

Posted on

01.04.2014

Share on

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Email](#)

The “Why” of Democratisation in Burma/Myanmar

Introduction

Arguably the question as to why a country democratises has been the most important driver of contemporary political science since the end of World War II. In the case of Myanmar, whose turn towards democratisation in 2011 was largely unexpected, and widely applauded, this question dominated reactions in the first few months as onlookers were amazed at the changes. However, it was later replaced with 'How?' as these same people became convinced that Myanmar had genuinely changed. With the increasing focus on 'How?' in debates nowadays, this other question of 'Why?' has become largely absent. In my opinion, without a clear understanding of power relations, i.e. the heart of political science, from which Myanmar's democratisation originates, 'How?' debates will lack a significant dimension - original power configurations have not vanished from the scene. Though they may play a less important or obvious role now compared to 1990s and 2000s, power configurations have a lasting influence on the way current and future changes take place because Myanmar's political scene was dominated by the military in one way or another for more than four decades. Democratisation does not tend to be completed in a few months or years, especially in a country such as Myanmar. Accordingly, this article will only focus on the “why?” of Myanmar’s transition of democracy.

Background

It must be first and foremost stated that Myanmar's democratisation has received undue praise by the international community that is largely politicised in many ways. Another very important fact is that Myanmar is not a democracy yet, even according to the minimal standard of free and fair elections, except the by-elections in 2011 which saw Daw Aung San Suu Kyi join the parliament as a member.

Furthermore, the current ruling regime headed by President Thein Sein just came out of a military apparatus which ruled Myanmar since 1988. This regime came to power with winning in the 2008 elections which was discredited by the international community as neither fair nor free. However, the Thein Sein administration later got some sort of 'legitimacy' through various political reforms, the most prominent being the release of the Nobel Peace Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her later participation in the parliamentary politics as an MP after the by-elections; cease-fire negotiations with various armed ethnic insurgent groups and loosened controls over the press. On the other hand, many seemingly insurmountable challenges such as the war in Kachin State, the Rohingya issue, and amendment of the 2008 Constitution in current operation still prevail. In other words, Myanmar is a democratising country.

The 'Why?'

Before embarking on explaining why Myanmar democratised from 2011 onwards, it is worth noting that the process has caught many by surprise. Some would even claim that it was both unexpected and unprecedented. I would argue instead that it was both premeditated and calculated.

For theoretical parsimony, it is usually argued that democratisation is brought about by three major causes, though with many overlaps and mixes: popular revolution from within; import from outside mainly through a war; and negotiated or compromised change between the ruling regime and the opposition. Myanmar's democratisation is an anomaly because it was not caused by any of these three factors. It is common knowledge that an in-country revolution or a war waged by an external power such as the United States did not lead to Myanmar's democratisation. Whether it came out of a political compromise or negotiation between the ruling regime and the opposition might be a bit difficult to ascertain for many onlookers. However, if we look in detail at the step-by-step democratisation of Myanmar by the preceding military regime, we can say fairly confidently that it was not a compromise either. That Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party later reregistered after an important private meeting between the Nobel Laureate and President Thein Sein and contested the by-elections in 2011 for a little over 40 parliamentary seats might be viewed as a compromise; however, we must not lose sight of the real fact that the referendum of 2008 which approved the current Constitution and the general elections of 2011 which enabled the Union Solidarity and Development Party to win a majority of the votes and parliamentary seats were neither free nor fair. In frank opinion, just a minor compromise was offered by President Thein Sein to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi after his Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the military had largely dominated the political scene. Then the opposition led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to be out of options under an extreme political repression for more than two decades and had to accept that minor offer.

In another stream of literature, there are two main causes of democratisation in a polity which was previously illiberal or authoritarian – structural and personal or rational. Structural causes include class problems, economic hardships, splits in the ruling regimes, international pressures, etc. On the other hand, personal reasons such as the preceding dictator's own desire for change, the previously ruling regime's rational calculation, etc. Despite the fact that both had affected Myanmar's history of democratisation, I would argue here that ex-dictator Senior General Than Shwe and his military corps' rational calculation was the most important cause which has led to Myanmar's honeymoon period of democratisation.

In other words, Myanmar's democratisation was a set-up by the preceding regime in order to ward off any untoward harm toward the ex-junta and prolong the military's involved dominance in Myanmar's parliamentary politics. The previous military dictatorship had been preparing for this so-called Myanmar democratisation for so many years with their announced Seven-Step Roadmap to ensure that everything is in order when the country opens up and no harm befalls them. Evidently, the 2008 Constitution was written and passed without genuine popular approval, in various constitutional provisions for an automatic granting of a quarter of the parliamentary seats to the military and for a de jure military take-over of power

in instances of emergencies and chaos, and in blatant built-in legal obstacles which shall make any future efforts to significantly amend the Constitution almost impossible, to mention just a few important facts. The sheer fact that the notorious military dictator Than Shwe and his comrades are now free and forgotten by most of the people in Myanmar and elsewhere itself is evidence of how so-called democratisation of Myanmar has been stage-managed by the preceding regime. Also missing is transitional justice, even if it is just aimed at social memories and reconciliation, is not being broached by any parties in the current political arena, with the exception of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar Tomás Ojea Quintana.

Conclusion

To sum up, this article has argued that Myanmar's democratisation was an orchestration by the preceding military regime to protect itself, at least its leaders such as Than Shwe, from future harms by opening political space bit by bit for dissidents such as NLD and other ethnic parties and groups. Various issues such as political equality among various ethnic groups of Myanmar, enormous discrimination being faced by the Rohingya, religious violence, and constitutional amendments are yet to be solved. And they do not seem to be easily solvable into the near future. Justice has not been made to various peoples and groups which tremendously suffered under the previous military regimes since the 1960s. Many other political, economic, social and cultural challenges remain. And how they will appear and how they will be solved by the current regime and the following ones are yet to be seen. However, power politics from the 1990s and 2000s behind this Myanmar's applauded democratisation must always be viewed, at least into the near future, as one of the major factors in current and future debates on the country.