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Myanmar: How Fragile the Reforms?

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The scope and pace of liberalization in Myanmar since the inauguration of the "civilianized" Republic of the Union of Myanmar in March 2011 have been remarkable. These policy initiatives encompass a broad spectrum of the multicultural entity that is Myanmar. In politics, economics, governance, and social arenas, President Thein Sein has articulated a reform agenda that is constantly expanding and has publicly acknowledged societal deficiencies that have remained real but officially unacknowledged for a half-century of military-dominated rule. The state, under a military-scripted constitution overwhelmingly approved by a manipulated referendum in May 2008, has begun to move to a more pluralistic administrative system reflecting its pluralistic cultural, multi-ethnic base.

After 50 years of authoritarian control, about half of which were in relative international isolation, Western states have responded positively to these reforms. The European Union has suspended its limited sanctions policies, and even the United States after two decades under the Clinton and Bush administrations of ineffectively using sanctions to achieve the goal of regime change, has welcomed these changes with positive and welcome suspension of its more stringent sanctions. Japan is restarting its economic development assistance, and the multilateral aid agencies are beginning anew studies of this complex society's most urgent needs, which are virtually ubiquitous.

Observers of these reforms, from the US secretary of state to seasoned specialists on Myanmar, and indeed to the citizens of that country, have questioned whether the reform agenda can be sustained, and whether it is too fragile to continue. These issues are real, in contrast to the views of early foreign and domestic skeptics who believed the reforms were false or facades for continued authoritarian governance. The reality of the reforms has been generally accepted, but their continuity and potential effects are subject to question.

Anecdotal evidence exists that there has been resistance to the president's liberal agenda in his administration, among some higher-level military, and from those strategically placed whose livelihood or monopolies on power or position would be threatened. Could these reforms, then, be reversed by such powerful elements?

Constitutional provisions exist for a return to strict military rule, which would likely stifle the reforms and return Myanmar to a garrison state in which the military would claim a national emergency that warrants their control and retention of power. But the reforms themselves have excited such internal optimism that the complete closure of the progress already exhibited might provoke a popular explosion of sentiment that could in turn evoke a national emergency, as viewed from the barracks. Thus, barring either a foreign invasion or a nationwide natural disaster, either of which are most improbable, stoppage of the reform process as a whole is quite unlikely. The reforms are not likely to be torn asunder wholesale.

Observers, including some in the US government, have called them "irreversible." As an overall process, this seems likely even though some might argue that they have been generated on a highly personal basis – President Thein Sein. Power in Burmese political culture has been highly personalized, resulting in weak institutional authority. Should anything happen to him, or when his presidential tour ends in 2015, or if the political process should substantially deteriorate, the fragile reforms might slow. If President Thein Sein continues his measures through his presidency, having successfully administered the ASEAN summit meeting in 2014 and the Southeast Asian Games in 2013, then it is likely to endure.

More likely, however, are problems inherent in the state's capacity to implement the reforms and at speeds that deliver to the people the anticipated relief that they clearly have sought. The former taut military command system is no longer operative in civilian matters, in spite of the martial background of most of the leadership and the specified constitutional provision of military dominance. Changes in policy now must be legislated and then enforced through a system dominated by people who never have entertained liberalized ideas or procedures, or even had the legal opportunity to read about them during their lifetime. Articulation of policy changes is relatively simple compared to their implementation.

So the fragility of the reforms is less likely to become evident from their reversal than from their faulty implementation or unanticipated consequences. The reform process is also likely to be uneven, spotty, implemented in a less than ideal manner, and at paces that probably will cause frustration at the rate of change that may be considered too slow or even too fast.

Reforms have been started on economic policies, social sectors such as health and education, the more inclusive political process and the opening of more political space between the state and the people, and in some minority affairs.

A unified foreign exchange rate, overdue for decades, has been started. A new foreign investment law is underway. Banking reform is likely to follow, and the reformation of the public sector – the state economic enterprises – is discussed.

The meager health budget, the lowest in the region, has been doubled. Higher education is touted to be transformed and made more independent of state control. Labor unions are legal, approved demonstrations appropriate, much less censorship is evident, human rights are discussed and violations considered through a new human rights commission. And the longest rebellion in the modern world (since 1949) has resulted in a ceasefire. Provincial legislatures have been established for the first time in Burmese history, and may bring more attention to, and solution of, local problems.

As comprehensive as these changes sound, what will evolve will be a distinctly Burmese approach to liberalization. The military will control the constitution, and Western concepts of civilian control over the military is anathema. The military will continue to influence and manage large segments of the economy through their conglomerates, which are not part of the public sector. The military will continue to train the "future elites," as the engraving on the Military Academy's gateway indicates, and perhaps not simply in military institutions but throughout a civilianized administration. The private sector, starved of capital except to state-controlled enterprises, may well be in the hands of those who have non-banking access to such funding – the Chinese. Thus the future middle class may be essentially Chinese and higher-level military retirees. Thus, compounded problems and dangers continue.

The most difficult task will be to find a quintessentially Burmese solution to the majority-minority tensions that have since independence in 1948 resulted in dozens of larger or smaller rebellions and, according to the estimate of a former head of state, the loss of some 1 million lives. Creating a nation-state is still an unfulfilled process, never having existed in pre-colonial, colonial, or in the independence period under civilian or military regimes. It is the essential, most profound, issue facing the state. It is on this solution that a brighter future for that sorry state of Myanmar rests. More has happened positive in the past year than in the half-century proceeding, but reaching an acceptable equilibrium of the distribution of power and resources among all ethnic groups will be difficult, involving changes in attitudes long engrained in the social fabric. It is, as the poet said, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

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