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## SURVEYING THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLITICAL TERRAIN

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## **Surveying the Southeast Asian Political Terrain: Myanmar and beyond**

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### **Contradictions and contexts**

In recent weeks Myanmar has been receiving another round of bad press. This time attention is focused on desperate people from the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderlands who have taken to boats seeking sanctuary and better lives across the Andaman Sea. Their journeys have often proved heart breaking. Emerging evidence of mass graves and gross exploitation in Thailand and Malaysia have shaken the region, with Southeast Asian governments working towards a cooperative solution to what has been a longstanding, and usually ignored, crisis. The roots of many of these tragedies are found in northern Rakhine State where a Muslim minority who call themselves Rohingya are disempowered and shunted aside. The Myanmar government seeks to avoid responsibility for them, claiming that this group is ineligible for the privileges granted to Myanmar's other ethnic and religious minorities. When in 2012 Muslim neighbourhoods and villages were attacked in a wave of Buddhist fury, the international community sought to offer a rapid humanitarian response. Since then conditions in Sittwe and the forgotten townships of northern Rakhine State have remained tense, primed for further violence. Rakhine Buddhist nationalist movements, which argue that they face an unrelenting tide of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, have sought to entrench their dominant position, unwilling to countenance compromise with those who were their Muslim neighbours.

Practical, compassionate and sustained responses to this situation have struggled to adjust to the changing political terrain elsewhere in Myanmar. Many Buddhists resent special treatment for displaced Muslims and have even sought a moratorium on the use of the "R" word. Such sensitivities are compounded by impressions that international activism—whether from the liberal West or the Islamic world—is designed to undermine Myanmar at a time of uncertainty, even vulnerability. Myanmar is preparing for what we anticipate will be elections in late 2015, with a wide range of other promising economic, cultural and strategic

developments also gaining momentum. President Thein Sein and his government in Naypyitaw are justifiably proud of the way they have managed a multi-faceted transformation from entrenched military government to semi-civilian rule. Their 10-year-old capital exemplifies a grandiose ambition for Myanmar, where the country takes what they imagine is its rightful place as a major regional power. Long land borders with China and India have some investors salivating at the potential for Myanmar to be a new regional hub in manufacturing, energy and mining, with further economic potential once new infrastructure is put in place.<sup>1</sup> It is a big story, with many good news aspects, that also requires awareness of contradictory trends.

In this brief paper I sketch out some of the contradictions that have emerged during Myanmar's recent busy years of political, economic and cultural change. This treatment starts with (1) the persistence of conflict under conditions of aggressive peace negotiation; then (2) consideration of the variety of ways that dictatorial practices continue to influence government; followed by (3) analysis of the country's key foreign relations, and then (4) a close look at the exclusion of the Rohingya from what is a proud multi-ethnic society. It is this final point that draws together the analysis of Myanmar's recent changes, seeking to explain how and why northern Rakhine State remains a site of extreme anxiety. It is reasonable to assume that any future Myanmar government will struggle to manage such issues, and there is clearly no single template for policy success. Experiences from Europe to Australia indicate that the management of large-scale population movements, especially once people smuggling networks are well entrenched, is a fiendish challenge. To conclude, the paper assesses four scenarios for Myanmar's political and economic development including some alternative futures that deserve significant attention across the region and beyond.

## **1. Peace and war**

Since independence in 1948 all Myanmar governments have fought against minority armies seeking greater autonomy. Nobody knows how many people have died in the many wars—large and small—that have monopolised resources the length-and-breadth of the country. It could be as many as a million. Millions more have fled, seeking sanctuary across the country's borders and in countries further afield. War has proved frustratingly persistent, with some battles continuing even in 2015. The role of the Myanmar armed forces in fighting these battles has

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014 the Myanmar government claimed the country received over 3 million foreign arrivals for the first time. This is a further indication of the resounding international acceptance of the changes that are underway. The era of tourism boycotts, justified by statements from democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, has quickly faded into history.

shaped a peculiar institutional ethos where the primary focus of strategic policy is internal security. Most senior Myanmar military figures can tell personal stories of these wars, including about the large number of comrades-in-arms that they lost in battle.<sup>2</sup> Those stories are shared among countless ethnic military leaders who have spent their lives locked in combat, or ceasefire stalemates, with the central authorities.

Such history means that when they sit to negotiate more peaceful interactions there is a shared awareness of what is at stake. The Myanmar Peace Center, the government's primary vehicle for creating a new compact with ethnic minority armies, has made progress towards a nationwide ceasefire deal. There is optimism that a final agreement will be organised before the anticipated 2015 election. Yet battles continue in some parts of the country, with recent attention moving to the Kokang region of northern Shan State where fierce fighting erupted in early 2015. It follows earlier explosions of new conflict in other parts of the country—notably the Kachin, Kayin and Shan States—in the past few years. Each of these situations is different but what ties them together is the erratic consolidation of peace arrangements.

Many ethnic minority leaders therefore remain hesitant to endorse a political system that they judge merely maintains the influence and interests of the old military regime. They call for greater decentralisation and a genuinely federal union. The goal is a political system where local livelihoods, cultures and languages can be supported, with the central government taking on a much-diminished role responsible for matters like foreign affairs and national defence. Some ethnic minorities imagine that local security, taxation and service provision will be formally ceded to them to manage as they see fit. This would codify the arrangements that already exist in some places where powerful militias, usually those with longstanding agreements to work alongside the Myanmar army, are entrusted with significant components of local governance. How this fits into the new constitutional order remains unclear, even though some remote locations, all in Shan State and Sagaing Region, have been granted a “self-administered” status. Perhaps over time more regions will receive permission for such administrative exceptions, although the current patchwork suggests that it is only those groups

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<sup>2</sup> Such stories tend to focus on cadet classmates who were killed in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The intensity of fighting, particularly during the height of the Communist Party of Burma's insurgency, is difficult to exaggerate. Some battles in Kayin and Shan States are also recalled with dismay. It was in these long wars that some senior figures, such as the Union Assembly Speaker, Shwe Mann, received their *Thuru* honorifics for distinction on the battlefield.

judged pliable by the former military regime that have workable autonomy in their areas.

## **2. Dictatorial practices, democratic beginnings**

For a country that was governed by a series of military regimes for almost five decades, the pace of change in recent years is astonishing. For a start, it is easier than ever to interact with government officials, to learn about the country's far-flung corners, and to experience both the frustrations and joys of working in a system where the military stranglehold has gradually loosened. The emerging system continues to bamboozle those who anticipate the rapid creation of something akin to a Southeast Asian Sweden. Instead the heavy contestation of future directions, the thick residue of old grievances and the abrupt change to the social and economic climate all suggests that turbulence will remain the medium term formula. Its ongoing rehabilitation has changed the character of much political and economic discussion around the rest of the region. Everywhere there is new enthusiasm for what Myanmar can offer its people, the Southeast Asian region, and the rest of the world. It is a time of considerable analytical uncertainty, with new ideas postulated at a frenzied pace.

With respect to governance, it is clearly time to take stock of what has been learned during this nascent democratic phase in the hope of offering a reasonable foundation of understanding in the lead-up to the 2015 election. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the current government remains deeply connected to the former military regime. This starts at the top, with President Thein Sein, and the majority of his senior ministers, who have only recently swapped their army trousers for civilian *longyi*. In Naypyitaw's much-celebrated legislative system, the two speakers, Shwe Mann and Khin Aung Myint, are retired generals who held top command positions under the State Peace and Development Council administration. At the State and Region level, where 14 local governments and legislatures take responsibility for key functions, the ongoing influence of retired and serving military officers is striking. This is partly explained by the heavily managed result of the 2010 election when the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party won a sizable majority of seats across the country, and also by the 25 percent allocation of seats to serving military officers.<sup>3</sup> The residual military tilt of senior post-holders is further explained by the relative paucity of

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<sup>3</sup> At the time, the 2010 election was widely judged a missed opportunity and yet in the years since it has provided the foundation for much greater interaction between military, military-aligned, democratic and ethnic political interests. Those interactions are especially important in the new legislatures in Naypyitaw, where elected and appointed military members spend long days together. That almost all democratic and ethnic members also live together in the Naypyitaw Council Guesthouse provides further opportunities for productive learning.

other skilled management personnel. Even a fully democratic Myanmar is likely to need the input and skills of those who were trained at the Defence Services Academy and other prestigious military educational institutions. The reality is that the civilian education system will require a generation of investment in its rehabilitation, a process that has already begun under the watchful guidance of Aung San Suu Kyi's project to revitalise the University of Yangon.

The other reality is that the military controls significant real estate holdings, economic segments and strategic resources. This combination is what sustained the former military regime, and only hesitant steps have been taken towards reform in this sensitive area. Some work has, for instance, been done to seek clarity on which military land-holdings need to be returned to their original owners. The disjuncture between the lofty rhetoric of the rule of law and the implementation of local governance procedures is another point of friction. It remains unclear whether military authorities will surrender their real estate interests, especially if large numbers of displaced former owners begin to return from abroad. The expansion of garrisons in some ethnic minority areas will test goodwill on all sides, but in the long-term the only conceivable resolution will come from the retreat of army units from their current locations.<sup>4</sup> The timing and success of these efforts will depend on how well the return of diaspora populations can be managed.

### **3. Foreign relations in a crowded neighbourhood**

Such issues have a distinctive international component, especially where large numbers of Myanmar people have moved across international borders. The primary host for this population is Thailand, where perhaps 2 million Myanmar citizens (and former citizens) now live. They find themselves doing the dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs that most Thais prefer to avoid. Some are also caught up in the most exploitative elements of the Thai economy, whether crewing unregulated fishing trawlers or working in the shadows of the sexual services industry. Thailand has, for its part, sought to maintain the flows of Myanmar labour, resigned to the fact that its economy requires their low-priced contributions. The Myanmar government has, since 2012, become more active in its efforts to support migrant workers and acknowledges the value of their remittances. Nonetheless there are certain groups—most significantly the Rohingya—who are not eligible for Myanmar government support.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a process that would obviously need to be managed alongside any peace agreements. The scale of the undertaking is immense. Today the Myanmar armed forces probably have around 350,000 uniformed personnel, with over 1000 major defence facilities spread to all corners of the country.

At high levels there is regular communication between the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments, but sadly this has not led to any greater connection or understanding between their populations. It is a relationship still defined by mistrust and lack of empathy.<sup>5</sup> Myanmar nationalists blame Bangladesh for the perceived flow of migrants across the border from Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar and Teknaf. They insist that they face a flood of illegal workers eager to take their jobs and land. This specter is often painted in starkly religious and racial terms. In this framework there is no room in northern Rakhine State, and perhaps in other parts of Myanmar, for Muslim minorities that may struggle to justify their long-term presence in the country. At the moment the relationship between Myanmar and Bangladesh is framed by paranoia about existential threats to Buddhist civilisation. It is a narrative of crisis and decline, where Myanmar's only hope is to defend itself against "foreign invasion".

Under such terms Myanmar's relations with the rest of Southeast Asia will need careful attention. Reports of mistreatment of Rohingya or other Muslims in Myanmar could prove to be a potent tool for Islamist mobilisation across the region. Protests supporting the Rohingya have been held in major Southeast Asian capitals, and in Indonesia in 2013 a plot to attack the Myanmar Embassy was disrupted. These issues complicate the otherwise positive interactions that Myanmar now enjoys with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Having hosted the ASEAN summit and associated meetings for the first time in 2014, Myanmar has a higher regional standing than ever before. But this hard-won status is fragile and could be undermined by assertions that mistreatment of the Rohingya goes unpunished in northern Rakhine State.

Myanmar is also juggling its relations with the region's great powers: China, India and the United States. Each has welcomed the recent political changes, although China probably has the most to lose in the short-term from the resurgence of wider interest in Myanmar's economic potential. The suspension of the multi-billion dollar Myitstone dam project in 2011 still reverberates in discussions of China's influence over what was once sometimes considered a client state. Myanmar is now developing relationships in new directions, with the re-embrace of India and the United States setting a tentatively "democratic" tempo. The fact that US President Barack Obama has now visited Myanmar on two occasions is taken as evidence of the muscled-up American ambition in this corner of

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed analysis of how northern Rakhine State looks from across the border in Bangladesh see: Nicholas Farrelly and Ishrat Hossain, "From Bangladesh: Considering another side of the Rakhine conflict", in Nick Cheesman and Htoo Kyaw Win (eds), *Communal conflict in Myanmar*, Yangon: Myanmar Knowledge Society, 2015.

Southeast Asia. The United States, among other countries, has criticised the Myanmar government for its treatment of the Rohingya. It has also offered extra support for the resettlement in the United States of some stranded boat people.

#### **4. The exclusion of the Rohingya**

It was the discovery of the mass graves in Thailand and Malaysia that has motivated the recent spurt in attention to the miserable conditions of the Rohingya, whether in Bangladesh or Myanmar.<sup>6</sup> Neither country has any desire to absorb this population with both claiming that the other must shoulder the ultimate responsibility. This has led to large movements of people and to violent incidents. In the violence of 2012 the parallelism of the two national narratives was a striking outcome. In Bangladesh people were told that they faced an unrelenting wave of migration from Myanmar, where people were being persecuted for their religious and cultural background. In Myanmar the story was inverted: a wave of migrants was looking to make new homes in Myanmar and needed to be discouraged from doing so. In this frenzy of half-information, there were attacks on Rohingya and other Muslims in Myanmar, with violence also targeted at the million-strong Buddhist minority in south-eastern Bangladesh. The town of Ramu, outside Cox's Bazaar, was a key site for Muslim mobs seeking vengeance for what they had insisted was blasphemy. In the face of these incidents, both Myanmar and Bangladesh the governments struggled to react.

A few years later the response of the two governments can also be usefully compared. While Bangladesh continues to claim that it must minimise the “pull” factors enticing Myanmar’s Rohingya to seek new lives on their side of the border, they have slowly absorbed 100,000s of these new residents. Some of these people eventually end up on boats sailing across the Andaman Sea. Others end up forced to hustle on the margins of the economy in southeastern Bangladesh where the local population struggles to harmoniously integrate these new arrivals. With “pull” factors in mind, Bangladesh has worked to ensure that the international humanitarian response does not become an attraction for Rohingya while, on its side of the border, there are indications that Myanmar is deeply ambivalent about the role of foreign assistance. It is this double bind that has trapped the Rohingya: unwanted in Myanmar but discouraged from seeking alternative opportunities. And while the Bangladesh government and security forces have rebuilt most of the destroyed Buddhist sites and neighbourhoods on their side of the border, there has been no effort to support the return of Muslims to their burned out

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<sup>6</sup>Reports suggest that a fraction of the people taking to boats from the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderlands are Bangladesh citizens. Current information is that perhaps 30 percent fit that criterion, with the rest Rohingya from southeastern Bangladesh and western Myanmar.



homes across northern Rakhine State. This contrast tells us something about the immediate political calculus, but also about the long-term potential for peaceful coexistence between different faith groups.

The crisis that forces Rohingya to take to the sea, and become vulnerable to the evil plans of human traffickers, is the outcome both of conditions in the borderlands that Bangladesh and Myanmar share, but also of the political mood in Myanmar nationalist circles. Senior Myanmar politicians, including Aung San Suu Kyi, have proved wary of speaking out about the issue. This means there is no locally produced counter-argument to the assertion that Myanmar faces existential threats from Muslims who will seize land and opportunities. Some widely heard voices also posit that Myanmar's Buddhist women need special protection, and there are regular moves to impose extra conditions on the Muslim minority. These conditions serve, specifically, to dehumanise the Rohingya.<sup>7</sup> Concerned outsiders have warned that northern Rakhine State has some of the early warning signs of a much graver humanitarian crisis, perhaps even a slow-burning genocide. Online there are regular efforts to generate attention for this unfolding tragedy. These are matched by the ardent voices of Myanmar nationalists seeking to claim that the real victims are on the Buddhist side. While that remains such a strongly held view the Rohingya are vulnerable to an explosive political dynamic. It does not take much imagination to consider scenarios where Myanmar's Muslims confront very hard choices about their futures, and are forced to flee in even greater numbers. While there is clearly no single answer, the maintenance of a plural and inclusive society cannot be ignored in the rush towards welcoming other political and economic changes.

#### **Four scenarios to consider**

This paper has sought to offer some perspective on the overall picture of political, economic, cultural and strategic change in Myanmar. The four key issues that have been explored in detail—peace, democracy, foreign affairs and the Rohingya—all point to ongoing challenges and the persistence of both positive and negative trends. To conclude, the analysis takes a speculative turn with four scenarios that could loom over the horizon.

##### 1. Good things will grow

It is tempting to expect that the positive aspects of Myanmar's current trajectory will be maintained. Such an outcome would emphasise the return of foreign

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<sup>7</sup> For details on northern Rakhine State after the 2012 violence see: Human Rights Watch, "*All You Can Do is Pray! Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State*", April 2013.

investment, the improvement of economic and social infrastructure, the rapid adoption of new technology, and the continued liberalisation of politics and the media. In such a scenario increasing connection to regional and global trends will reinforce many of the positive aspects of recent change. This scenario, which we might call “good things will grow”, will reward those who have expressed confidence in the tentative reform process. Under such conditions it would be reasonable to expect that the military, the National League for Democracy, ethnic minority political interests, and the wider population, would all enjoy healthy stakes in the success of the system.

This is a scenario where the consolidation of democratic practice will still take time, but it will lead to a relatively robust framework for adjudicating political differences. Some level of armed conflict would likely persist, but not to the extent that it undermines the overall development of a much happier society, where economic growth delivers benefits to the majority of people. Unless there was a radical change in policy, inequality is also likely to increase, particularly between urban and rural areas. Yet the overall picture would be benign, even rosy, with Myanmar finding its internal success leads to greater global status. It is a scenario where Aung San Suu Kyi could find herself governing in a coalition or perhaps in some other configuration that benefits the political and economic interests of the armed forces. While such a pattern of government implies compromise, there would also be the long-term promise of a genuinely democratic political order.

## 2. Democratic consummation

It is the quicker implementation of such an order that the National League for Democracy has in mind. The scenario that might best suit their current plans is one where a resounding victory at the 2015 election creates a mandate for more radical change. The constitution is usually identified as a key obstacle to fuller democratic practice and its reform is obviously on the agenda for Aung San Suu Kyi. Many point to the non-democratic 2008 constitutional referendum as adequate justification for comprehensive legal and political overhauls. In a scenario where Myanmar’s democratic aspirations are fulfilled a set of further negotiations, particularly with ethnic minority armies, would need to follow.

A new government ruling under such conditions would probably also seek to rearrange the economic jigsaw, but would need to be careful that it did not unduly alienate powerful vested interests. This would leave revolutionary elements dissatisfied but would probably be the only way to keep the country together.

Even with a fully democratic system, effective checks-and-balances, a functioning judiciary, free media and all the rest, Myanmar would remain prisoner to aspects of its recent history. The integration of former senior military figures in such a system would likely support its long-term success, but would also frustrate those who presume they should be forced to account for alleged historical crimes. Even such a full democratic consummation would require ongoing patient management. The experience of Thailand, which was previously held up as Southeast Asia's democratic success story, points to the major problems with bedding down a long-term democratic arrangement.

### 3. Back to the future

Efforts towards such a “democratic” outcome would certainly justify the risks that have been taken in recent years, but those moves could also embolden the destructive forces that seek opportunities to break the current system. Protests by labour unions and student groups are a reminder that some sections of society feel ill-will towards those managing the current transition. They might help to trigger just the type of instability that has historically motivated the armed forces to reassert their political authority. The current constitution gives the armed forces' high command the choice to “reset” the political equation if they see fit. While there are no current indications that a coup is on the horizon the fact is that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his subordinates have other tools at their disposal. If they feel threatened then the national security apparatus could swing quickly into a more defensive posture, arresting opponents, clamping down on supposed dissidents, and cramping the new found spaces for open political discussion. Such a draconian turn would probably generate further conflict in ethnic minority areas, and it would not be good news for those seeking a more conciliatory approach from Myanmar's decision-makers in other areas. The Rohingya, in such a scenario, would face even tougher choices.

What is unclear is whether the “back to the future” scenario implies the current surge of positive international attention would drop off completely. There are many semi-repressive but otherwise respectable regimes around the world that juggle the mixed impressions of their governance. If Myanmar retreats to some form of more direct military rule then its leaders will hope that economic opportunities trump liberal political sentiments. In that assessment they could point to many regional examples where authoritarian governments prove to be stable international partners. Aung San Suu Kyi's high esteem is naturally a complicating factor but if Myanmar took a turn to this historical pattern then she may have lost her last chance to seize what many consider her political destiny.

#### 4. Myanmar unraveled

A final scenario to consider is one that breaks all of the rules of Myanmar's fragile unity, where the nation-state fractures along regional and ethnic lines. This is not a novel suggestion: many people, including senior Myanmar military figures, have long worried the country could fracture, perhaps in a process of balkanisation that sees its precious territorial integrity destroyed. "Myanmar unraveled" is a fair designation for a scenario where centrifugal pressures rip at the bonds that keep 135 officially designated ethnic cohorts inside the same system. Even today there are parts of the country governed under utterly exceptional spatial, political and economic arrangements. In a scenario where Myanmar unravels, the creation of new statelets and fiefdoms could occur quickly. In some interpretations this would be a return to the historical norm, where highland and lowland polities were traditionally estranged.

Under these conditions neighbouring countries could be expected to meddle in Myanmar's affairs to an unprecedented degree. China and Thailand would be obvious patrons for some of the political interests that would emerge. Avoiding this scenario has justified generations of defence investment on the Myanmar side, and yet there are still very significant risks that, at some stage, the country will face this challenge. Some ethnic minorities would welcome the loosening of what they consider Naypyitaw's chokehold. Any fragmentation of the national territory would be accompanied by violence and so international attention to these possibilities is prudent. The potential for population movements on an unseen scale would be one obvious outcome. In a scenario where Myanmar unravels, even partially, the potential for region-wide instability would preoccupy strategists across East, South and Southeast Asia.

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These outlines of four scenarios point to the ongoing challenges and pressure points for Myanmar's authorities. They face unenviable decisions, including about the Rohingya. Regional and international pressure goes some way towards the better management of what remain unpredictable future directions. Current mistreatment of the Rohingya, both in Myanmar and elsewhere, shows how far the country needs to go before it is a happy place for all its people. Today's headlines are an important reminder that this is a story that needs to be told and retold. While we wait for the election of 2015 we should not forget that this intense period of campaigning will be quickly replaced by a new chapter of anticipated compromise, potential conflict and ongoing contention.