

REALISTIC OPTIMISM AND CAUTION: MYANMAR'S POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION

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POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION



- ✗ Overview Events
August 2011 Meeting
“Pact-Making”
- ✗ November and January
Prisoner Releases
- ✗ April By-Election
- ✗ Accompanied by ongoing
economic reforms.
- ✗ April 1, 2012 floating
exchange rate
- ✗ Investment and land laws
- ✗ Roots of change 2002-3,
Nargis of 2008

SUBSTANTIVE CHANGES IN MYANMAR

- ✖ Freer press (open discussion of issues and significant reduction censorship)
- ✖ Diffusion of political power
- ✖ Reduction of direct military role
- ✖ Broader political opposition in legislatures
- ✖ Engagement with West and others more broadly
- ✖ Open discussion of issues
- ✖ Dissipation of fear



PROCESS OF POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION

- ✗ Led by President Thein Sein, but supported widely by sectors within and outside government.
- ✗ “Win-Win” transition rather than “zero-sum”
- ✗ Process begun but no transition as yet, but simultaneously talk of reversals not realistic
- ✗ Resistance to change inside system, while political opposition (primarily NLD) pressures on pace and substance of changes
- ✗ Nature of opposition to liberalization – inside and outside. Hardliners and nationalists



POLITICAL REALITIES OF LIBERALIZATION



- ✗ Not a “democracy” (no broad free and fair election until 2015 expected)
- ✗ Key issues in transition not likely to be substantively addressed (impunity, corruption, displacement of old elite/cronies)
- ✗ Important to see profound changes, but also realize limits of change to date
- ✗ Ongoing changes – contested over their substance and pace

CONFLICTING CURRENTS - CORRUPTION

- ✗ Legal anti-corruption framework
 - New anti-corruption law
 - Civil servant ethics law
 - Considerable political will at presidential level
- ✗ Crony “signature” culture
- ✗ Political uncertainty and vested interests
- ✗ Public anger growing over this issue



CONFLICTING CURRENTS – POWER DIFFUSION



- ✗ President key figure for change and decision-making
- ✗ Reality is that power is more diffuse in parliament, bureaucracy, military and among cliques. Recent addition of ASSK. Process of accommodation.
- ✗ Limited civil society engagement
- ✗ Slow decision making

CONFLICTING CURRENT – ETHNIC MINORITIES

- ✘ Approach toward conflict resolution historic, Karen peace agreement
- ✘ Establishment of peace building initiatives
- ✘ At same time, ongoing problems in Rakhine and Kachin states.
- ✘ Legacy of exclusion of minorities.
- ✘ Challenge of Burman nationalism
- ✘ Difficult search for effective ethnic representation



CONFLICTING CURRENTS - REFORMS

- ✘ Focus on rule of law and legal framework.
Intense investment in framework for liberalization.
- ✘ Difficulty of implementation and buy-in from stakeholders
- ✘ Reforms not felt on the ground



CHALLENGE OF GOVERNANCE



- ✗ Open recognition of problems within Myanmar, e.g. poverty, infrastructure
- ✗ Challenge of prioritization
- ✗ Capacity building multiple levels, building institutions
- ✗ Challenge of delivery
- ✗ Strengthening political will
- ✗ New military role toward professionalism

CHALLENGE OF PERSONALITIES

- ✘ Lessons from history of 1950s
- ✘ Political fragmentation on many fronts
- ✘ Managing division among leaders
- ✘ Trust building
- ✘ Jockeying and competition for resources and position



CHALLENGE OF PARTY BUILDING



- ✗ Institution building for representation
- ✗ NLD ASSK iconic status. Difficulty finding quality candidates and moving party beyond the leader
- ✗ USDP has identity, recruitment and leadership issues.
- ✗ Engagement with society

CHALLENGE OF PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS

- ✘ Rising expectations in society
- ✘ Rising activism in civil society and protests (land, electricity and students)
- ✘ Pressures for translating reforms into results



CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPMENT



- ✗ Focus remains on basic needs --incomes, infrastructure, electricity, health, housing, education.
- ✗ High levels of poverty and vulnerability. Yangon alone 50% below poverty line
- ✗ Rising inequalities

WINDOW FOR CHANGES 2012-2014

- ✘ Pre-election window critical. Next two years.
- ✘ Challenge of sustaining political cooperation at the top and within government, shared common purpose
- ✘ Concrete economic gains and governance



IMPERATIVE OF INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

- ✘ Rising Myanmar
- ✘ Needs international recognition and support
- ✘ Process “Myanmar” driven
- ✘ Right type of support on partnerships, people-centered collaborations, institution building.
- ✘ Building sustainable relationships



MYANMAR BETWEEN CHINA AND WEST



- ✗ Myanmar currently moved toward “West”
- ✗ Expectations of sanction removal, technical support and international aid.
- ✗ China still and always be a major player, given neighbor and economic interests. Yet aim is to gain more autonomy from “big brother”

MYANMAR & ASEAN



- ✘ Myanmar welcomes investment and capacity-building support from ASEAN.
- ✘ Within Myanmar resistance to being seen as a “problem” and concerns of local producers of maintaining competitive position.
- ✘ Concerns over pace of changes and tone of engagement

REFLECTIONS

- ✘ “Hurry up and wait”
Need for patience.
- ✘ Non-linear changes with uncertainties
- ✘ Steep learning curve, with considerable people’s will with future focus
- ✘ Central role of trust-building on multiple fronts

