



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



MYANMAR'S SPRING REVOLUTION : A PEOPLE'S REVOLUTION

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Michal Lubina, April 2021

INTRODUCTION

A People's revolution

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EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The end of hermit country

Burma has traditionally been called a hermit country¹ – a designation not uncommon in Asia (Bhutan and especially Korea were similarly named), yet very fitting in the case of Myanmar. Precolonial Burmese kingdoms were generally inward-looking, with periods of sometimes spectacular external expeditions being exceptions rather than the rule. Some believed Burma's isolation was due to economic self-sufficiency, others ascribed it to geography. Still others looked for explanations in the cultural realm, believing - like Aung San Suu Kyi in her early writings² - that Buddhism made Burmese uninterested in foreign ideas. Whatever the reasons, it was only the colonial period that brought Burma into the global, capitalist world, however imperfectly: "Burma had been thrown open to the world, but the world had not been opened up to Burma."³ This forceful incursion inflicted wounds that never healed. That is why after the creative and chaotic decade of the 1950s (somewhat similar to the last ten years), Burma reverted to self-isolation after the 1962

¹ Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, ISLCAA Tokyo 1999, p. 141-142, 337-349.

² Aung San Suu Kyi, *Intellectual Life in India and Burma*, in: *Freedom from Fear*, London, Penguin 2010, pp. 108-121, 115 and 121.

³ John S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice. A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, NYUP, New York 1956, p. 202.

military coup. Finding the world a dangerous place, General Ne Win decided the best antidote for external perils was to stay away. He openly declared that all Burma wanted was to be left alone,⁴ and implemented a self-defeating policy of isolation and autarchy.

His vision collapsed like a house of cards in 1988, when the 8888 Revolution broke out. This led to Ne Win's personal and ideological downfall, while a generation of younger officers extinguished the protests, maintained the army's power and embraced capitalism⁵. Despite its nationwide character, the 8888 revolution ultimately failed to bring down the military regime. This was due to the esprit de corps of the officers of the Burmese army (Tatmadaw): only high-level defections could have "turned the tables."⁶

The National League of Democracy's vision of a non-violent struggle failed, in both its variants: radical (Suu Kyi-Win Tin's 1989 civil disobedience campaign) and conciliatory (Kyi Maung's post 1990 electoral victory strategy). As Suu Kyi painfully found out in 1995/1996 and 2002/2003, the generals would only accept her as an appendix to their own system, as a sort of symbolic legitimisation of their rule. External pressure (sanctions and boycotts) was unsuccessful too, as the generals would "weather another 40 years of sanctions just fine."⁷

What finally produced the breakthrough was a match made in heaven between the regime's reformists (backed by the "third force" of non-Tatmadaw intellectuals and returning Burmese emigré dissidents) and the West, which embraced the reforms and lifted sanctions in 2011. Suu Kyi's strategic U-turn was also decisive. After 23 years of struggle with the generals, the Nobel Laureate changed her tactics from confrontation to cooperation and agreed to function within rules that were determined by the regime (thus taking the biggest political risk of her post-1988 life). Although this Suu Kyi-Tatmadaw political marriage of convenience was at best a mutual misunderstanding and at worst a matter of sleeping with the enemy, it nevertheless enabled a promising decade. While Aung San Suu Kyi believed she could change the system from within, the generals conceded her an appendix role.

A splendid decade

The reforms initiated by the Thein Sein administration (2011-2015) and continued by Suu Kyi (2016-2021) produced the best decade since the 1950s. Throughout the country roads were improved, infrastructure developed (with access to the electricity grid reaching 70 per cent of the population), connectivity enhanced, a cyber revolution enabled and modest progress achieved in education and healthcare. Socio-political space expanded significantly: corruption decreased, transparency increased, the Tatmadaw's grip weakened, and CSOs strengthened, empowering people. Most of the political prisoners were released; exile dissidents were welcomed home; civil society and grassroots organizations, including humanitarian, educational and religious institutions sprouted in big cities; political parties were re-legalised. Censorship was eased and then formally lifted while self-censorship remained, recalling Burma's media experience of the 1950s. Dissent and public discussion was tolerated once again. Trade unions and the right to strike were reintroduced. Most importantly, after decades of brutal dictatorship, poverty and stagnation, the people of Myanmar came back to life and unleashed unprecedented energy. They could finally reintegrate with a rapidly developing Asia and start making up for lost time. That is why, notwithstanding unresolved ethnic issues, emerging communal tensions, Buddhist-Muslim violence, environmental damage, the rise of Buddhist extremism and the Tatmadaw's entrenchment in key segments of socio-political life – to name just the most important obstacles, the reforms were positive as they opened Myanmar to the world.

A Burmese "generation Z" was born, accustomed to using social media, working online and living within a high tech reality. A decade ago, a SIM card cost a thousand dollars, the internet ranked among the slowest in the world, and telephone meant landlines. Today almost every Burmese is on Facebook (on their smartphones), while many work and make money online thanks to a robust IT sector. For young Burmese, the internet became as ubiquitous as the air they breathe.

⁴ "Bilateral relations, then and now," *Myanmar Times*, 19.11.2012.

⁵ Robert Taylor, *General Ne Win. A Political Biography*, Singapore 2015, p. 554.

⁶ Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, London and Bangkok 1990, p. 127.

⁷ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps. A Personal History of Burma*, New York 2006, p. 342.

All these changes meant that the people of Myanmar lived better lives (much better for some, a little better for many) and had high hopes for the future. Fear of the Tatmadaw diminished, and despite the remaining invisible red lines, people ceased to live in fear: the traditional vision of rulers as one of the five existential enemies started to fade away. There was a general feeling that despite obvious drawbacks and problems, things were moving in the right direction. Until the military empire struck back.

The Spring Revolution

The February 1st coup d'état was an unexpected shock, best illustrated by the viral story of Khin Hnin Wai, who recorded her daily fitness exercises oblivious to the background of soldiers seizing the parliament.

Although tensions between the civilian government and the Tatmadaw had risen dramatically in the weeks preceding the coup, there was a general assumption that the opposing sides would finally mend fences as they had always done throughout the 2010s.

When the dust settled and the people realised that a nightmare had materialised, they went out to demonstrate. February saw a carnival of protests - with an atmosphere not dissimilar to that of August 1988. Its culmination point was on 22nd February (five twos is the date!), when approximately a million of people filled the streets of Myanmar's cities. The Spring Revolution united an otherwise divided society, with young and old, rich and poor, city dwellers and villagers, Barmans and ethnic minorities all calling for an end to military rule. As Khin Zaw Win remarked, "a diverse and traumatized country finally saying with one voice 'enough is enough' and getting to its feet and forging its own future minus the current military. This kind of coalescence of views and commitments happens only rarely in a country's life."⁸ The Spring Revolution became a nationwide resistance against the privileged ruling military class (with their own schools, hospitals and shops), which refused to share power.

The protests revealed a profound societal change. The previous decade of opening the country up had transformed the hermit Myanmar into a society where many know the external world and understand its codes and patterns. The Burmese now feel at ease in the current globalised world, skilfully using new media to struggle with the junta. Facebook (and to lesser extent Twitter and Instagram) are widely used as channels of communication and coordination, both within the country and outside. Internet is also the key source of information for the outside world. That is why CNN's parachute journalism in April evoked such anger: it was not only incompetent but also totally useless, as much better information was provided by local sources of reporting, including established sources (such as Frontier, Irrawaddy, Mizzima, Burmese BBC, Myanmar Now and others) and individual providers (Burmese journalists, from the well-known Aye Min Thant, Wa Lone, Ei Ei Toe Lwin, Mratt Kyaw Thu, to many lesser known and anonymous freelancers). Social media are also used for shaming and boycotting families of the army and police.⁹ A campaign first shamed the family of a policeman who killed Thwe Thwe Khaing in Naypyidaw, the first civilian casualty. This echoes anticolonial struggle patterns, for example the ostracism of the family of Ba U who sentenced the rebel Saya San in 1931. Social media are also vital for disseminating photos and videos of the Tatmadaw's atrocities. For all these reasons the regime has constantly been trying to turn the internet off. Temporary cuts have become the norm, though a complete cut has not happened and no Burmese cyber "Great Wall" is yet in sight. Various forms of strikes and boycotts – from CDM (civil disobedience movement) to "silent strikes" – draw on the experience of the anticolonial struggle in Burma and the Indian subcontinent ("hartal").¹⁰ They use the know-how gained from the veterans of the 8888 Revolution such as Min Ko Naing who announced the formation of the National Unity Government, an underground government, and knowledge accumulated during three decades of behind-the-scenes activism.¹¹ The 1989 civil disobedience campaign started by Suu Kyi never really took off, but the current CDM is a political force to be reckoned with.

⁸ Khin Zaw Win, keynote speech during seminar "Surviving and Thriving. Myanmar's Coup and Security Instability in Asia, TCSS seminar, Taiwan, 15.04.2021.

⁹ Burhan Wazir, Myanmar's protest movement riven by suspicions and accusations of betrayal, *Coda*, 26.4.2021.

¹⁰ Renaud Egreteau Twitter, https://twitter.com/R_Egreteau/status/1374604109408432134, 24.03.2021.

¹¹ Lisa Brooten, Myanmar's civil disobedience movement is built on decades of struggle, East Asia Forum, 29.3.2021.

Culturally speaking, the aesthetic aspect of the protests shows the reintegration of Myanmar with the global village. The codes used by protestors to ask for freedom, rights, and dignity are both Burmese and international at the same time. That is why stories of Kyal Sin (a teenage girl wearing a shirt inscribed with the slogan “Everything will be ok” when killed by a sniper) or Ann Roza Nu Tawng (a nun kneeling in front of security forces, resembling a Kachin version of “tank man”) became not only national, but global symbols of defiance. Moreover, even without speaking Burmese one may understand (and like) the movement’s protest songs, from *Ludu teitan go le khan sa* (“Can you hear the voice of the people”), *Anashin sanit sone that ya myee* (“Dictatorship must end”), hip-hop’s *Doh Ayay* (“our case”), to punk’s *One Day* and the re-emerging *Kaba ma kye bu* (“without forgiveness until the end of the world”). Memes, graphics and posters all tapped into the codes of global pop-culture to tell the same heroic story of the Spring Revolution. Demonstrators have been skilful on the international scene, too: the reinterpretation of the Milk Tea Alliance successfully advocated for Myanmar’s regional case. Thanks to all these actions, Myanmar’s struggle is much better known and publicised worldwide than it was in 1988. In a way the Burmese protests achieved in politics what K-Pop has managed in pop culture: being both local and international, or being international in form while being local in content. This has helped the protests, if only by increasing the stakes for the junta with its brutal pacification.

Who will wait out whom?

It is not the protests that hit the junta the hardest, but the CDM and accompanying boycotts. The banking system has collapsed, supply chains are breaking, international trade is almost on hold, Yangon’s port and airport barely function due to strikes.¹² The public bureaucracy, such as former civilian ministries, has been seriously weakened by walk outs and inertia. Railway workers are at the frontline of protests and face repression. Public transport has largely ceased to function, with buses and trains not operating while private car drivers fear military abuses at checkpoints throughout the country. This break-down of logistics has led to shortages of products and medicines in the cities. Hunger and health crises loom on the horizon.¹³

The junta’s response was to step up indiscriminate violence. But this has not quelled the protests. Instead, it has led to chaos.¹⁴ At the time of writing, the situation is in a stalemate: the regime hasn’t won, the people haven’t yet lost. With both sides believing the other will crack, the deadlock continues. The establishment of the National Union Government (NUG) has not changed these dynamics. Although it was a step in the right direction, reflecting impressive ethnic diversity, something the NLD government has badly lacked since 2016, the NUG lacks the military resources to turn the tide. Unless powerful ethnic armed organizations such as the Arakan Army or the United Wa State Army change their wait-and-see approach, the fate of the NUG will resemble that of the failed NCGUB of the 1990s more closely than that of the victorious AFPFL in the aftermath of WWII. While the bravery of the people vis-à-vis the brutal regime has been breathtaking, the junta has superior resources and reserves and can feed itself.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A marathon, not a sprint

Although the protestors keep calling for R2P (Right to Protect), there is no prospect of an international intervention, given the divided UN. China did not like the coup but detests instability even more, preferring tyranny to potential anarchy. Russia is eager to sell weapons and play above its regional status. ASEAN, with Thailand and Vietnam having sweet deals with the Tatmadaw, can only do face-saving diplomacy, as seen during the recent Jakarta summit. What the EU and other entities that wish Myanmar well can do, however, is to influence the Asian partners to exert pressure on the junta. Instability and state failure in Myanmar is in nobody’s interests. A joint effort should be targeted on finding ways for a face-saving solution for the Tatmadaw. This institution, although murderous and hated, is unfortunately too powerful to be politically excluded.

¹² *Nothing is Moving: CDM freezes foreign trade, raising fears of shortages*, Frontier Myanmar, 12.03.2021

¹³ *Myanmar on the Brink of State Failure*, ICG 09.04.2021

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

While the protestors and foreign sympathisers alike are still hoping for a dramatic change of fortune in Myanmar (say a counter coup: a Burmese version of Philippines 1986 or Indonesia 1998 with top officers renouncing their loyalty to the dictator) this – though not impossible – is unlikely given the two glues that hold the Tatmadaw together: economic interests¹⁵ and ideology. That is why the EU (while not excluding the possibility of a miracle) should be prepared for a long-term, patient strategy of quiet diplomacy and support for civil society (as it did in the 2000s, with good results)¹⁶. To quote Aung San, the EU should hope for the best while expecting the worst.

Change will come, though it will not come tomorrow or even the day after tomorrow. We need to realise that if Burmese history unfolds in cycles, we are now somewhere around 1988 or at best around 2003 (after the Depayin massacre). It will be a long process: a marathon rather than a sprint.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA) is an interdisciplinary research project that studies multiple forces affecting regional integration in Southeast Asia and the challenges they present to the peoples of Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, ASEAN.

CRISEA innovates by encouraging ‘macro-micro’ dialogue between disciplines: global level analyses in international relations and political economy alongside socio-cultural insights from the grassroots methodologies of social sciences and the humanities.

Coordinated by the Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) with its unique network of ten field centres in Southeast Asia, the project brings together researchers from seven European and six Southeast Asian institutions, with three objectives:

1. Research on regional integration

Multiple internal and external forces drive regional integration in Southeast Asia and compete for resources and legitimacy. CRISEA has identified five ‘arenas of competition’ for the interplay of these forces, investigated in the project’s five research Work Packages. It further aims to assess the extent to which they call into question the centrality of ASEAN’s regional model.

2. Policy relevance

CRISEA reaches beyond academia to engage in public debate and impact on practitioners in government and non-government spheres. By establishing mechanisms for dialogue with targeted audiences of policymakers, stakeholders and the public, the project furthers European science diplomacy in Southeast Asia and promotes evidence-based policymaking.

3. Networking and capacity-building

CRISEA reinforces the European Research Area (ERA) in the field of Asian Studies through coordinated EU-ASEAN academic exchange and network development. It connects major research hubs with emerging expertise across Europe and Southeast Asia. CRISEA also promotes participation of younger generation academics in all its activities, notably policy dialogues.

¹⁵ Bertil Lintner, *Why the Tatmadaw Won’t Crack in Myanmar*, Asia Times 20.04.2021

¹⁶ Details: Marie Lall, *Understanding Reform in Myanmar. People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule*, Hurst & Company, London 2016, 13-67.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Competing Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA)
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FURTHER READING	<i>A Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi: A Hybrid Politician</i> , Michał Lubina (Routledge, 2020) <i>The Moral Democracy</i> , Michał Lubina, (2019), translated into Burmese and published in Myanmar just before the coup.