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Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 286 | November 10, 2014

Myanmar: Taking the Long View

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Priscilla Clapp, former US Charge d'Affaires in Rangoon, explains that “A return to sanctions and punitive policies would limit US influence on the government just at the time when we have a unique array of policy measures and channels of communication for assisting and guiding the transition forward.”

With Myanmar's transition now in its fourth year and the 2015 elections approaching, it is time for the United States to take a fresh look at the long-term significance of its bilateral relations with Myanmar. The conditions of the 1990s that inspired US sanctions against Myanmar over the past 20 years are no longer relevant and continuing to view sanctions as the most effective policy for influencing democratic development in Myanmar could seriously damage US strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Twenty years of US sanctions on Myanmar effectively froze bilateral relations between the two countries, without preventing the military government from oppressing the democratic opposition, conducting cruel campaigns against minority ethnic groups, and devastating the national economy. The United States had little or no means of communicating with the country's military leaders and thus no direct influence on them. In fact, because the US government considered the country to be of little significance to its larger interests in Asia, having moribund bilateral relations was of no consequence.

The political and economic transition that has taken place in Myanmar since 2011, however, has changed the equation for the United States. Precisely because of the transition, Myanmar's significance in Asia has been fundamentally transformed. Having abandoned its isolationist traditions and opened its doors to international investment, trade, and commerce, the country is now attracting major investment from around the world, especially Asia. With its abundance of natural resources, educated population, and agricultural potential, Myanmar promises to become one of the most consequential nations in Southeast Asia, if its reforms succeed in eventually creating a vibrant free market economy and democratic government.

Whereas the previous military regime turned a blind eye and deaf ear to human rights, democracy, and good economic governance, the new government, has sought to open its society, introduce freedoms of information and association, which were previously strictly denied, reconcile with the democratic opposition and ethnic armed organizations, and develop a government structure capable of reflecting the full diversity of its society. It has – at least in aspiration, if not yet in practice – embraced the fundamental values of liberal democracy as its goal. While there is still a long road ahead, with continued military control of essential political and economic sectors as a major roadblock, a course has been set and there has been sufficient progress to make an about-face extremely costly, because this would certainly cause a steep decline in foreign investment and assistance.

Although still far from meeting its goals, the transition's record of achievement is impressive, but it has also exposed the depth of the problems confronting the country's reformers. For example:

- A surprisingly proactive parliament – albeit elected in 2010 through a grossly manipulated vote – has passed new laws designed to remove past repression and inequity, but it has not rescinded old laws dating back to colonial times, which are still being implemented at the grassroots level.
- The private press, finally released from heavy government censorship, is producing a wealth of information previously unavailable to the public, but the kind of regulations and

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journalistic culture that guide the press in democratic societies are not yet established, so new rules must be negotiated.

- Sclerotic government ministries – long the domain of generals seeking to line their own pockets – are struggling to develop a new culture of service to the people and responsibility for implementing new programs, but still suffer from decades of operating under a military command mentality.
- A business community, accustomed to operating at the will and whim of the military establishment in an economy closed to outside competition, now fears it could be overwhelmed by the challenges of the changing macro-economic structures and the flood of foreign investment.
- Fear mongering by opportunistic radical elements in the society has found fertile ground among those who still view external influence as a threat to their cultural, ethnic, and religious identity, leading to outbreaks of communal violence against religious and ethnic minorities.
- The country’s first serious peace negotiation with ethnic armed organizations promises an end to one of the world’s longest civil wars, but both sides are having trouble making the final compromises necessary to conclude a national ceasefire and move into the political phase of negotiation.
- The military is no longer the law of the land, but it remains unduly entrenched in the country’s political process through undemocratic provisions in the new constitution.

These countervailing pressures illustrate the need for strong international support and assistance in order to consolidate the reforms and move democratization forward. US interest in nurturing democratic development requires that we remain a robust participant in this task, employing a flexible and creative arsenal of political, economic, and diplomatic instruments combining both tough love and encouragement.

The coming year will provide a litmus test for the transition. The first question will be whether the ceasefire negotiations can produce an agreement allowing the ethnic armed groups and their supporters to participate in the political process. The second question will be whether the parliament will vote to amend the constitution, diminishing those provisions that give the military a stranglehold over the democratic process. The third question will be whether the government can conduct free and fair elections in an atmosphere of relative security. The fourth question will be whether the body politic that emerges from the elections can reach consensus on new leadership in 2016 when the parliament must choose the president, because, if conducted fairly, the elections are likely to produce relative parity among three major political groups: one bloc comprising the government USDP plus military representatives in parliament, a second comprising the NLD and other democracy parties, and a third made up of the ethnic minority parties. The parliament will look very different than it does today and coalition-building will be essential. With these elections, therefore, Myanmar’s transition will enter a critical new phase.

Myanmar’s political transition is one of the most promising we have seen in recent years. It has been guided – at least in part – by the democratic values we espouse and it is in our vital interest that the largest land-based country in Southeast Asia becomes an economically strong, stable democracy with friendly ties to the US. A return to sanctions and punitive policies would limit US influence on the government just at the time when we have a unique array of policy measures and channels of communication for assisting and guiding the transition forward, which have never been available in the past. The US should make full use of them and not squander the opportunity by tying its own hands with undue negative pressure.

The journey from deeply entrenched military oppression to sustainable democracy is long and winding and we cannot expect it to be accomplished overnight. If the US wishes to assist in tackling the country’s deep-seated problems, such as continuing human rights abuses, land management, ethnic and religious conflict, and the military role in governance, it must remain engaged and not relegate itself to the sidelines with reimposition of sanctions and other policy measures that limit US assistance.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

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APB Series Coordinator: Alex Forster

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