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## Myanmar in 2000: Ready Or Not For Change?

In 2000, the Australian Government's assessment of the prospects for movement in Burma seemed about as gloomy as could be imagined.<sup>1</sup> What the assessment did not mention was that the process of political negotiations in Myanmar remained at a complete stalemate, and that the prospects for a resolution of this situation seemed as remote as ever. What it did not need to state was that a repressive, undemocratic military regime was still engaging in widespread human rights abuses and that the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was still under house arrest, with her freedom of movement extremely restricted. Faced at that time with a 'temporary' military regime which had already been in power for more than a decade, and apparently confronting stern outward resistance from the Burmese army military leadership to any overt liberalising openings, it was hard to discern where the inspiration for substantial change

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1 The entire entry on Burma in the DFAT Annual Report for 1999–2000 read: 'We continued a carefully judged approach to Burma, enabling Mr Downer's Human Rights Institution initiative to proceed to the point where the first human rights training workshops could be held in July, with another one to follow in October 2000. The workshops expose middle-ranking Burmese civil servants to international human rights concepts, instruments and standards. At the same time as implementing this innovative approach, we took care to keep Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese opposition fully informed. The department complemented the human rights initiative through direct representations to the Burmese Government about arrests and harassment of members of opposition groups, and other human rights violations. We supported human rights resolutions on Burma at the UN General Assembly and the UN Commission on Human Rights and a resolution on the use of forced labour in Burma at the International Labour Conference.'

could emerge. Yet it was mainly a problem of not knowing enough about the opponents. As the International Crisis Group would comment in its very first report on Myanmar in 2000: 'The challenge for the international community is to find ways — having regard to the regime's apparent strengths and vulnerabilities — to intensify the pressure upon it to accommodate peaceful democratic transition.'<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, as I discovered during my initial exposure to Burmese matters after my appointment was decided upon in early 2000, there were some very slight grounds for hoping that the distasteful military regime in Yangon might be receptive to allowing some change. For example, when Australian Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti visited Myanmar in August 1999, he was surprised by the apparent openness he encountered about exploring the scope for human rights cooperation on the part of regime representatives.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, even a slight hope for positive movement seemed to encourage some international 'players' to contemplate modest initiatives to encourage more movement. Alexander Downer himself was frank about what might or might not be expected from this initiative, when he admitted:

Now, this one swallow is a long way from making a summer, but the fact that the Burmese Government can see the point of such a (independent human rights) body, albeit not having made up their minds about it, is a good step forward. And it highlights the positive role that Australia can play in advancing discussion of human rights issues throughout our region.<sup>4</sup>

Australia was not alone, however. When I attended a United Nations-sponsored meeting at Walker Hill in Seoul in March 2000 to consider ways forward for Burma, diplomats, experts, and scholars from more than 20 countries were split over whether the best option would involve engagement or further sanctions. At least at this meeting there was debate and discussion on possible ways to move forward.<sup>5</sup> In the

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2 International Crisis Group, 'Burma/Myanmar: How Strong Is the Military Regime?', Asia Report No. 11, Bangkok and Brussels, 21 December 2000.

3 Sidoti's lengthy and detailed press release can be viewed at [www.humanrights.gov.au/news/media-releases/chris-sidoti-visit-myanmar-burma](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/media-releases/chris-sidoti-visit-myanmar-burma).

4 See Alexander Downer's speech to the NSW Branch of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, 'Australia — Effective Action on Human Rights', 5 August 1999. See [foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/1999/990805\\_aiaa.html](http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/1999/990805_aiaa.html).

5 See Roger Mitton's report, 'Inside "Secret" Meetings: The Chilston Conferences to Engage Yangon', *Asia Week Online*, March 2000.

previous year (1999), the Burma Update Conference at The Australian National University in Canberra had concluded that 'given the strength of the regime, the relative weakness of the domestic opposition, and the severity of the humanitarian situation, it may be necessary to try to work with the military in order to prepare the ground for the political and economic reform'.<sup>6</sup>

A separate, if related, trend appearing after the mid-1990s was the growing consensus that, notwithstanding the military regime's superficial cohesiveness, there were 'cracks in the edifice' and 'an accommodation with the military regime' probably held the key to making progress towards a political solution of the stand-off between the military regime, its political opponents, and Myanmar society at large.<sup>7</sup> In hindsight, the year 1997 seems to have been a watershed: this was the year the military regime underwent an 'identity change' from State Law and Restoration Council (SLORC) to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), changing its structure, its personnel and its priorities; it was also the year that Myanmar decided (voluntarily) to coordinate its overall policies more or less to the templates of ASEAN. Whatever shortcomings ASEAN might possess, ASEAN membership was quite a good way to encourage a previously xenophobic and isolationist country to turn its thinking around and to embrace what were for it novel and unprecedented changes.

An important trend throughout Burma's modern history was its strong predilection to seek its own solutions and to make its own choices. One method I used to find out what Myanmar officials might accept was to pose the question: what would be needed for Myanmar to become a 'normal' country after undergoing a process of change which it seemed to be intent on devising for itself, while being conscious of 'lessons' it could learn from other countries? It was encouraging that Myanmar officials did not seem to see their future founded in isolationism or in remaining separate or cut off from the rest of the

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6 See 'Introduction' to ANU 1999 Burma Update papers: Morten B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R. J. May (eds), *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State*, Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2000.

7 See the chapters in *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State* by Mary Callahan ('Cracks in the Edifice') and Andrew Selth ('The Future of the Burmese Armed Forces'): Morten B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R. J. May (eds), *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State*, Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2000.

world. Indeed, it was in many ways surprising, but also realistic and reassuring, to find that they might turn to countries such as Australia for assistance and help.

In view of the impenetrability of the Myanmar military and the fragility of the political opposition under police state conditions, it was not surprising that observers looking at Myanmar asked questions about the real potential of non-governmental organisations to act as the harbingers of change in such a tightly controlled state. A few encouraging signs could be found. First, the military regime's gradual acceptance of humanitarian INGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières, World Vision, and the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) after 1990. Each of these had a formal MOU with the Myanmar Government. The most significant development in the area of civil society, involving a clear 'back-down' on the part of the regime, was its 1999 agreement to allow the ICRC for the first time ever to visit political prisoners from its office in Yangon, in accordance with standard ICRC procedures. A key role in achieving this outcome for the ICRC was played by the Swiss humanitarian 'field diplomat', Leon de Riedtmatten, who over the next decade was to act as an important mediator in Yangon between the regime and various international agencies, including the ICRC, the United Nations Special Envoys, the International Labour Organization, and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

The unrecognised potential for civil society to play a larger role was registered by the eminent US scholar David Steinberg at the 1999 Burma Update at The Australian National University in Canberra. While admitting his own pessimism, Steinberg concluded:

There is no reason why, over time, pluralism and democratic governance may not develop in Burma. The issue for the Burmese is over how long a time; and for foreigners, what role they might play to assist the process.<sup>9</sup>

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8 De Riedtmatten always shuns publicity, and the only description of his role is at [th.linkedin.com/pub/leon-riedtmatten/48/14b/67a](https://th.linkedin.com/pub/leon-riedtmatten/48/14b/67a). The regime formally rejected a role for 'mediators', but the enormous contribution of de Riedtmatten from 1999 should not be overlooked.

9 See Steinberg's chapter, 'The State, Power and Civil Society in Burma/Myanmar', in Morten B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R. J. May (eds), *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State*, Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2000.

Analysing the same issue in its second report on Myanmar in 2001, the International Crisis Group (ICG) concluded:

While civil society organisations will therefore be important in creating the backing for any solution, and in consolidating the democratisation process once it begins, they are not likely to be crucial players in achieving a momentum for change.<sup>10</sup>

The other changes that began around this time were the emergence of business ‘cronies’ of the military as substantial ‘independent’ corporate operations. Almost all of Myanmar’s modern-day ‘crony capitalists’ began their corporate development in the early 1990s, deliberately encouraged by the army leadership after 1990. Although demonised by the pro-democracy movement for enjoying unfair benefits from their close associations with the army leadership, crony capitalism was not a new phenomenon in Myanmar.<sup>11</sup> From small beginnings, their reach extended quickly from resources and construction into banking, tourism (hotels, airlines), and other sectors. Eventually, once consolidated as business conglomerates with a wide range of interests after around 2000, many of them would make substantial contributions to infrastructure improvements across the country. The value of their contributions to lifting standards of living and upgrading national physical infrastructure has not been properly acknowledged because of their poor reputations (although, generally, their activities lacked transparency and accountability, and may not have always complied with the provisions of the law). Even at the grass roots, where people in Myanmar were often desperately poor and disadvantaged, they welcomed tourists, their farmers responded quickly to the needs of international markets if they could, and they were interested in the gains from adopting technological change when they could see the advantages of doing so.

The continued opening up of Myanmar after 1988, in direct opposition to the extreme isolationist policies under Ne Win, was a significant change that had wide implications for the possibility of

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<sup>10</sup> International Crisis Group, ‘Myanmar: The Role of Civil Society’, Asia Report No. 27, Bangkok and Brussels, December 2001.

<sup>11</sup> In his 2001 doctoral dissertation, the Myanmar-born political scientist Kyaw Yin Hlaing noted that ‘crony capitalism has always thrived [in Burma] and continues to serve as the bedrock of state-business relations throughout the post-colonial period’. Abstract cited at *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1 Spring 2004. Available at [www.soas.ac.uk/sbbr/editions/file64304.pdf](http://www.soas.ac.uk/sbbr/editions/file64304.pdf).

political and economic reform as well as potential receptiveness on matters such as human rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly. While this change started with SLORC in 1988, it was hastened by the military regime's 'Visit Myanmar' program in 1996, and was deliberately, but quietly and gradually, extended after 2000. Its political impact was well understood by members of the NLD, one of whom was of the opinion that opening areas of Myanmar for tourism usually resulted in reduced human rights abuses such as forced labour. It was also well understood by religious groups in Western countries such as the United States and Australia, who responded by sending the equivalents of missionaries to provide humanitarian support and educational opportunities for Myanmar people as much as to proselytise. Such groups seemed adept at organising continuous and effective access, even to remote parts of the country such as Chin State and Shan State, and were careful to avoid risky political involvement or gratuitous criticism of the military regime.<sup>12</sup>

In the police state that Myanmar was in the early 2000s, these activities were not only authorised by the Myanmar authorities, they were quietly facilitated and even encouraged. In 2002, I was invited as Australian Ambassador to attend a large graduation ceremony in the Strand Hall, beside the Australian Embassy and alongside the famous Strand Hotel in downtown Yangon, for which the Yangon police provided traffic control. During an officially-approved visit to Kalay in Sagaing State in 2002, I called on the (Burmese) Bishop of Sagaing at his official residence in a large agricultural training centre in the middle of the town. Around this time, I also heard of American trainers carrying out personal management training programs as capacity-building humanitarian activities in the southern part of Myanmar. Such activities were clearly not unusual; they were not held in secret or surreptitiously, but they were conducted discreetly, without publicity, and went without mention in international media. On this basis, they were evidently regarded as not posing political, cultural, or security problems for the authorities or the ordinary Myanmar people they assisted. Indeed, they must have been officially

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12 As an example, the American Baptist Church-sponsored Myanmar Institute of Theology in the suburb of Insein in Yangon underwent rapid expansion of its activities from 2000, according to Wikipedia. Its history went back more than 100 years, but, according to its own account, it was permitted to grow substantially and even prosper in the early 2000s. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar\\_Institute\\_of\\_Theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar_Institute_of_Theology).

regarded as usefully filling gaps when access to quality international education or training was in short supply because of sanctions and Myanmar's 'pariah' status.

In various ways, therefore, by the late 1990s general conditions in Myanmar were better suited to allowing long-awaited political and economic changes to occur. Modest changes at the grass roots level could already be observed at this time, but without any regular and free reporting by local and international media at that time, it was not easy to get information about positive or negative developments, and with all the tools of a police state in full array, it was equally hard to identify what changes were significant and which Myanmar individuals could be expected to deliver 'results'. The prospects were not bright, and the direction, pace, and duration of changes could not be guaranteed or predicted — and, indeed, some would temporarily go into reverse after 2004. Later, after the abolition of the military regime with the change of government, the post-2011 reforms began at a very rapid speed, a development that took many observers by surprise, even though many of the challenges had been recognised, if not addressed, years before.

Another development in the early 2000s was the growth of private international schools around Yangon. It was well known that the Myanmar Government school system was failing and incapable of providing better opportunities that would offer worthwhile employment prospects and greater personal fulfilment. Increasingly, small private schools were being set up, ostensibly to provide English language training or computer skills development, or, in some cases, as preparatory schools to prepare young Burmese for entrance to universities in the US or UK. Some young Australians came to work as 'teachers' in these schools; it was not clear what kind of visas they received or what qualifications they had, but they were not mere short-term visitors. They stayed out of the public eye and apparently managed to avoid causing problems for the ubiquitous Myanmar authorities. The legitimacy of some of these slightly dubious 'international schools' would later be questioned when education reform finally began in Myanmar, but at the time there was no doubt that all of them were tolerated by the authorities, who at this time saw no prospect of Myanmar Government funding for such educational activities. (Myanmar per capita spending on education at this time was appallingly low.)

As ambassador, I was once invited to speak about Australia at one of these American-run 'preparatory schools' in Yangon around this time, a routine invitation which I accepted and which raised no issues for anyone. At this time, there were no Australian Government scholarships available for students from Myanmar, so there was little prospect of Burmese students at such schools going on to study in Australia. However, some enthusiastic, smaller Australian universities were already trying to promote their programs for Burmese private students who might be able to pass entry exams and fund their own studies in Australia, such overseas travel no longer being prohibited for Myanmar citizens. I personally received visits or enquiries from the University of Southern Queensland and Curtin University, both of which seemed enthusiastic about their prospects in Myanmar, but other Australian universities were interested as well. After all, at this stage no Australian Government sanctions against Myanmar would prohibit their campaigns to attract students from Myanmar; only the lack of scholarships or alternative funding would deter Myanmar students from going to Australia.<sup>13</sup>

On the media side, it would be several years before relaxation of Myanmar Government controls over the media occurred, but a surprising number of foreign journalists managed to visit Myanmar during the early 2000s, mostly travelling on tourist visas, obtained quite easily from the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok. While in Myanmar, such visiting journalists still had to be careful if they were interviewing Burmese nationals, and they often could not travel outside Yangon, but they seemed to be able to go about obtaining material for their reporting without too much trouble, as long as they avoided obvious 'political' topics. Television or film reporting was, however, unusual. I received several requests for interviews from visiting international print journalists — not many of whom were Australians — which I gave at the Australian Embassy in the normal way. Of course, any 'political' comments I made in these interviews were suitably careful, but apart from preferring to be identified only as 'a Western diplomat', I was never aware of any negative consequences from any of these kinds of interviews. I assumed some

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13 Only later was it revealed that some generals had sent their children to study as private overseas students at Australian universities. I saw this as a positive rather than negative phenomenon, as it implied they were being exposed to Australian values and ideas rather than having closed minds.



other ambassadors in Yangon were doing exactly the same thing — we were not trying to hide any facts about Myanmar from the outside world.

Obviously, the most direct impacts of Myanmar's 'police state' were on its own citizens, not on foreign diplomats, and my anecdotal account is not implying any necessary correlation between what happened to me as a diplomat with the often grim experiences of Myanmar citizens — which they sometimes spoke about. Some retired officials in the early 2000s told how they had been arrested under the Ne Win regime; many claimed this period before 1988 was worse, in terms of ruthless treatment of citizens and arbitrary actions on the part of the authorities, than anything that happened under the SPDC. Of course, in those days few international human rights organisations had access to Myanmar.

One of the main practical problems of dealing with an authoritarian military regime was its inability to be flexible or to negotiate with others. One illustration of this was provided by the relatively affable Minister for Home Affairs, Colonel Tin Hlaing, who in so many ways enjoyed and shone in his role as a *de facto* politician. In dealing with early instances of extremist Buddhist reactions to Muslims, Tin Hlaing quite often pointed out that, on some of these issues, the authorities had to deal with 'extremists' on both sides, a comment which certainly holds for the debate about Rohingya policies in Myanmar under the Thein Sein Government after 2011.

In 2015, 12 years later after I left Yangon, it is hard to recall just how isolated Myanmar was between 2000–03. Official embassy communications were excellent, following the 1999 worldwide upgrade of the Australian diplomatic communications network, which fortunately included the embassy in Yangon.<sup>14</sup> But other forms of communications with and in Myanmar in 2000 were not so advanced. Landline telephones were subject to interception and frequent breakdowns; mobile phone technology was only just beginning in Myanmar, and relatively few people had access in 2000–03. The internet only began in Myanmar in 2000 (in a highly controlled form),

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14 Some details of the program to upgrade Australia's diplomatic communications network were contained in the DFAT Annual Report for 1998–99. See [dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/corporate/annual-reports/annual-report-1998-1999/html/programs/subprog41.htm](http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/corporate/annual-reports/annual-report-1998-1999/html/programs/subprog41.htm).

and access was slowly expanding as my assignment concluded in 2003. However, within a couple of years it was possible for me to stay in contact with most Myanmar friends by email. As another example of rapid change, just a few years later I would receive phone calls from friends in Myanmar without this being unusual, for either them or for me.<sup>15</sup> According to the International Telecommunications Union, Myanmar still has one of the lowest per capita rates of access to the internet and mobile telephones, although expansion in both has jumped dramatically since Myanmar's reforms started after 2010.<sup>16</sup>

As an indication of Myanmar's isolation in 2000, perhaps only four international airlines flew direct to Yangon, although the number increased quite quickly after around 2005. The Myanmar postal system was notoriously unreliable and remains so to this day, although registered mail (a requirement of Universal Postal Union membership) usually gets through. Myanmar's middle classes were keen to adopt new information and communications technology (ITC) both professionally and in other ways, but most people in Myanmar initially tended to be quite cautious in how they used these technologies. Moreover, the potential connection between modern telecommunications technology and political liberalisation was predictably of considerable concern on the part of the Myanmar military regime, who often used technical breaches of ITC laws for internal security purposes.<sup>17</sup> All forms of communication technology — facsimiles, internet-connected computers, mobile phones — could be targeted by the authorities for potential political abuses.

Under the military regime, satellite television access was notionally more tightly controlled at the personal level than other forms of ITC, but this did not seem to stop satellite dishes appearing around the country after 2000. In 2000–03 international free-to-air satellite broadcasting was already spreading rapidly, and was uncensored, so some footage of the 9/11 incident in New York was instantly available, FA Cup football

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15 Myanmar's standing in international data on the diffusion of new telecommunications technology was always poor, but my own experience has been that generally those who wanted access could get it.

16 See ITU statistics on telecommunications diffusion at [www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx](http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx).

17 One of the first steps taken by the National League for Democracy after 2011 was to establish its own website, which made a visible difference to its profile, even if the website was not fully developed. Later it was closed down and replaced.

matches were routinely screened at local pubs and 'tea houses', and major international events were seen in one form or another. Within a few years, satellite dishes could be seen in cities and even in small and remote towns all over the country, showing the keen desire of the ordinary people to enjoy access to at least some of what the rest of the world could see. By 2005, Democratic Voice of Burma started television broadcasts directly to Myanmar, and these broadcasts influenced the unfolding of the 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007.

In a relatively minor way, in 2000–03 Australia was inevitably involved in some of these advances in new ITC in Myanmar. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio Australia had long collected evidence of its loyal short-wave radio listenership in Myanmar; and when Australia Television International (ATVI) was launched in 2002,<sup>18</sup> it also found an audience in Myanmar, even though its signal did not target Myanmar and was not strong there. Australian missions in Southeast Asia, including the Australian Embassy in Yangon, were asked at this time to assist ATVI in getting started with local audiences.<sup>19</sup> Myanmar's isolation was somewhat mitigated by the subsequent arrival of ATVI at some of Yangon's hotels in early 2003. Although Myanmar was at the western edge of the satellite footprint, it could be received there and, following an exploratory visit to Yangon by ATVI representatives, after it was installed in a few hotels in Yangon in early 2003, it was instantly popular, reflecting the general appetite for such things in Myanmar. (Myanmar was not even an official target country and there would not have been many paid-up subscribers.)

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18 See Alexander Downer's speech on the occasion of the launch, entitled 'Australia, the Asia-Pacific, and Television: Broadcasting to the Region', 13 February 2002, at [www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2002/020213\\_fa\\_austv\\_launch.html](http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2002/020213_fa_austv_launch.html).

19 As the DFAT Annual Report for 2002–03 blandly said: 'The department and posts worked closely with ABCAP (ABC Asia Pacific) TV to secure entry into regional markets.' In 2002, the ABC launched ABC Asia Pacific or ABCAP — the replacement for the defunct Australia Television International (ATVI) operated previously by the Seven Television Network.

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