

## Counterpoint on Myanmar's Transition

By Stanley A. Weiss

**YANGON**—As demonstrators from Tunis to Cairo to Tripoli wonder if their revolutions will succeed, Myanmar remains an unfortunate poster child for what happens when revolutions go wrong. With a population equal in size to the United Kingdom, and a per capita income of less than two US dollars per day, Myanmar has suffered under military rule since 1962.

Peaceful demonstrations for democracy like those seen in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya (seen, that is, everywhere but here, since coverage is censored) led to soldiers opening fire on defenseless monks and students—first in 1988 when an estimated 6,000 were killed; and again in 2007 when hundreds died and thousands were jailed in unrest that became known around the world as the Saffron Revolution.

So, it came as no surprise last November when the international community dismissed Myanmar's first general election in two decades, which saw regime-backed candidates win handily, as "neither free nor fair," in US President Barack Obama's words. As the new elected government prepares to take over this month, there are still unanswered questions about what the people in Myanmar think and what people in the West understand about Myanmar's transition. This writer reached out to contacts made in the years I've traveled to Myanmar and three strong themes emerged from their insights.

First, the elections mattered more than the West realizes. "What has been missed in the West is that these elections took place within a much broader political transition," said Myanmarese historian Thant Myint-U, the grandson of former United Nations (UN) Secretary General U Thant. "Nearly the entire junta has resigned their military commissions. Many ran in the elections and some will wind up in the new government. A whole new generation of army officers has been promoted to the leadership. Under the new Constitution, the National Assembly and various regional assemblies will be one of three political actors, along with the presidency and the army."

I received a similar reaction from a long-time political activist, who was once jailed by the junta, who echoed Thant's point, saying, "When the junta started the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that won the elections, the high level members they chose for ranking positions were from small towns—doctors, high school principals, business people—who were already well-known and popular in their society. When you look at the candidates who won, they won. What has escaped notice by the West is that the new President, Thein Sein, is clean and his children are clean, with no corruption scandals. It's a start."

Long-time Myanmar scholar Robert Taylor said, "While outwardly it appears that the generals have traded suits for uniforms, underlying it there is change of a more substantial nature. The army realizes that it cannot govern alone forever

and wants to open up political space and opportunities for those who share its goal of economic development, political stability and political nationalism."

"And don't forget," added Thant Myint-U, "In the election dozens of parties competed, most entirely independent of the junta. Millions have voted for the first time in 20 years. Is this a step toward democracy? Only time will tell. But who can say, even in hindsight, what the important steps were that eventually led to democracy in, say, South Korea or Indonesia."

Second, many Myanmarese feel embittered toward the West. "There is solid mistrust and resentment toward the West, not only among the generals but the country as a whole," says the activist. "We're tired of being represented in your newspapers as cowering in fear and barefoot, scrabbling in the mud. It's just insulting. America now talks about China's growing influence here. We just happen to be right next to it. So, finally the American administration is looking at a map?"

A local expatriate who requested anonymity said, "It is too late for the United States here now. You were arrogant for too long to think Western input was needed. It's not. Now, a major economic corridor is forming in Myanmar, and massive investment is flowing in. Sad to say, but you've lost this generation."

Third, Western sanctions are not just useless but they actually strengthen the regime while weakening the opposition. "What the West doesn't understand," says a transplanted British citizen, "is that the sanctions of the international community (imposed by the US) have not only failed but the community itself has failed to achieve the respect of the generals that would enable meaningful dialogue."

Thant Myint-U agrees: "US policy for a long time has been based on an objective that was extremely unlikely to be met—a dialogue between opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi (who was recently released after 17 years in jail and under house arrest) and the junta leading to democratic change. Western sanctions that were put in place to force the dialogue have not bankrupted the government, nor pressured leaders toward political reform. What they have done is severely weaken the position of independent businessmen and the middle classes on whom an open society depends."

Adds the expatriate: "The regime has no reason or incentive to want sanctions lifted. They want no NGOs, no UN, and no ILO (International Labor Organization) to have to compromise with."

"Like it or not," Thant Myint-U adds, pointing to Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, "we have to accept that we no longer live in a time when the West can determine political change half way around the world." Unfortunately for the West, *that* may be the revolution that lasts.