

Will the Burma Road End in Democracy

Thursday 12 July 2012, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2012).

Most visitors to Myanmar these days, when the country is opening up, limit their trips to Yangon, better known in better times as Rangoon. They rarely make the five-hour trip to Naypyitaw, the site upcountry to which the ruling military regime has transferred the capital. As a parliamentary delegation from different Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) governments seeking to make contact with opposition legislators, we embark on the road trip to the Burmese generals' version of Brasilia, not really knowing what we'll find at the end of the 230-mile journey.

Before we leave Yangon, however, we meet with members of "Generation 88," people now in their forties who were leaders of the student uprising of 1988. Our meeting takes place against the background of fast-moving developments in Burmese politics: the triumphant European tour of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, universally referred to as Daw Suu or "the Lady"; the release of two dozen more political prisoners; and the opening session of parliament on July 4. There is a widespread sense that the country is undergoing momentous change.

Having spent a large part of the last 20 years in jail, the Generation 88 leaders are hardened activists who know the mentality of the military regime to the core. So it is a bit of a surprise when one of them, Ko Ko Gyi, says that the country's political opening is "irreversible." "Of course," he clarifies, "there might be setbacks, but the military knows it is in their interest, broadly, to reform. They know they can't go on like this."

How do they plan to engage with the current reform process? "We will mobilize different sectors around their legitimate demands such as wages," says Ko Ko Gyi, "but we also want to make sure that things are resolved within the framework of the current reform process." And yes, they plan to constitute themselves as a party and field candidates in the parliamentary elections of 2015.

The Military's Shangri-la

The meeting with Generation 88 provides much food for reflection during the trip to Naypyitaw. Some of us had expected architecture and planning in the fascist style, but what we found bordered on the surreal: surreal fascism. The place is linked by concrete roads that can be as wide as 18 lanes. The road leading to the parliament building, for instance, is wide enough for the latest jumbo jet to land on.

A great deal of empty space separates imposing government buildings, upscale shopping malls, and pricey resort hotels said to be run by cronies of the top generals. These first-world structures coexist with miserable settlements of the poor found near construction sites, where they provide the work force for ongoing projects.

Perhaps the most imposing structure is the Uppatasanti Buddhist pagoda, which is one of the tallest and largest structures of its kind in the world. The pagoda has a spire coated with 32 tons of gold, while its interior, which is patterned after Istanbul's famous blue mosque, boasts pillars constructed out of jade. All in all, Naypyitaw is, as one member of our delegation notes wryly, "a bizarre display of military intelligence."

That this country is still far from being a democracy is something we are reminded of when soldiers barred us from visiting the parliamentary building, and no amount of arguing that we are a fraternal parliamentary delegation can persuade them to let us through. We are not stopped, however, when we visit the residential quarters of the opposition members of parliament, which they occupy during the seven months that the body is in session. These are small one-room habitations that share communal toilets. The freshly laid barbed wire on top of the walls surrounding the compound gives the overall impression, as one member of our delegation remarks, of a “concentration camp.” Adds another, “Maybe the point is to discourage the opposition people from running for office.”

Ethnic Minorities

Since we cannot go to the parliament, MPs belonging to parties representing ethnic minorities and the National League for Democracy (NLD) join us in meetings at a restaurant in one of the capital’s two malls. The session with the MPs representing the ethnic minorities reveals an upbeat mood, with one MP from Rakhain state telling us, “It takes some time before you can get pure water from a well.” The MPs assure us that they belong to the opposition, though one of them says that only 70 percent of them can be counted on to be with the opposition, the rest being influenced by the military.

How to work with the ethnic minority parties and organizations will be one of the biggest challenges confronting the NLD. Myanmar has about 135 different ethnic groups scattered in seven states and seven regions, some of them with armed groups that have been battling the military regime for decades. Will Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD succeed in promoting by peaceful means a comprehensive agreement that has eluded the military? The Kachins have been dissatisfied with her failure to condemn the military’s recent offensive against them. Even more criticism has greeted her statement during her European tour that she was unsure whether the Muslim Rohingyas, who were victims of ethnic clashes in the state of Rakhine, were actually Burmese nationals. Clearly, Daw Suu will have to tread carefully here, reassuring the country’s minorities that she’s on their side while not giving the military the opportunity to paint her as endangering national unity.

NLD and the Reform Process

When we meet with some members of the NLD parliamentary delegation the next evening, they warmly thank us for the support given by the ASEAN Interparliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) during all those years that the regime tried to crush them. We, in turn, express our admiration for their perseverance in uncompromisingly opposing the military for over 20 years — ever since the NLD was prevented from taking political power after its landslide victory at the polls in 1990, when it won 80 percent of the seats. The eight MPs who attend the dinner have a total of over 70 years in jail between them, notes Kraisak Choonhavan, the former Thai senator who is one of the leaders of our delegation.

Unlike the meeting with the MPs representing ethnic minorities the night before, when many expressed optimism about the future, the NLD legislators are cautious, indeed very cautious. We are told to keep things in perspective, that the NLD has only 43 seats and the opposition has at most 168 seats in the 600-member parliament. One of them, U Win Htein, tells us that the regime is beginning to “tighten the screws on us.” He cites the government’s new requirement that the NLD must first inform the government before it establishes an office in any locality, its recent decree requiring parties to account for their expenditures in the recent by-elections in April, and a recent lower court decision awarding half of Suu Kyi’s family property to her estranged brother, Aung San Oo — a naturalized American that, as a foreign citizen, is forbidden by law from owning property. The regime, the NLD MPs say, has also made much of the Lady’s initial refusal to swear to “respect” the 2008 constitution and her constant use of the name Burma instead of Myanmar.

Caution is also the mood communicated by NLD senior statesman U Tjn Oo, head of the Central Convening Committee of the party, whom we visit at NLD headquarters when we return to Rangoon. He tells us, "Note carefully that Daw Suu has said she can work with President U Thein Sein but she is not sure she can work with the government." He sees the the NLD's future as resting on its work in organizing and winning over the younger generation. He also tells us that while the NLD welcomes foreign investors, projects "will have to be transparent and to be clearly beneficial for the masses and not simply for businessmen."

Tentative Conclusions

It might be rash to make a judgment after a three-day-visit, but let me venture the following tentative conclusions about the process unfolding in Burma. The country has definitely taken steps toward democracy, but these are baby steps, and "democratization" may not be the right word for the current process. Power continues to be tightly concentrated in the military, the official expression of this being the 11-member National Defense and Security Council. Although President U Thein Sein and reformers within the Burmese military currently hold the upper hand vis-à-vis the hardliners, their position continues to depend on the man behind the scenes, the aging dictator Than Shwe.

The momentum for reform is clearly gathering force, but it is not irreversible. Right now the regime is on good behavior, eager not to do anything that might derail its assumption of the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014, which will complete Burma's reentry into the ranks of legitimate governments. The real test will come during the parliamentary elections of 2015, when the NLD is expected to coast to victory if the elections are free and fair. Will the regime allow the NLD and its allies come to power, or will it panic as in 1990?

Finally, Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic forces will need all the support they can get from the outside world as they negotiate the swirling political currents over the next few years in their terribly challenging task of steering Burma toward genuine electoral democracy.

P.S.

From Focus on the Global South