



28th

ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE

2-4 JUNE 2014, KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA



PLENARY SESSION FIVE
3 JUNE 2014

MYANMAR'S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORMS

by

Mr. SOE Myint

Founder and Editor-in-Chief
Mizzima Media Group
Myanmar

SPONSORS



Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

UEM



JAPAN FOUNDATION



NEW ZEALAND
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE



Embassy of Japan
in Malaysia





Presentation by Soe Myint, Editor In-Chief, Mizzima Media, Myanmar
At 28th Asia-Pacific Round Table, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
2-4 June 2014

I would like to begin by thanking the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia, as well as the other members of this panel and all distinguished guests for the opportunity to speak here today. It really is amazing what has transpired in Myanmar over the last few years, and it has been a privilege – as a Myanmar media company – to be able to cover these stories for both domestic and international audiences. However, just as we had our own problems prior to the initiation of political and economic reforms, the current atmosphere of transition in the country carries with it its own challenges and risks.

No discussion of Myanmar's political transition, and related reforms in foreign relations and economic liberalization, can ignore the forthcoming 2015 general election – which will likely be held in either November or December. It stands not only as a benchmark for the sincerity of the government, in the form of holding free and fair elections, but will also be a critical indication of the political maturity of the country's population and political parties.

While there are to be by-elections later this year, and the importance of the success of this balloting is not to be understated, the by-elections themselves do not carry the potential for a major shift in the political orientation of the state. We saw this in the April 2012 by-elections, which while relatively free and fair also posed no threat to the immediate political status quo.

This is simply not the case for the 2015 general election. Already, it can be argued, campaigning has begun, with personalities such as opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and House Speaker Thura Shwe Mann having voiced their desire to assume the presidency. I am sure many of you are aware of the ongoing battle to amend the constitution to, among other things, permit Aung San Suu Kyi to in fact assume the country's top post. There is, of course, an underlying belief held by many that Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy are destined and entitled to rise to power following the polling.

However, whether or not the constitution is amended and whether or not the opposition is able to emerge victorious, I would argue that it is at least as important that space within the mechanisms of government is identified and appreciated for both ruling and opposition parties. If Myanmar's election is construed as a zero-sum, winner takes all affair, there is a real danger that the people of Myanmar will end up the losers – as formal and informal means of political opposition could threaten to derail the social and political transition process.

But the 2015 election does not only impact Myanmar. Especially as Myanmar is the current chair of ASEAN, the country's domestic politics can also carry a regional impact. There is a danger of personal competition on the domestic scene undermining Myanmar's chairmanship as potential 2015 candidates jockey for position. It is thus essential that whatever domestic political turmoil is taking place, that it is dealt with in a manner that does not compromise Myanmar's ability to establish and execute a coherent agenda for the greater ASEAN community.

Of course, politics in Myanmar is not only about competition at the level of the central state, it is also very much about the relationship between the central state and peripheral regions of the country. Later this month, it is expected that the government and armed ethnic groups will reach an agreement on a final ceasefire accord. However, decades of conflict have left a considerable gap in trust between the various sides to the conflict. Issues such as demobilization, resource extraction and revenue, and educational curriculum are likely to remain highly contentious – as ethnic groups seek to protect their identity in the face of a Myanmar state seeking rapid development and wrestling with the demands of modernity.

The fragility of the current center-periphery relationship can be seen in the risks posed by the not yet complete 2014 national census – the first Myanmar has conducted since 1983. Potentially divisive subjects such as ethnicity, religion and citizenship are being collected. These factors of identity are, of course, at the heart of some of the most intractable conflicts in Myanmar – as evidenced by recent bouts of sporadic violence in Rakhine and Kachin States.

Following independence in 1966, and at a critical juncture of transition for the country, the government of Botswana made a conscious decision to cease the collection of ethnic and racial identity in all future censuses. Now, there are arguably just as many potential negative side effects to not collecting and reporting information, as there are in the release of potentially sensitive and inflammatory statistics – my point is simply that the government of Myanmar will need to be vigilant in its reporting and use of the information, and all the more so with elections scheduled for 2015.

Yet political reform and good governance is only one area of reform, Myanmar is also undergoing significant economic reforms. If you were to visit Yangon five years ago, you would see a very different city – no ATMs, no Coca-Cola, and very little incentive to build. Today, it is at the center of the economic liberalization of Myanmar society.

However, if you were to visit Hakha, the capital of Chin State, there would be no more ATMs, no more sounds of construction crews busy at work. Admittedly, Chin State may be an extreme example, but the question remains how the vast swaths of the country outside the economic corridors connecting large urban areas, and projected Special Economic Zones, will benefit from the economic liberalization currently underway.

It is a question that is even more important to inhabitants of resource rich regions – including several areas prone to ethnic conflict, where investment is often extractive in nature. Attention will need to be made to invest in the human capacity of Myanmar's

citizens. This is vital if the current economic liberalization is going to grow to become self-sustaining on a national level.

Now, I would like to briefly touch on how the reform process has impacted Myanmar's media industry – and the experiences of this one industry will hopefully shed light on how far Myanmar has come to date, and just how much farther we still have to travel.

It is true that the Censor Board has been dismantled, private daily newspapers are now on the streets and legislation is being passed to oversee print and broadcast media more in line with internationally accepted norms. At Mizzima, we last month also launched daily SMS and mobile phone radio news services – just one more indication of the transformations underway in Myanmar and opportunities available to both businesses and consumers.

However, what is important to keep in mind is that Myanmar is still very much in transition. The media market, despite liberalization and the transitioning of state media to public service provider, remains dominated by state related products. To compound this unequal playing field, the local economy is not yet mature enough to be able to fund the production of news sources through such mechanisms as advertising revenue. And there is also again the center versus periphery divide. Infrastructure in the country makes it physically and financially prohibitive to undertake a truly national distribution system.

There is some progress being made with respect to upgrading broadcast technology throughout the country, but this will also take some time – and prospective private broadcasters will have to abide by the terms of broadcast legislation, which can still be argued to favor state-related entities. I want to emphasize here that, just as we see with the lingering effects of decades of conflict between the state and ethnic armed groups, there remains a pervasive lack of trust, or at least wariness – in this case between the state and private media. This can also be seen by the number of arrests of journalists over recent months. It is, I would argue, the mental obstacles that may prove the most resistant to reform and change.

However, to be fair, the state is right in their concern that businesses must conduct themselves responsibly. Given the lack of educational and professional opportunities for independent journalists in Myanmar, this is a real concern for the media industry, and something we at Mizzima confront on a daily basis. To give just one example, we are now implementing a training course on how to professionally and ethically cover election news. We are doing this with an eye to the by-elections later this year, but also in preparation for the 2015 general elections.

So, yes, reforms have come to the media sector in Myanmar – and these should by no means be discounted. But, it is a gradual process. And just as it will take time for state reforms to become comfortable with a vibrant, independent media industry, it will also take us – in the media business – time to raise our level of professionalism in production to where it needs to be.

What then, it is asked, is needed to sustain the momentum behind Myanmar's reforms?

I know I haven't talked much about foreign policy, but let me first say that with respect to foreign policy, former Myanmar Prime Minister U Nu described the country as "hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cacti" between the competing interests of China and India, as well as the United States. With the changes taking place in Myanmar, and the opening of the country, Myanmar's leaders will be further tasked to balance regional interests with its own bilateral interests in managing the influence and pressure of global powers – who of course each carry their own agenda.

Moves such as the suspension of the Chinese-backed Myitsone dam project can be interpreted as an indication from the Myanmar government that it is looking to move away from a perceived overreliance on China, in turn diversifying its foreign relations portfolio – which is made all the more possible by the political reforms in the country.

Concerning ongoing political reform, we must continue to study and learn from the experiences of others. This has been a crucial component thus far in areas of legislative reform, for example. But, I say this not so that Myanmar can copy what others have done, but so that we can apply lessons to our unique situation.

And I cannot stress enough the need for both free and fair elections and inclusive, responsible governance. December 2015 may seem a long way off, but the next general elections are already very much a newsworthy topic. Just what transpires from this experience will go some distance in indicating the speed and stability of Myanmar's transition and the confidence foreign investors will have in the country.

Economically, we must continue to invest in human resources and improvements in infrastructure, empowering the people and future generations of the country. This, together will ensure that the growth and investment in the country is conducted responsibly and does not endanger the environment or living conditions of citizens.

These are exciting times for Myanmar, and I appreciate the chance to share some of my observations and experiences with you.

Thank you.