



A Critical Moment for Myanmar by Bradley O. Babson

Keep an eye on Myanmar. Since the audacious attack on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) supporters shocked the world at the end of May 2003, the internal dynamics of change in this reclusive country have taken on new dimensions, and there are signs of potentially promising developments in the coming weeks and months. There is also a growing sense of urgency that the political fundamentals of ethnic stability and movement towards democracy need to be addressed sooner rather than later, although the prospect of a regime change that would drastically reduce the controlling authority of the military in Myanmar seems now a wilted dream.

The attack on Daw Suu appears to have been pre-meditated but short-sighted. Not only did it ignite revulsion and indignation among her supporters inside and outside the country, but it also seems to have crossed a red line within the military establishment itself. The status quo could no longer be tolerated. In the aftermath of this watershed event, there has been realignment of upper level leadership in which Sr. Gen. Than Shwe has consolidated his authority at the helm of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), while at the same time appointing Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt prime minister with the authority to launch new initiatives both in developing a road map for democracy and in negotiating reconciliation agreements with recalcitrant ethnic insurgency groups.

The determination to move forward on this agenda is palpable. The military has long maintained that the path to democracy would require attainment of stability in the country as a first priority. The efforts to entice ethnic minority groups to participate in a national convention to draw up a new Constitution are guided by this belief. A fundamental objective of the convention will be to work out agreements that are broadly acceptable to the major ethnic minority populations, and that strike a balance between reasonable local autonomy and necessary national authority. This balance was never attempted under colonial rule and was never effectively established following independence. The national convention is thus a crucial step toward shaping a genuinely national consensus for governance that has been a missing ingredient in this highly pluralistic and divided society.

Building democracy requires more than holding elections. By concentrating on the process of building support for participating in a constitutional convention, the military authorities are laying the foundation for addressing other major issues related to building a functioning democracy in Myanmar. Primary among these are shaping future institutions of governance that will be legitimized and animated by a broadly accepted constitution, and delineating the meaning of citizenship through articulation of shared values and aspirations, including basic rights and obligations. There are many important questions to be resolved in the convention deliberations. These include basic principles of national

identity; the future role for the military in the governance structure and extent of civil authority; balance of power among ethnic groups and between central and local authorities; protections given political institutions, freedom of religion and civil liberties; and commitment to strengthening the rule of law in enforcement of the constitution. So far, we have not heard much said on any of these critical issues.

Whatever the motivation that led to the attack on Daw Suu and her NLD followers, the decision to keep her under house arrest and away from the microphone was a deliberate and tactical one. It has allowed the military government to move ahead with the ethnic minority agenda without the distractions of the NLD raising issues that might confuse the process of reaching agreements with the ethnic groups to participate in the constitutional process. An important test of the commitment of the leadership to broadening the process and addressing the issues of institutional building and citizenship in a democratic Myanmar is their willingness to give the microphone back to Daw Suu and to allow the NLD full voice in the national debate. The big question is: What will she say?

Setting a date for the convening of the convention and inviting the NLD to participate would be significant developments in which the stakes would be high for both the military leadership and for the proponents of democracy. To be successful, the convention and the constitution it adopts must be perceived as legitimate domestically and abroad. Domestic legitimacy will be largely determined by popular perception of how representative the participants will be of the diverse interests in the country, how openly the deliberations are held, and how constructively sensitive issues are resolved. International legitimacy is largely going to be determined by Daw Suu and the NLD in deciding whether to join the process and whether to support the eventual conclusions. A strong vote of support for a new constitution would transform the politics of engagement with Myanmar and the politics of overseas dissident groups and their supporters.

Expectations are rising that in the coming weeks – before the anniversary of the May 2003 attack on Daw Suu and the NLD – significant developments will take place to set the stage for the convening of the national convention. Let us hope so. But let us not be sanguine about how easy the road to democracy will be for Myanmar. Even if Sr. Gen. Than Shwe is willing to give the green light, and even if Daw Suu is willing to work with the military authorities toward the convening of a genuinely representative convention, the challenges of resolving the legacy of divisiveness, building capacity for modern governance, and alleviating poverty in this complex society are enormous. Under the best of circumstances, it will take many years of hard efforts for Myanmar to develop into the democratic and prosperous country that it has always had the potential to become.

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