government bureaucracy did not necessarily enjoy being overshadowed by military intelligence, but some bureaucrats seemed to work very closely — if not always comfortably — with military intelligence staff. Khin Nyunt and his deputy, Major-General Kyaw Win, were generally impressive and competent, and their senior colleagues, Brigadier-General Thein Swe and Brigadier-General Kyaw Thein (on narcotics and ethnic issues), were also cooperative and efficient. Ultimately, OSS staff tended to be somewhat cocky and perhaps over-confident in their role, and this may be why they were a particular target for the purge that happened in 2004–05.

The OSS could be extremely helpful, especially in handling slightly unusual situations, as its staff were less hidebound than the bureaucracy, had the authority to overrule the bureaucracy, and knew that they would not be challenged if they obtained Khin Nyunt's blessing for any proposed action. They were often an avenue of last resort for foreign embassies. On one occasion, the Australian Embassy in its consular role needed to contact an Australian backpacker who

7 In 2000, the regime's official spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Hla Min, wrote a propaganda publication for the regime entitled 'Political Situation of Myanmar and its Role in the Region', which is now in its 26th edition.

8 Of course, Western embassies also considered Burma's military intelligence to be a 'hostile' intelligence service, and the necessary security protections were used.

was travelling ‘up country’ and we asked military intelligence if they could help us locate the young man to tell him that his father was seriously ill in Australia. Military intelligence obliged and, eventually, some time later (too late, as it happened) provided us with detailed list of where the young man had travelled and the hotels he had stayed in. The only problem was that the information reached the Australian Embassy long after the young man had returned to Australia. This anecdote reveals several sides of Burma’s military intelligence: their wide reach that could be quite effectively targeted; their extreme technological backwardness; and their readiness to provide assistance in some circumstances.

Dealings with the Army

Protocol demanded that the Australian Ambassador present credentials to the Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Than Shwe, who was head of the military regime (the State Peace and Development Council), and to make introductory and farewell calls on the de facto prime minister, General Khin Nyunt. It was also not unusual to see General Khin Nyunt at national day receptions of leading Asian countries.

Embassies had little or no contact with Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Than Shwe, other than in the case of high-level visits, such as the October 2002 visit of Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer to Myanmar, which included a courtesy call on Than Shwe in his capacity as head of state. Than Shwe would occasionally be seen from a distance at formal state occasions. There was even less contact with former head of state, Ne Win, who was living under de facto house arrest in a remote location on the edge of Inya Lake in Yangon. Members of the public and foreigners were not permitted to meet Ne Win, although members of his family (his children) were occasionally in contact with some senior Burmese. Although Ne Win was reputed to be pulling the strings behind the military regime, there was no evidence whatsoever of this by 2000: no verified reports of interaction between Ne Win and the military leadership; no reports of any kind of interventions by Ne Win in policies, politics, or national security matters; no rumours or anecdotal reports of Ne Win’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the state of the nation. In hindsight, it seemed that promoting stories of Ne Win retaining real

power suited conspiracy theorists, and those who sought to discredit the Than Shwe/Khin Nyunt leadership of the army. In fact, whether he did or did not retain political influence made no difference at all. When Ne Win finally died in December 2002, the military regime even denied him an official funeral, more or less confirming that he had long lost any standing.⁹ There were no observable consequences from his death.

As an embassy without a military attaché on its staff in-country, the Australian Embassy, like many other embassies, had almost no direct dealings at all with uniformed officers in the one organisation that ran Myanmar, the Burmese Army, or *Tatmadaw*. The only immediate consequence of this was that, as ambassador of a country that did not have a defence attaché on its embassy staff, and did not maintain active defence relations, I did not receive an invitation to attend the Burmese Army's annual Armed Forces Day celebrations. (This is not to say that this event was without its impact on anyone living in Yangon: with a large parade of soldiers, and some equipment, near the centre of the city, and rehearsals for weeks before and — even by 2003 — live television coverage on the day, one could not be unaware of the event.)

As in some other countries where access to the government was not easy, quite a bit of business would be transacted with Myanmar Government leaders attending national day receptions. I recall one diplomatic reception, before the 40th anniversary of the Burma–Thailand Railway in 2002, at which I tackled General Khin Nyunt over the very poor state of the road between Yangon and Mawlamyaing, by which elderly Australian former POWs would have to travel in order to attend the commemorative event at Thanbyuzayat (just south of Mawlamyaing) in May 2003. I was concerned that some of our veteran visitors might suffer health problems because of the state of the road. It was probably not normal, and certainly not encouraged, for ambassadors to raise such negative and possibly embarrassing issues with army leaders. Foreign Minister U Win Aung (now deceased) pulled at my arm to drag me away from General Khin Nyunt, who listened but did not make any very specific commitment to me. But some repair work was subsequently done on the road before the railway anniversary event. It was perhaps planned to occur anyway.

9 The Reuters report of his death, compiled with input from the Reuters stringer in Yangon, can be seen at: www.dawn.com/news/70684/ne-win-dies-at-91.

At this time, there were perhaps only four ministers in the cabinet who were not from the army,¹⁰ so meetings with any other ministers were with army generals. The sports minister who attended the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney with the Myanmar athletes was Brigadier-General Aye Win. His attendance required a waiver of the travel bans applied by Australia against the military regime. The travel bans had a significant effect in deterring high-level official travel to Australia, which was not always for the public good. We had only one clear example where the bans were applied when it might have been beneficial if the visit had proceeded. This was a proposed visit by the Mayor of Mandalay, who was attracted by some traffic light technology being manufactured and exported by an Australian company in Melbourne, and was planning to visit with an eye to consummating the purchase. When it was realised he was a brigadier-general, his proposed visit was aborted, and his visa application was denied, and as far as I know the sale did not proceed. So the commercial returns were lost by the Australian firm, and Mandalay would have obtained its traffic lights from another source. Slightly lower-level military officers of the rank of colonel or lieutenant colonel were permitted (by special arrangement) to attend an ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Sydney in 2002.

Of course, embassies also dealt routinely with those military officers who held ministerial rank in the cabinet/government — whose rank ranged from major-general to colonel. These ministers wore their uniform proudly when working inside Myanmar, but would attend international meetings in other countries in civilian clothes. One also encountered uniformed officers in their regional commander roles, when travelling ‘up country’. In my case, I had occasion to call on the Deputy Regional Commander in Rakhine State for a briefing on the security situation there. I also called on the Regional Commander in Mon State to seek his cooperation in a broad sense for Australian participation in the 2003 anniversary of the Burma–Thailand Railway. However, embassies did not normally have dealings with the military

10 U Soe Tha, the Minister for National Planning and Economic Development (elected in 2010 as a Union Solidarity and Development Party MP and Committee Chair in the People’s Assembly); U Than Aung, the Minister for Education (now deceased); David Abel, the Minister for Trade (a former military officer, now retired); and Dr Kyaw Myint, Health Minister after 2001 (now retired).

corporations — Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings or Myanmar Economic Corporation — or any of the other military arms of the Ministry of Defence, the three services (army, navy, and air force).

The major military event on the annual calendar was Armed Services Day, 27 March, which was usually an occasion for a massive march by army troops, but not necessarily for displays of military hardware, as in some other countries. Streets in Yangon were closed off for this event, and for the rehearsals that took place in the weeks leading up to 27 March. The Australian Defence Attaché (from Bangkok) usually attended this event, but no other Australian embassy staff were invited to attend. So the Australian Ambassador and other staff had almost no opportunity or occasion to get to know regular members of the military. (By contrast, the US Chargé d’Affaires in Yangon often played golf with senior military officers, thanks partly to the connections the US Government maintained with the *Tatmadaw* through the three US military attachés stationed in their embassy in Myanmar, notwithstanding US sanctions.) The absence of regular, direct, and effective channels of communication with the military was undoubtedly something of a handicap, but it did not really produce problems for the Australian Embassy at this time. Defence attaché visits from Bangkok were a useful supplement for our limited defence intelligence needs, but their necessarily infrequent and occasional character meant they did not seem to lead to significant deeper understanding of the military regime.¹¹ This may have changed a few years later when a successor defence attaché in Bangkok found his visit more productive.

The one regular contact the Australian Embassy had with the army was to request them to provide a bugler for the annual Anzac Day service, which was held at the Yangon Commonwealth War Cemetery on 25 April.¹² They regularly did this, and indeed seemed to be pleased to oblige. Since Burma was still a colony and not independent in World War II, remembrance of World War II military history was not as

11 Politically, at this time, with almost no sign of flexibility on the part of the military about transferring political power, it would not have been realistic for Australia to seek to engage more directly with members of the military.

12 Only seven Australian soldiers are buried in the Yangon Cemetery, compared to some 23 at the largest Commonwealth War Cemetery at Taukkyant, north of Yangon, and 1,350 prisoner of war graves at the Commonwealth War Cemetery for the Burma–Thailand Railway at Thanbyuzayat (see Chapter 10).

prominent in Myanmar as one might have expected, given the country was directly ruled by the military from 1988–2011, and the small but valuable role the Burmese army played in victory over the Japanese in World War II. So Anzac Day and Remembrance Day (11 November) ceremonies were mainly attended by the foreign community, and any role the Burmese army played in these commemorations would not have been noticed by other Burmese. The Myanmar Government played no official part in these ceremonies at all.

In the early 2000s, the role of the Burmese army in controlling the country was not normally much in evidence. Large military barracks were a common sight around the country, but military troops were rarely seen in an operational role. Troops were deployed to border areas for military operations, but it was not common to see military troops stationed on the streets in Yangon or other major cities. This was somewhat surprising given that a military regime was running the country. If there were security alerts (for example, against a possible *coup d'état*) troops would sometimes be mobilised discreetly around town, usually overnight, and not in obvious view. Army leaders seemed intent on keeping their visible presence to a minimum, other than in their roles as ministers in the government when they customarily wore their military uniforms, and when they were often photographed. Even so, it was impossible for any foreigner living or working in Myanmar to be oblivious of the army.¹³ At the same time, the fundamental role that the Burmese army has always played in Myanmar means that its unstated presence in the background is a factor that Burmese people live with, often uncomfortably. Moreover, this presence reaching right across the country could sometimes affect daily affairs, especially the affairs of Myanmar families, quite directly. Most embassies in Yangon paid close attention to the views and thinking of the military, to the extent that it was possible to ascertain what these were.

The modest commercial or non-governmental presence of Australian organisations and individuals in Myanmar did not bring them into much direct contact with the military. So, after 2000, the Australian Embassy had little cause to deal with the Burmese army on its own. This also meant we had little or no opportunity to influence the

13 Mary Callahan explains the often contradictory role of the army in state-building in *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004.

Burmese army, but this was not a role we were seeking, then or now.¹⁴ After Australia's other sanctions against Myanmar were lifted between 2010 and 2012, the restrictions on direct cooperation with the military were retained. This reflects an enduring political constraint, whereby the pro-democracy advocates on Burma in Australia, as elsewhere, still criticise any direct Australian Government military dealings with the Burmese Army, and are reluctant to accept that such dealings could be justified, given the Burmese Army's continuing record of human rights abuses.

Ultimately, the Burmese Army is a highly secretive organisation, not given to making public statements to advertise or defend its policies. It was suspicious of outsiders, and distrusted foreigners as well as civilian Burmese.¹⁵ At the same time, it was an extremely proud organisation, certain of its central place in holding the Myanmar state together, and assured about the absolute importance of its role in supporting national security. Aung San Suu Kyi was inclined to say that she accepted that the army would play a key role in nation-building, and was confident that they could more than hold their own against Thailand. However, after 1994, as the army spent less time fighting insurgency following the conclusion of various ceasefire agreements, its military prowess began to erode, and during the short border disagreement with Thailand in 2002 it lost out in cross-border skirmishes with Thai troops for the first time.

Working in a Police State

Anyone living in Myanmar in those days, even as a diplomat, was very conscious that Burma was a fairly effective police state, but its police state system also had some obvious weaknesses. It still relied mainly on paper documents; the IT age had not arrived fully

14 However, Dr John Blaxland from the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at ANU, and Defence Attaché to Myanmar (and Thailand) from 2008–10, has argued that Australia could play a key role in influencing the *Tatmadaw* positively in regard to reform and ongoing state-building activities. See: John Blaxland, 'Myanmar: Time for Australian Defence Cooperation', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 7 No. 4, Summer 2011, pp. 63–76. Available at: www.regionalsecurity.org.au/Resources/Files/vol7no4Blaxland.pdf.

15 An Australian scholar specialising in the Burmese military, Dr Andrew Selth (who was formerly a diplomatic member of the Australian Embassy staff) still has professional contact with the military.

in Myanmar, so the regime's information was often incomplete, its communications arrangements were primitive, and its responses were not always timely. Nevertheless, one could not really escape the feeling of being regularly monitored, if not actually followed, and it was uncomfortable knowing that Burmese staff at the embassy or the ambassador's residence were probably reporting to military intelligence on one's activities. This meant one was always careful and automatically cautious in whatever one did.

One of the more irksome manifestations of the military regime was the tight control that was exercised, quite effectively, over in-country travel by the staff of foreign embassies and international agencies. For diplomats, it was necessary to obtain permission for any travel (private or official) more than 50 miles outside Yangon (other than for tourist trips to Pagan and Mandalay). One irritating aspect of this was that permission would always be granted at the last minute. In reciprocity, the Australian Government (like its Western counterparts) imposed parallel restrictions on Myanmar diplomats in Canberra. These travel restrictions mostly had a strong 'nuisance value'; I have never seen any study, official or otherwise, that demonstrated that these travel restrictions ever produced any other useful results. They were accepted as one of the array of security counter-measures (perhaps even 'counter-espionage' measures) against such governments. There was no formal effort made by either side to change or moderate this policy in this period.

The Australian Embassy operated under instructions from Canberra to comply with such restrictions. Personally, whenever possible, I avoided seeking permission to travel to areas where tourists were permitted to travel freely, and where diplomats should have been absolutely free to travel. But if I had reasons — official or otherwise — to travel to more unusual places, I normally 'notified' the Foreign Ministry; I specifically did not seek 'permission', although the ministry often responded formally by saying my travel had been 'approved'. I only rarely omitted to notify my intention to travel outside Yangon, and sometimes this did not seem to be noticed by the Myanmar authorities. It was sometimes possible to go to unusual parts of the country that were not generally 'open'. For example, permission was given for me to make an official visit to Northern Chin State in December 2002 so that we could inspect an embassy community aid project — a village water supply and mini-hydro scheme — that had been funded under

the embassy's Direct Assistance Program. In early 2003, I joined an ASEAN ambassadors' tour of the famous ruby-mining area of Mogok, which was normally 'off-limits' for foreigners, presumably because of the risk of smuggling rubies, and perhaps because of the appalling working conditions of the miners.¹⁶ There were few if any instances where an embassy or an ambassador was singled out by the Myanmar authorities for more favourable treatment under these arrangements. We never inquired about how the Chinese or (then) Soviet embassies were restricted.

In my case, travel permission was only denied twice. The first instance was when we sought to go further along the track of the World War II Burma–Thailand Railway — from Thanbyuzayat (the site of the Commonwealth War Cemetery) to Three Pagodas Pass — than had previously been allowed. Permission was denied on the grounds of security, which was slightly plausible, in that the New Mon State Army controlled territory there. (I am not aware of any foreigner being permitted to travel to Three Pagodas Pass from Thanbyuzayat until Professor Joan Beaumont from ANU in February 2013.) The leading ethnic group in the area, the New Mon State Party (NMSP), would normally have been prepared to allow travel within their territory, but their relations with the government were not good at this time. I encountered them only at road checkpoints where their territorial control began, although the NMSP sent an unofficial representative to the 60th anniversary ceremony we held at the Thanbyuzayat Commonwealth War Cemetery in 2003. On another occasion, my wife and I wanted to visit Laiza, the lacquerware production site in Shan state, privately, but we were told that on security grounds we could not go there. (There was some insurgent activity in the area, so this could have been a genuine reason.) I did not hear of any other foreigners visiting Laiza at this time.

Generally, during this period the authorities relaxed their restrictions on foreigners' travel quite considerably, and organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were permitted to establish branch offices in a number of regional centres (some of which were later closed). During my three years in Yangon, I was able to travel widely around the country, mixing business and pleasure

16 All such officially approved tours were very tightly controlled during this period, with itineraries and meetings under strict Myanmar official restrictions.

(tourism), from the north in Kachin State, where Australian aid funds were going to the INGO World Concern, to the far south in Myeik, where the West Australian firm Atlantic Pearls had a joint venture with the Ministry of Mines. I was able to visit environmental sites (such as the Moyingyi Wetlands, listed under Ramsar),¹⁷ cultural sites such as Pagan (later accepted for World Heritage listing by UNESCO), Sri Ksetra, the ancient archaeological Pyu site in Central Myanmar, and Mrauk-U in Rakhine State, as well as beach resorts (such as Ngwesaung, where development was overwhelmingly by private entrepreneurs). Only once, when trekking from Kalaw in Shan State to Inle Lake, was I directly affected by being followed by the security authorities, who tried to find me at the wrong hotel in Nyaung Shwe, at the northern end of Inle Lake, and loudly abused our tour guide — not in my presence — for misleading them (when it was plainly their mistake). When travelling by car along the track of the World War II Burma–Thailand Railway in Mon State, we eventually reached a security checkpoint beyond which we were not permitted to travel. Unlike my predecessor, I was allowed to visit Northern Chin State (Tiddim) to inspect an Australian aid project for a village water supply. I was only rarely conscious of being monitored or trailed by Myanmar security/intelligence vehicles, which were mostly unobtrusive, but our private driver sometimes openly reported our movements on these trips to MI staff. Several trips were organised by UN agencies such as UNICEF or UNHCR, for which Australia was a significant donor, both for Myanmar programs as well as more broadly.

Under existing standard procedures, as ambassador, I was required to obtain written permission from both Canberra and the Myanmar Government for any travel I undertook inside Myanmar, whether the travel was official or private. Securing approval from DFAT to undertake travel was not normally a problem, as long as the Embassy Number Two, the First Secretary, remained in Yangon. Obtaining permission from the Myanmar authorities in time to make the necessary logistical arrangements was not always easy, and once or twice when travelling to Mandalay or Pagan for tourism, I did not bother to seek their approval (on the grounds that foreign tourists did

17 Ramsar is the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. Myanmar only ratified the convention in 2005, and Moyingyi is Myanmar's only listed wetlands site. When I visited, preparations for its listing under Ramsar were already well advanced. See: www.ramsar.org/wetland/myanmar.

not need to obtain permission to travel to such sites). There were no consequences from this. I was given permission for all other trips, and travelled without any official 'escort' or security presence; other than a trip in early 2003 to Chin State, which was not open for tourists at that stage. On that trip to Northern Chin State (Haka, Tiddim, and Falang), I was obliged to accept two armed soldiers for security protection (although it was not certain that their weapons had bullets). There was no problem in following our planned itinerary and we were able to carry out our program as proposed. Needless to say, there was never any hint of a security problem. On none of my travels did I experience any 'incidents' or interference of any kind. Other than the trip to Chin State, I never sought permission from the Myanmar authorities to meet specific Myanmar individuals, many of whom worked for non-government bodies, while on these trips. If there were any concerns on the part of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra on the grounds of security or anything else, they were never made known to me.

Whatever the extent to which our movements were monitored by the internal security authorities, I was never conscious of Myanmar non-government people in the regions being reluctant to meet me or fearful of the consequences of talking to me. At the same time, I did not seek to introduce political overtones into regional trips. Like other Western colleagues, I met former political prisoner and NLD-elected MP U Ohn Maung whenever we stayed at his Inle Princess Resort on Inle Lake in Shan State. There seemed to be no consequences from these meetings for U Ohn Maung, who spoke frankly about his experiences and his openly (but predictably) anti-government views. Most of the Myanmar people I met were cautious in their remarks, the notable exception being the rickshaw driver in Mawlamyaing who was quite happy to expound his fierce determination to run for the elections, while standing next to me in the middle of the road. When travelling inside Myanmar, I did not normally seek to meet regional Myanmar Government representatives, who were also regional military commanders. I usually had no business to raise with them, and to meet them could have implied inappropriate recognition of their political legitimacy. There were only two exceptions to this: when I called on the (Military) Governor of Mon State in early 2003 to alert him to the visit by Australian former prisoners of war to Thanbyuzayat, south of Mawlamyaing, for the 60th anniversary of the Burma–Thailand

Railway in May 2003; and when I called on the Deputy Regional Commander/Deputy Governor in Sittwe to explain Australia's interest in the plight of the Muslim Rohingya, as the largest foreign donor to the World Food Programme, and to urge the Myanmar Government to treat these people more reasonably. Not surprisingly, I was given the standard response by the Deputy Governor, who was some years later 'promoted' to be a deputy minister in the central government.

Pragmatic interaction with the government in effective control

The Australian Embassy had no specific detailed instructions on how to handle day-to-day dealings with the military regime. This would normally be left to the common sense judgement of embassy officers, and the absence of detailed guidelines was not really problematic. A pragmatic approach generally made sense. But the arms-length relationship that Australian governments preferred, for domestic political reasons, to maintain with the military regime could lead to awkward moments. Ambassadors normally call on ministers of the receiving government after they present their credentials to the head of state. I decided to seek appointments with the ministers with whose portfolios Australia had most contact, or some semblance of a working relationship. But the only civilian ministers were the Minister for Trade (David Abel, a retired brigadier-general and a Christian who was responsible for ASEAN Free Trade Area issues); the Minister for National Development and National Planning (U Soe Tha, whose responsibilities included coordination of aid, and Australia wasn't giving economic aid to Myanmar at this time); the Minister for Education (U Than Aung), although Australia at that time had stopped offering scholarships to students from Myanmar as part of its sanctions against the military regime; and the Attorney-General (U Tha Tun, who supported human rights development, but died in office in 2002). Even the Minister for Health was a general — Major-General Ket Sein, against whom human rights abuse allegations had been made by human rights activists. (Later, and perhaps more normally, a senior medical doctor was appointed Minister of Health.)

The main ministry that acted as the interface between the diplomatic corps and the military regime was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Myanmar has a career foreign service whose personnel were competent and courteous, if not always fully in control of the ministry's policies. Some senior members of the Myanmar foreign service had even been trained in Australia before 1988; the last one being Ambassador Kyaw Tint Shwe, who would become Myanmar Ambassador to the United Nations around 2003. Senior Myanmar diplomats were quite impressive, in particular Deputy Foreign Minister U Khin Maung Win (who was *de facto* head of the ministry). A few military officers had been transferred to the ministry over the years, to toughen it and to ensure the army knew what ministry staff were thinking. Some, but almost certainly not all, of these officers were known to foreign diplomats. Several became long-term members of the Myanmar foreign service. They did not necessarily perform well, but one exception to this was the long-time Chief of Protocol, Thura Aung Htet, who would recount with feeling his difficult years in the army in the jungle fighting the Burmese Communist Party. On closer acquaintance, by the early 2000s, Myanmar diplomats could be quite frank in private conversations. Sometimes they even went further than might have been expected in official discussion, for example, requesting (publicly available) reports of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings on a regular basis, even though there was no prospect of Myanmar being invited to join APEC at that time. After the US bombing of Iraq in 2003, one middle-ranking bureaucrat who was in frequent contact with diplomats privately called for similar US action against Myanmar, but such extreme behaviour was rare, and he did not remain long in his job after this.

Given the synergies between the Australian and Myanmar economies, and after consulting Australian NGOs informally, I decided in the first instance to call on the ministers for mines, agriculture, and livestock and fisheries, all of which were sectors of potential direct interest to Australia. Each of these ministers was a general, but each was accustomed to meeting foreign 'dignitaries' in their 'civilian' capacity. The meetings I had with these ministers were vaguely useful, and I recall the Minister of Livestock and Fisheries (Brigadier-General Maung Maung Thein, who was the longest serving minister in the early 2000s) proudly telling me there were no state-owned enterprises under his ministry. The Minister for Agriculture, Major-General Nyunt

Tin, was enthusiastic in supporting agricultural research cooperation with the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research when this was proposed in 2002, and we signed the government-to-government MOU for the project together.¹⁸ The Minister for Mines, Brigadier-General Ohn Myint, had oversight of the pearl industry, where there was an Australian joint venture.¹⁹ I realised there was a limit to the utility of these calls on other ministers after a particularly unimpressive meeting with the Minister of Industry Number One, (where, by contrast, there were no less than six separate state-owned enterprises). The minister, a retired army officer who was one of the regime's hard-line ideologues, U Aung Thaung, simply rattled off government propaganda and was not in the least interested in engaging with a 'Western' diplomat.²⁰

Seeking out civil society: Few alternatives to the military regime

There were few practical alternatives to dealing with the military regime in Myanmar in the early 2000s. One of the frequent observations about Myanmar at that time was that, structurally, civil society weakness was one of the major obstacles to reform and democratic change. This is hardly surprising, given that around two million Burmese, who represented much of the intellectual and financial capital of Myanmar, had left the country after 1988 to live overseas. The non-government sector was indeed unusually weak between 2000–03, having been actively suppressed during Ne Win's one-party rule after 1964. Ne Win had even forced organisations such as the local subsidiary of Rotary International to disband itself, although, by 2003, suggestions for the revival of Rotary in Myanmar

18 Major-General Nyunt Tin had been appointed as Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation in 1997, and was dismissed ('permitted to retire') in 2005, supposedly for corruption.

19 This was Myanmar Atlantic Pearl, which was based in Western Australia and operated a pearl farm near Myeik in the far south of Myanmar. See their website: www.myanmarpearl.com/update.htm.

20 According to the editor of *The Irrawaddy* magazine, Aung Thaung was known for his anti-Western views and for his survivor instincts. He later served on the executive of the government's Union Solidarity and Development Association. See Aung Zaw, 'Aung Thaung: Burma's Untouchable Minister', *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 15, No. 6, June 2007. He stood for election for the USDP in 2010 and was elected, but was not given a ministerial position by President Thein Sein in his new cabinet in March 2011.

began to be heard, but did not gain any headway until more than a decade later. Interestingly, church organisations, including the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), continued to function, and several volunteers from Australian counterpart groups were present during this period. The Myanmar Red Cross (MRC) was a government organisation, but the Australian Red Cross considered it a counterpart, and occasionally sent its experts to work at the MRC in Yangon or with ICRC which at that time had numerous offices around the country. The Australian Embassy had good contacts with both the MRC and the ICRC.

After around 1999, it had become possible for local non-governmental organisations to be approved as potential partners for international 'counterparts'. One of the first organisations to be established was an environmental group, the Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association (FREDA), which had been established as early as 1996.²¹ Some environmentalists later established another wildlife conservation organisation called the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA). According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, by 2002 more than 20 local NGOs had been approved,²² but they were closely watched by the authorities and allowed little freedom of action. Unfortunately, these NGOs were rather fragile and, at that time, did not have a high level of capacity, so there were limited scope for connections between Australia and these groups. (On my return to Australia in 2003, I sought to put BANCA in touch with Birds Australia in the hope that counterpart collaboration could develop.) Historically, there were also a few government-connected humanitarian organisations, such as the Myanmar Anti-Narcotics Association (MANA). Some Australian grass-roots assistance was delivered with the cooperation of local organisations such as the Myanmar YMCA, which was remarkably 'independent', and headed nationally at the time by the respected (Karen Christian) scholar Tun Aung Chain. Such organisations often seemed to have developed pragmatic working relationships with the authorities, who did not interfere unduly with small-scale, local humanitarian initiatives.²³

21 FREDA maintains an impressive website. See: fredamyanmar.com/freda.html.

22 Official communication from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Australian Embassy.

23 On the other hand, the military regime remained quite suspicious of international agencies and pursued a much more interventionist role in relations to their activities, insisting that programs be coordinated and monitored by the Ministry of National Development and Economic Planning, a policy that was resisted to the extent possible by NGOs and UN agencies.

Embassies that had similar programs (the UK and Japan) had similar experiences, so this was not a unique phenomenon for Australian programs.

Around this time, a few academics and retired bureaucrats with professional qualifications had organised 'academies of science' as a means of keeping in touch with other professionals and fostering future independent professional development. These groups depended to a great extent on retired government officials, but were seriously short of funding. In 2002, the Australian Embassy arranged for a donation of surplus forestry science books from ANU Forestry School (where quite a number of Myanmar foresters had been trained under the Colombo Plan) to be donated to the Academy of Agriculture and Forestry Sciences. These organisations would later proliferate as new vehicles for international cooperation and provide some long-awaited opportunities for strengthening civil society. Also common were some professional associations, a few of which were active, useful, and non-political. The best known was probably the Myanmar Historical Commission, whose regular conference was a major opportunity for interaction between scholars, including, from time to time, some from Australia. There was a further substantial growth in the NGO sector after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, partly as a result of the ongoing need for relief activities for local communities.

Another large and important national Myanmar non-governmental organisation was the Buddhist clergy, or *sangha*, numbering more than 400,000. They were not officially isolated from the outside world, and occasionally travelled overseas. Burma hosted the World Buddhist Summit in December 2004, the year after I left Myanmar, and from around this time began to receive foreigners who wished to undertake meditation courses (a special kind of religious tourism). In the absence of many 'neutral' political observers, I sometimes sought to consult leading independent Buddhists about current affairs. A *sayadaw* I visited on more than one occasion was U Jotika (Zawtika),²⁴ who was comfortable discussing the current political situation. I met another *sayadaw* who had actually been a political prisoner himself, and who

24 U Zawtika (also spelled U Jotika) speaks fluent English, having lived for a short period in the United States. He was living in a small monastery on the outskirts of Bago, about 50 kilometres north of Yangon. Like many prominent *sayadaws* in Myanmar, he has a large popular following for his sermons that he distributes on CDs or tapes. His biodata can be found at www.thisismyanmar.com/nibbana/jotikauk.htm.

was much more nervous about talking (through an interpreter) about such matters. Burmese people quite routinely discuss their daily issues with their *sayadaus*, as we might in a Western society. Some Myanmar *sayadaus* are actively and openly involved in supporting their communities over politically sensitive local issues, but many who were affiliated with the government-controlled *sangha* would not challenge or criticise the military regime.

One sector that was largely ‘missing’ in Myanmar was the media, both domestic Myanmar media and international media. A trademark of the military regime was its highly effective censorship of the media. Amongst other things, this meant no foreign correspondent was based in Myanmar, apart from the Xinhua representative, and tight controls were exercised over journalistic reporting. But even by 2000, this was starting to change. Foreign media representatives were permitted to enter the country as working journalists from time to time, satellite broadcasting was beginning to have an audience and an impact, and more and more Burmese were tuning into Burmese-language broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), and later (2007) Radio Australia. Although political uses of the media were still in their infancy inside Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi was very effectively using video ‘messages’ and speeches smuggled out of the country to get her message across directly to international audiences. But even SPDC censorship was being exercised more sensitively in some ways. For example, several international news agencies had long employed highly capable and well-informed local journalists as their ‘stringers’. Some of the best media reporting at this interesting transition time was by the stringers for Reuters (Aung Hla Tun) and Associated Press (Aye Aye Win). These two highly professional journalists showed excellent ‘instincts’ when it came to knowing what developments were important and would be carried by international media. But their reporting was all the more impressive because they succeeded in pushing the boundaries of what reporting the regime would tolerate. Their reports were more accurate, and more timely, and sometimes would have definitely benefited from information provided by military intelligence. Of course, the *Myanmar Times* was operating in a similar way, but it remained constrained by its weekly format and by (initially) appearing only in English.

On one occasion around 2002, I discussed press censorship with the editor-in-chief of one of the main daily Muslim newspapers, who described the form of self-censorship under which he was permitted to operate at that time: his newspaper content was entirely confined to religious matters and not political or social issues. But it seems like the form of 'post-publication censorship' adopted after 2012. At that time, he was not noticeably unhappy about any restrictions on his publishing activities.

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