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Myanmar

Hope and angst



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Myanmar presents a mixed picture three years after the launch of reforms, and the next presidential election holds the key to which way the country will turn. By Rajiv Bhatia

IN MYANMAR, and beyond, reform is no longer the big story or “uplifting saga” it was in the heady days of 2011 and 2012. Scholars now talk about “the ebbing” of optimism regarding the nation’s future. Are they right to be anxious?

A recent opinion poll indicated that the people were still hopeful. According to the survey conducted by the International Republican Institute, 88 per cent of the respondents said that the country was heading in the right direction. They cited the building of roads and bridges, the improvement in economic conditions, and the freedom that people enjoyed as the reasons for their optimism. But the survey’s methodology and conclusions have been criticised.

With President Thein Sein completing the greater part of his tenure in March, it was time for another evaluation of his achievements and failures. Speaking on the occasion, he understandably emphasised how much the nation had achieved. But his remarks had a jarring contradiction: he claimed that the dictatorship of the past had been changed to “a fully parliamentary democratic state” and he also spoke of “our ultimate objective of building a democratic state”. Therefore, an impartial appreciation of recent trends may be instructive.

Political landscape

For the first time since 1983, the government recently undertook a nationwide census with international assistance. Its results will be a valuable tool for economic planning and better governance. It covered over 10 million households, but excluded parts of the population living in Kachin State and the Rohingyas in Rakhine State. The former because of disturbed conditions, and the latter because the authorities decided that Muslims identifying themselves as “Rohingyas” (and not “Bengalis”) would not be counted by census officials. This question of identity of the Muslim people in Myanmar is complex. Large-scale, violent communal incidents have occurred from time to time, including during Thein Sein’s tenure, but the government has been unable to come up with an acceptable solution. The disturbances in Rakhine fuelled tension and violence in several other parts of the country, demonstrating the worsening of Buddhist-Muslim relations.

According to a news agency report, at least 237 people have been killed in communal violence in Myanmar since June 2012, and more than 140,000 displaced, many of them in Rakhine State. Responding to a United Nations briefing, Samantha Power, the United States Ambassador to the U.N., urged the Myanmar government to take steps to stop the violence between Buddhists and Muslims and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid. She added: “We continue to support Burma’s reforms but are greatly concerned that without government intervention violence in Rakhine could worsen, lives will be lost, and the critically needed humanitarian presence will not be sustainable.”

Apprehensions regarding the rise of ultra-Buddhist nationalism are felt by many. As the country advances towards parliamentary and presidential elections in November 2015, vote-hungry politicians may be less inclined to bridge the communal divide. As *The Economist* stated recently, the country’s politics is now in “a dangerous phase”.

The larger question of lasting reconciliation among the various ethnic groups continues to engage the government’s attention. After securing ceasefire agreements with all of them, it has been striving to conclude a nationwide, collective ceasefire agreement with the armed ethnic groups as a prelude to a dialogue on political issues. That agreement remains elusive after several rounds of discussions. Indications are that it may come through at the jumbo meeting planned in May. A comprehensive solution may have to be deferred until after the elections.

Constitutional reform has registered little progress so far. It encompasses the role of the military in politics, redistribution of powers between national and provincial governments, independence of the judiciary, and review of qualifications for the President and the Vice President. The last mentioned issue has attracted much attention because “democracy icon” Aung San Suu Kyi will be ineligible to be a presidential candidate unless the relevant provision in the Constitution is amended. The country’s

Parliament has shown little appetite for securing constitutional reform in the short term. The military, which holds the veto, prefers to move slowly.

Suu Kyi has used all weapons in her armoury—sought accommodation with power wielders, lobbied the international community, and urged people to launch an agitation—but she seems to have made little headway. While receiving a human rights award in Berlin recently, she stressed that “Myanmar is not yet a democracy”. The world should watch, she suggested, if the government wished to move towards “a truly democratic union” or “an authoritarian state disguised in democratic garb”. The establishment favours stability and gradualism, whereas the opposition wants full democracy, freedom of choice and a level playing field.

In its latest assessment, the International Crisis Group (ICG) praised the military for initiating and sustaining the process of reform, depicting it as “a planned, top-down transition”. However, the report cautioned against “a strong possibility” of the military wishing “to preserve its political role longer than is healthy”. If “undemocratic provisions” were kept intact for long, they would be “deeply damaging to the country’s future”, it said.

Which way will Myanmar turn? The answer will emerge once it becomes clear who the next President will be. Myanmar watchers focus on four likely candidates: two known ones—Suu Kyi (if the Constitution is amended) and Speaker Thura Shwe Mann; and two who are undeclared—President Thein Sein and Commander-in-Chief Aung Hlaing. The nation’s choice will depend on the outcome of the parliamentary elections and the deals that political parties strike among themselves and with the military. The main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), is expected to perform well. The ruling party is also expected to put up a tough fight, unlike in the 2012 byelections when it probably wanted the NLD to win.

In an article published in August last year, I had concluded that “Suu Kyi has better chances to be the Speaker rather than the President after the 2015 elections”. This assessment remains valid. Reliable sources in Myanmar said in March that in comparison to Suu Kyi, a retired general or a serving general who may choose to retire in order to enter politics may have a better chance to be the next President.

Economic scene

The country’s economy has performed quite well, growing at 7.5 per cent in the last fiscal year. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that the growth rate may increase to 7.8 per cent in the next two years. The government’s economic reform strategy is, therefore, showing positive results. Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows are up; investor confidence is high. At a recent meeting with Thein Sein, ADB President Takehiko Nako urged him to continue the sound economic policies, expand structural reforms and strengthen the industrial climate.

The downside is well known, characteristic of one of the weakest economies in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): the need to attack poverty, unemployment, corruption, land-grabbing and institutional inadequacies. Those who show impatience with Thein Sein’s economic scorecard need to be reminded that reforms in China and India took years to show noticeable results.

External relations

Foreign policy is the domain where the government has achieved much success—balancing its relations with the West and China, with its immediate neighbours, and expanding the footprint of friendship and cooperation with other countries and international institutions. Human rights have been the only area of vulnerability. ASEAN commands top priority this year as Myanmar savours the privilege to be its chair. It will host two ASEAN summits in 2014, at a time when the association's energy is devoted to completing community-building by end-2015. Myanmar is expected to provide sober leadership to the regional grouping.

Myanmar's relations with China remain a subject of immense interest to scholars and officials alike. The transition undoubtedly represented a setback, but both sides have sought to stabilise relations since late 2011. China has grudgingly accepted the reality of Myanmar's other relationships, and Myanmar is conscious of the limits of its strategic flexibility. Clearly, the West, ASEAN, India and others have considerable room to help Myanmar and develop their cooperation with it.

As regards India-Myanmar relations, South Block invested heavily in this vital relationship, especially during the past two years. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Myanmar twice. The next government in New Delhi is also likely to take relations forward. Economic dividends are beginning to flow. After losing telecom projects, Indian companies have won contracts for four offshore oil and gas blocks. Equity stakes in a deep-sea block for another Indian company may be on the cards. Indian authorities are presumably pushing the companies concerned to complete the Kaladan and Trilateral Highway projects ahead of deadline. An exclusively Indian engineering exhibition, held in March at Yangon, was a notable success.

In short, three years after the launch of reforms, Myanmar presents a mixed picture. It is a complex polity that swings between hope and angst. Its future trajectory merits careful nurturing and close watch.

Rajiv Bhatia, former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, is Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs.

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