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Myanmar Frozen in Time By Ethnic Rift

By Stanley A. Weiss

WASHINGTON—The topic of assassination lends itself to one of the recurrent parlor games of world history. If John F Kennedy had never been assassinated, would the United States have gotten out of Vietnam? If Yitzhak Rabin hadn't met an assassin's bullet, would the Oslo Accords have led to peace between Israelis and Palestinians? If Archduke Franz Ferdinand had survived his attacker in Sarajevo, would the world have gone to war in 1914?

There is no place on earth where the consequences of a past assassination are more acutely felt than in Myanmar, also known as Burma. The brutal slaying of General Aung San by machine-gun fire in 1947 - six months after he helped negotiate Myanmar's independence from Britain, a short time before he was to take over as prime minister - left many dreams unrealized.

But it is one issue in particular, left unresolved to this day, that animates the conversation of national unity and progress: what to do about Myanmar's many ethnic minorities?

Just weeks before his death, Aung San convened a tribal summit which led to an agreement committing Myanmar to a spirit of equal representation - an agreement that was frozen in time when he was killed. Whatever the outcome of this coming Sunday's parliamentary elections in Myanmar - the first such vote in two decades - unless and until somebody picks up Aung San's mantle and works to resolve the ethnic question, Myanmar will remain frozen in time.

"There is no question," says a long-time Western observer who has done extensive work in country with Myanmar's ethnic groups. "It's all about the tribes. Ignore that fact, and you make the same mistakes we have made in Iraq and Afghanistan, where silenced minorities have wrecked havoc."

Slightly smaller than the state of Texas and situated at the crossroads of India and China, Myanmar is home to 135 distinct ethnic groups. The largest ethnic group by far is the Burman, which comprises about 60% of Myanmar's 50-million-plus population.

During Myanmar's period of colonial rule, from 1886 to 1948, Great Britain preferred hiring ethnic minorities to work in its colonial administration, for fear of putting the majority Burman in positions of power. As a result, ethnic nationals were often better educated and developed strong ethnic identities.

After independence was declared in 1948, the tables were turned and Burman politicians dominated the government, with long memories of their time in exile. "Many ethnic leaders viewed the Burman leaders as hegemony whom they could not trust," writes Myanmar observer Kyaw Yin Hlaing. "They agreed to join the union only out of respect for General Aung San."

Convening a meeting at the town of Panglong, Aung San promised an equal power-sharing agreement, pledging to ethnic minority leaders that they could opt out of the union 10 years after independence if the benefits of cooperation failed to materialize.

The "Panglong Agreement" gave rise to a spirit of equal representation that would be short lived. After Aung San was killed, Burman leaders tried but failed to work the agreement into the new constitution. Ethnic minority groups rebelled, with a handful launching civil wars against the Burman majority.

In 1961, 200 ethnic leaders met for a constitutional review and demanded a "genuine federal union". In response, in 1962, a convention was convened in Rangoon (now Yangon) to rewrite the constitution. It proposed to unite Myanmar as one state while assuring equal representation in its national assemblies.

It was too much for the military, which launched a coup during the convention. Different military juntas have ruled ever since. Certain armed ethnic insurgent groups have fought continuously against the junta in battles that have led to some of the worst human-rights abuses in recent history.

Since 1990, world attention has focused on Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi. Her National League for Democracy party won 58 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections in 1990, only to see the results annulled and Suu Kyi imprisoned or held under house arrest for 14 of the next 20 years.

So what can America do to help? First, if America's allies at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) recognize this coming Sunday's election results, so should the US. Says Ma Thanegi, who spent three years in prison working as Suu Kyi's personal assistant: "If the West really wants to help the people, they should accept the new government and give it a chance."

Second, right-size US humanitarian aid. Today, the United States Agency for International Development spends US\$10 million annually in Thailand supporting 150,000 Myanmar refugees, but only \$2 million in Myanmar to support an estimated 500,000 internally displaced citizens who have been driven from their homes amid armed conflict. Those numbers should be reversed.

Third, use America's leverage with ASEAN to bring the Myanmar military, the pro-democracy movement and non-Burman Ethnic Nationalities Council together. With broad economic sanctions in place since 1997 and more targeted measures implemented against senior junta members and their close associates under the George W Bush administration, the US has little leverage with Myanmar. However, ASEAN now aims to sign a free-trade agreement with the US and the grouping's inclusion of Myanmar stands in the way of a deal. Condition the end of economic sanctions on movement toward a three-part federation.

In preparation for the election, Myanmar's military leaders unveiled a new flag with three horizontal stripes - green, yellow and red - and a white star in the middle. No official word has been given yet on what the stripes stand for. Here's hope that they symbolize Aung San's dream of genuine unity with the country's ethnic minority groups.