

Dec 12 2011

## Myanmar – Mixing Hope with Realism

Dr Munir Majid

Dr. Zarni from the Human Security and Civil Society Unit of the Department of International Development LSE was sceptical and pessimistic about the political changes taking place in Myanmar which have given rise to hope the regime there is embarked on reform which will bring about true recognition of human and democratic rights. In the [seminar](#) organised by the Southeast Asia International Affairs Programme on 7th December, he described the various liberalising measures, such as the release of some political prisoners and easing of media control, as not part of true democratisation but just a process of “elite compromise”. The military, he emphasised, is still very much in control and is not converted to democracy or to giving the people their due.

He quite persuasively argued the concessions being made are driven by the military’s desire to find a way out for the generals and their cronies, to look not like the “bad guys” that they have been as they plan for their exit without any strongman successor going after them. They are not interested in democracy, less still in the interest of the people. They will reverse the concessions made or not proceed with further reforms promised – revert to kind – if they perceive their interest in a safe exit is threatened. Indeed, he pointed out, while President Thein Sein might appear to be the liberal reformer, he is only one and just a spokesperson of the nine member National Defence and Security Council, where true power in Myanmar still lies. He cannot afford to fall out of step.

He also contended Myanmar’s democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi is making a hopeful call on the regime’s good intentions knowing full well the country is not set on the path to true democracy. He was not enamoured of Aung San Suu Kyi’s enthusiasm in giving the present government a chance and would prefer to see a more robust insistence on giving real content to democracy rather than acceptance of a step-by-step loosening of tight governmental control without commitment to end objective. He insisted what was fundamental was constitutional change and the generals must be tested.

Neither the present rulers nor Aung San Suu Kyi, he held, have addressed the structural problems of Burmese society, a post-colonial process which has made little progress and, indeed, has been accentuated by military rule: no equality among the ethnic groups, the entrenchment of a rather “racist” political culture; a feudal outlook and attitude. In the National League for Democracy itself, he pointed out, there are no second-liners to Aung San Suu Kyi, who is supported by the party without question.

Dr. Zarni was a political activist in his country which he knows well and he is in close touch with people in Myanmar in and out of government. However, it is this very proximity, and then physical absence, which might lead him to want an idealised resolution after so many long years of military dictatorship. He wants to see a “Mandela moment”, a black-and-white change which may not be as easily replicated in Myanmar where, as he himself underlined, the generals are still very much in power and suspicious of change. Mutual confidence needs to be developed. In this regard, the engagement by Aung San Suu Kyi might very well be necessary.

Myanmar is also not as absolutely isolated by neighbours and by major powers as South Africa had been. The engagement by Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has its pluses and minuses and they about even out: Myanmar is watched and related to; at the same time, Myanmar is not isolated. Even if it is argued isolation by Asean could have turned on the pressure to change, the engagement by China would have provided relief, however imperfect. Now the US is also engaged, with Secretary Clinton’s visit at the beginning of this month. All this may not be driven by love of Myanmar or of an idealised democracy. No doubt specific interests and considerations are at play, but this is the way of the world.

The old debate about whether engagement or isolation works better to bring change is being played out in Myanmar with the emphasis, now, on engagement. When – whether – democracy and a decent life will come to the people of the country is a dynamic process and cannot be the outcome of a moment in time.



*Burma Protests. Photo Credit: Racoles*

This entry was posted in [ASEAN](#), [Burma](#), [IDEAS Blogs](#), [Nat10ns](#), [Nations](#), [political situation](#), [Southeast Asia](#), [Southeast Asia](#) and tagged [ASEAN](#), [Burma](#), [Munir Majid](#), [Myanmar](#), [Zarni](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).