

# 11

## Reflections on Coming to Terms with Myanmar: Personally and as Convener, ANU Burma/Myanmar Update 2004–13

Yangon is a cosmopolitan and multicultural city that was to affect me greatly, both personally at the time and ‘professionally’ for the next decade after my retirement as an Australian civil servant/diplomat. None of this was predicted by me at the time, nor was it planned. I had greatly enjoyed my unexpected assignment as Australian Ambassador to Myanmar, and indeed had been disappointed when my request for an additional year in the position was not accepted. When I left Myanmar, this could have easily been the end of any interaction I had with Myanmar. That would have ultimately been a great let down, and I would have missed out on ongoing and new experiences in engaging with Myanmar, its people, and occasionally its leaders. Some of my Australian associates on Myanmar may not have even perceived much change in my role after my ‘retirement’ as a diplomat, but it could have easily been the case of a one-off assignment for me ending after just three years. Although I had no retirement plan on leaving Yangon, I am very glad Myanmar was not a one-off assignment for me.

After I took early retirement from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in August 2003, I was invited to take up a (unpaid) position as Visiting Fellow on Myanmar/Burma in the Department of Political and Social Change, without any specific obligations or

work project in mind. So the challenge of 'coming to terms' with Myanmar remained, and for me a number of areas of 'unmet demand' proved to exist in relation to Myanmar, including the need to explain public developments on the basis of some direct experience and knowledge of dealing with leading figures in Myanmar; the need to assess the ongoing discourse about the encouragement or denial of democracy in Myanmar as objectively as possible and to balance the views and counter-views of those involved in the debate; and the need to articulate how and why any particular policy response by the Australian Government would be appropriate or inappropriate. Of course, a number of Australians were quite well qualified to do this, but I was the only former serving Australian diplomat who was absolutely free to comment.<sup>1</sup> Some Australian scholars of Myanmar — such as Monique Skidmore in Canberra and Sean Turnell in Sydney — were frequent commentators for the international media and parliaments, but being in the middle of their careers, they occasionally felt constrained from saying too much. Nicholas Farrelly later joined this 'group' after his return to ANU from Oxford University.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, none of us working on Myanmar at ANU ever felt the need to coordinate or consult with each other about what we were saying publicly about Myanmar; we always felt we could do no more than offer our best impartial analysis and assessment. I never experienced any discomfort from comments about Myanmar expressed by these true experts, who became my friends, and I only hope they felt the same. Our views were certainly not identical, and that was never what we sought to achieve, but we all made quite a contribution to understanding Myanmar, not only within Australia but well beyond our shores as well. This was mostly on the basis of being asked to respond instantly about developments that might (or might not) have already been reported with a particular interpretation by members of the Burmese democracy movement. In my case, it certainly helped greatly to have the status of Visiting Fellow at ANU.<sup>3</sup> ANU encouraged its affiliated personnel to speak to the media, without any thought

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1 For example, my predecessor as ambassador, Lyndall MacLean, was still working as a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

2 He also kindly gave me strong support for this memoir project.

3 In early 2004, I was asked to act as co-convenor for ANU Burma Update, and was convenor for the six update conferences between 2004 and 2013. The name of the conference was changed: initially to 'Burma/Myanmar Update', and then to 'Myanmar/Burma Update', which was soon shortened to 'Myanmar Update'.

to restricting or controlling what they said, seeing value in their publicising their ANU status. (This eventually became the butt of local comedians' jokes about the ABC and the SBS — the media outlets most frequently using university academics as a free source of 'expert' opinion for their current affairs programs.)

## The Australian National University as a Myanmar 'think tank'

In parallel with this, along with the rest of the outside world, the Australian Government had found one way it could try to come to terms with what was happening, and what was not happening, in Myanmar. This was the initiative from around 2000 to financially support The Australian National University's efforts to better understand the various developments and underlying forces at play in Myanmar, and the scope these offered for opening up and encouraging social, political, and economic change: the regular Burma/Myanmar Update Conference. In the decade after 2003, I was to become closely associated with this conference as a co-convenor, and edited or co-edited six collections of conference papers.

The conferences, and the publications they spawned, point to the many concerns and problems they uncovered and assessed. I had been invited to give a presentation at the March 2002 conference (while I was still Australian Ambassador and was therefore constrained in what I could say) just 14 months before the 30 May 2003 attack on Aung San Suu Kyi at Depayin. A driving force behind the conferences was Dr Ron May, Associate Professor in the Department of Political and Social Change, who was not a Burma expert but rather a conflict resolution specialist.<sup>4</sup> The format and focus of the update conferences was fairly consistent through this period: it sought to bring the world's leading Burma scholars to Canberra and have them present their interpretations of current events in Myanmar, alongside Burmese scholars and experts. In all cases, the objective was to hear from scholars who had recently been in Myanmar, and were not just examining theoretical or historical

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4 Under his tutelage, ANU was at the time sponsoring a project on 'Regime Change and Regime Maintenance in Asia and the Pacific', which published a series of research papers.

perspectives. Essentially, the conferences were not political and were not politicised; they endeavoured to consider policy options. The early conferences naturally focused on the debate between 'sanctions versus engagement'.

The themes of the update conferences, and thus the titles and dates of the publications with which I was associated, were:

- *The Illusion of Progress: The Political Economy of Reform in Burma/Myanmar* (2004)
- *Burma's Long Road to National Reconciliation* (2006)
- *The State, Community and the Environment in Myanmar* (2007)
- *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar* (2008)
- *Ruling Myanmar From Cyclone Nargis to National Elections* (2010)
- *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities* (2012)
- *Debating Democratisation in Myanmar* (2014)

An update conference was held in 2003, devoted solely to economic issues and convened by a former ANU colleague, Professor Peter Warr, who has a long-standing and deep interest in and knowledge of Myanmar. No publication was produced from this conference.

Some comments from conveners and editors might be noteworthy. Launching the conference series in 1999/2000, Morten Pedersen, Emily Rudland, and Ron May argued that the military regime was in a strong position rather than a weak one, that 'there are obstacles to the achievement of peace and prosperity in Burma which go beyond the formed structures of government', and that 'the future development of a well-functioning democracy in Burma critically depends on the emergence of a new synergy between a vibrant civil society and a strong, but responsive state'.<sup>5</sup> The argument was not that democracy would be doomed, but 'that it is not inevitable for the armed forces to fall out of power', which 'does not mean giving up hope for a positive political change'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See 'Introduction' to Morten B., Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R. J. May (eds), *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State*, Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2000, pp. 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Papers from the second update conference were not published until after the shock of the 30 May 2003 Depayin incident. Co-conveners David Mathieson and Ron May concluded that ‘as promising as many of the events of 2002 were in Burma, progress was largely illusory’, and that ‘the possible gains [for the regime] from destroying the domestic opposition outweighed any threat from international sanctions’.<sup>7</sup> Many of the conferences’ forecasts were nevertheless very prescient. Editing the 2006 publication, I commented that ‘national reconciliation is likely to be a drawn-out gradual process rather than a single event or agreement’.<sup>8</sup>

As late as the 2006 and 2008 update conferences, most speakers from Myanmar were anxious about publishing anything abroad that could be viewed by the Myanmar authorities as hostile to the military regime. Even if we treated such speakers as ‘commentators’ without formal papers, they would not necessarily be exempt from close scrutiny and possible official reprisals. By the time of the 2010 conference, this was no longer a concern, and Myanmar contributors began providing quite frank and revealing chapters. On the whole, Myanmar presenters were chosen for their independence, rather than their political affiliation. Some of our conference presenters from Myanmar — selected also for their ability to influence policy — went on to become advisors to President Thein Sein. It was always hoped that the conference publications would achieve some circulation and sales inside Myanmar, and, largely thanks to the Myanmar Book Company, this happened. By 2013, after reforms were becoming more embedded, copies of *Myanmar’s Transition* (2012) were observed in up-country bookshops. Copies of all update conference publications were presented to Aung San Suu Kyi and to the Myanmar Government (even *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar*, with its cover photo of the ‘Saffron Revolution’ street protests).

The Myanmar Embassy in Canberra was not formally invited to attend the conferences, although as a courtesy they were always informed beforehand of the program and the speakers. In the early days, their presence at the conference would not have been welcomed by some

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7 See ‘Introduction’ and ‘A Black Day in Burma/Myanmar’ in David S. Mathieson and R. J. May (eds), *The Illusion of Progress: The Political Economy of Reform in Burma/Myanmar*, Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2004, pp. 14, 303.

8 See ‘Introduction’ to Trevor Wilson (ed.), *Myanmar’s Long Road to National Reconciliation*, Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2006, p. xxxiii.

members of the Burmese expatriate community, regardless of any political associations. In those days, the Myanmar Embassy received reports of the conference from their own supporters who had attended. The embassy did not attend until the 2010 conference, which included a former senior Myanmar diplomat among the speakers. Accordingly, at the 2010 conference, the Myanmar Ambassador (who was known as a supporter of reforms) attended unobtrusively, without notice, and without fuss. No Myanmar Government speaker was invited to the conference until the 2013 conference, when the Deputy Minister for National Planning and Economic Development (a former academic economist) attended. Maintaining a careful distance from politics and from both governments undoubtedly helped the conference. It goes without saying that neither DFAT nor AusAID ever attempted to interfere with the content or character of the conference. In its format, the conference resembled most of the other country update conferences sponsored by ANU.

The Australian National University Myanmar/Burma Update Conference has been unique: nowhere else was there a conference that looked at contemporary Myanmar in a dispassionate way. To a considerable extent, this goal was greatly assisted by the many prominent and respected Burmese who came from Myanmar to speak about how things really were inside Myanmar. Some of them did this at some personal risk. Some prominent international observers of Burma regarded it as a very valuable and significant institution. It achieved considerable profile around the world, among scholars and governments alike. Burma scholars from around the world were prepared to participate in the conferences. Generating specific policy or other outcomes was not the objective of these conferences, but they certainly encouraged networking across borders, and they certainly enhanced Australian understanding of Myanmar. One notable feature was the enduring support and loyalty to the conference shown by Australian NGOs and individuals working with Myanmar, as well as the Australian Government's former aid agency, AusAID.<sup>9</sup>

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9 On 18 September 2013, the new Australian Prime Minister, Mr Tony Abbott, announced that the Australian Agency for International Development would be integrated into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Mr Abbott said: 'I intend to recommend to the Governor-General that the Australian Agency for International Development be integrated into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, enabling the aid and diplomatic arms of Australia's international policy agenda to be more closely aligned.' The new Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ms Julie Bishop, was also appointed Minister for International Development.

## Epilogue

The glimmers of hope that prompted many to anticipate that change might be coming in Myanmar in 2000 were extinguished in 2003–04 by the actions of the military regime. However, the desire for change and a better life did not disappear. It took a few years for the tide to turn in favour of change, but turn it did: further triggers for significant change could be observed in 2007 (the ‘Saffron Revolution’), in 2008 (Cyclone Nargis), and in 2010 (general elections). Myanmar now seems to be one of the few countries undergoing a political transition that is largely, but not entirely, peaceful and which has been sustained for more than a short time. The origins of the changes are largely home-grown and can be traced back to the period around 2000, if not before then. But, unlike some countries, change in Myanmar has been greatly influenced by international factors — much more than the Myanmar military leadership would like to acknowledge, and perhaps somewhat less than many in the international community would recognise or believe should occur.

Yet, realistically and objectively — despite the various stratagems deployed by interested parties from time to time, and despite many outspoken statements and allegations by different parties along the way — Myanmar’s problems have been quite steadily set on a ‘long road to reconciliation’ which will hopefully incorporate reforms more along the lines of what all stakeholders would prefer, or at least could live with, in a more or less ongoing trajectory — one satisfactorily ‘owned’ by the Myanmar people themselves. Some found it distasteful that, in the case of Myanmar, this ‘road’ was determined by the military regime; but, pragmatically, without military backing of some kind, the only way to move forward would have probably been through outright conflict. It seemed contrarian in the least, and to some people quite unprincipled, to try to argue that the cause of the democracy movement should not be accepted uncritically or *in toto* as the appropriate way forward, which explains why debates about ‘sanctions versus engagement’ were conducted so vehemently. Yet surely, if the authoritarian regime is even slightly open to outside ideas and to outside influence, and if it can be demonstrated that communication with — and pressure on — the authoritarian regime

has provided concrete examples of compromise and reconciliation, it would be not only foolish but dangerous to ignore what might be called a 'managed approach' to change and transformation.

My overwhelming reaction on observing conditions on the ground was that things were not nearly as bad in Myanmar as they were being presented internationally by the activist movement and the media. Although my opinion was never sought on whether or not 'extra-judicial killings' were widespread and whether or not massive repression of free speech was endemic, I knew that while many people in Myanmar were quite unhappy, many were also managing well enough, and the Myanmar situation did not seem nearly as bad as that in many other countries. Obviously, the wider lessons for effective resolution of deeply intransigent conflict are plainly present in the case of Myanmar — and are probably applicable for other situations. They include the overriding importance of the maximum possible transparency, as a means of reassuring all concerned about the process of change; and, conversely, the risks of unnecessary secrecy, especially because it subverts the benefits of openness; the value of occasional self-restraint in terms of not insisting on one's own interests all the time, when differing interests have to be accommodated at some point; the essentiality of maintaining lines of communication, even when worst-case scenarios ensue; and, ultimately, the folly of a non-inclusive approach that does not involve all possible stakeholders at all times, even those not initially fully committed to a shared outcome.

While The Australian National University awarding an Honorary Doctorate of Letters to Aung San Suu Kyi in 2013 was obviously a high point in any terms, it has been especially gratifying to see and work with some of the students who have won Australian Government scholarships to study for postgraduate degrees after 2010. Their personal and intellectual qualities, as well as their determination to enhance their capabilities to contribute more effectively to Myanmar's development, have been truly exceptional.

The Australian National University decision in 2015 to establish a Myanmar Research Centre in the College of Asia and the Pacific at ANU was also a most appropriate follow-up to this substantial collective effort.

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