BURMA OR MYANMAR?

The Struggle for National Identity

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The Struggle for National Identity

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Preface

Later this year (2010) the self-selected leadership of Burma has credibly promised to hold nation's first elections in 20 years, though they have not yet announced the date or electoral rules, and we can only wish the country well. Having been ruled for more than 50 years by an unbroken series of military dictatorships, it is difficult to imagine how Burma can function with a mere civilian government — the army monopolizes not only the instruments of violence more effectively than ever before (thanks to a series of cease-fire agreements with the ethnic armies and consistent budgetary preference), the educational, civil service, and welfare systems beyond it have all atrophied badly over the years. But then a Chile-style sweeping displacement of the junta is not a very realistic option. The State Peace and Development Council has taken every precaution to structure the forthcoming election to ensure the *Tatmadaw's* continued dominance, and a 1990-style democratic surprise is highly unlikely. Not only are a quarter of parliamentary seats reserved for the military, the main opposition party has been disbanded and its leaders remain under house arrest. Yet the shift to constitutional rule may still prove a meaningful one, marking perhaps the first step of a "pacted transition" to less arbitrary if not democratic rule.

I first became interested in Burma through its connection to China, the giant neighbor to the north with which it shares not only a long border but many other features as well. Both have adopted a form of socialism (which both have since revised extensively based on "national characteristics"), both legitimate themselves in terms of tutelary developmentalism heavily augmented by state coercion. To

be sure, China is still “communist” in the sense that it is ruled by a communist party, but the Burman junta now seems to be emulating the ruling party model as well, first in the form of Ne Win’s Burmese Socialist Programme Party, later as the Union Solidarity and Development Association. Yet the differences are far more striking. In contrast to China’s Promethean GDP growth, Burma is a developmental dictatorship without much development, a form of socialism exhibiting some of the world’s highest rates of poverty, disease, illiteracy and corruption. The transportation infrastructure remains primitive, economic development (beyond the extractive sector) extremely modest. Weberian assumptions about “legitimacy” to the contrary notwithstanding, a leadership that is neither rationally-legally competent, credibly “traditional,” nor led by charismatic personalities and can claim a popular mandate neither domestically nor abroad has proved highly durable over time and is now stronger than ever. On the other hand the democratic and ethnic opposition forces, though currently in eclipse, have proved amazingly resilient over past decades as well.

Our purpose in this volume is to explain how this could be true, to depict the problems that beset this unhappy country and the forces underlying its calm and beautiful façade at a time of incipient transition. We begin with mass politics, encompassing the forthcoming electoral context, the ethnic cleavages, and the humanitarian crisis inflicted on the nation’s masses. We then turn to elite politics, focusing in turn on military rule, with its monomaniacal focus on personnel chess-playing at the top and sycophantic loyalty at the bottom, and then in counterpoint to a study of the tragic symbol of democratic opposition to the military, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In the next section we turn to the national political economy, finding surprisingly that the country is not at all a “hermit kingdom” but one with a thriving trade sector and a seemingly bright fiscal outlook based on escalating international demand for hydrocarbons and other natural resources — though of course such an endowment is no unmixed blessing. Last but by no means least, we turn to foreign policy, showing how the junta has managed to chart a perilous course among their most powerful and influential neighbors, China, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my research assistant, Min Zin. A former leader of the democratic resistance in exile from Burma, now an advanced graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley and a brilliant and dedicated scholar, he knows far more about the country than I will ever know. As ever, I am also indebted to the Center for Chinese Studies and the Political Science Department of the University of California at Berkeley for financial support. An earlier version of this project appeared in the form of a special issue of *Asian Survey* (vol. 48, no. 6, November–December 2008), and we would like to express our collective gratitude to that distinguished journal for permission to use considerably revised and updated versions of those articles first published there. Early versions of the chapters by Jalal Alamgir, Renaud Egretteau, Ian Holliday, Stephen McCarthy, Win Min, and Sean Turnell first appeared in that context.

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