
Burma's Challenge

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In his first inaugural address in 2009, President Obama made an offer to the world's repressive regimes. He promised America's "extended hand" if they would "unclench [their] fist."¹ Soon after, his administration put that principle into action. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton led a policy review that resulted in a renewed emphasis on direct engagement with the Burmese leadership. Even as we maintained our longstanding sanctions regime, engagement was designed to test the sincerity of a Burmese leadership increasingly interested in improved relations with the United States.

Two years of intensive diplomacy followed, as the United States and Burma carefully assessed openings to restore the relationship and gradually overcome more than two decades of distrust. After President Thein Sein and a new parliament took power in March 2011, openings seemed to appear as the government began to evince a new approach to its domestic and international affairs. Over ensuing months and years, the Burmese government released hundreds of political prisoners, ended restrictions on the registration of the National League for Democracy party, held by-elections that brought Aung San Suu Kyi into Parliament, relaxed censorship and media restrictions, and opened the door to international development and humanitarian assistance on an unprecedented scale. In response, the United States eased sanctions on trade, investment, and travel; normalized diplomatic relations; exchanged Ambassadors; and reestablished a USAID Mission.

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A turning point came with Secretary Clinton's historic visit to Burma in December 2011—the first visit of a U.S. Secretary of State in more than half a century. And days after his reelection in November 2012, President Obama fulfilled the promise he made in his first inaugural address, physically extending his hand to President Thein Sein as the first sitting U.S. president to visit Burma.

If successful in its path toward reform, Burma could become a powerful example of how democratic reform can proceed out of a repres-

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sive, authoritarian system. Serious challenges remain, however, leaving the path ahead unclear. Reform has exposed unresolved questions about Burmese identity—questions that have been long repressed in a tightly controlled and closed society. Change remains rooted in individuals, not institutions, and old mindsets die hard. The development of a true democratic sensibility will take

years. Government and civil capacity is thin—bureaucrats and local officials alike still wait for the commands from above before taking action—while economic underdevelopment is endemic and civil liberties nascent.

Furthermore, Burma must address its challenges amidst its historic tendency towards fractiousness. Since its independence from British colonialism in 1948, Burma has been at war with itself, engaged in the world's longest-running civil conflict that has encompassed virtually every major ethnic group in the country at one point or another. Its early days of democracy during the 1950s were beset by deep divisions, becoming the primary justification for the military's takeover in 1962 and continuation in power for half a century, a path that led the country into even greater degradation and underdevelopment.

Despite the common perception abroad, Burma's defining challenge is much more complex than the image of one courageous Lady pitted against a military regime, as critical as that Lady is to the future of the country.² That challenge is how the country's diverse people can overcome a history of fractiousness in order to live together and hold the country together through political means rather than force—something that arguably has never happened in Burma's history.

ENDING BURMA'S CIVIL WAR

Building national unity is a complex, multifaceted challenge. But the central component is achieving a genuine and lasting peace between the Burmese government and its vast array of ethnic nationalities. One of Asia's most ethnically diverse countries, Burma officially recognizes 135 different ethnic groups. Aside from the majority Bamar (Burman), seven of these groups—the Arakan (Rakhine), Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Karenni (Kayah), Mon, and Shan—comprise the largest of the ethnic nationalities. In recognition of this diversity, at the Panglong Conference in February 1947, General Aung San, the primary architect of Burmese independence, convened leaders of the Chin, Kachin, and Shan to produce the Panglong Agreement. This agreement articulated a vision for ethnic nationality rights within a unified, democratic Burmese state.

Following the assassination of Aung San in July 1947, however, the optimistic vision of the Panglong Agreement eroded into distrust and eventually civil war. Ceasefire discussions came and went, but they repeatedly failed to turn into broader political dialogues or elevate ad hoc bilateral negotiations into a robust national peace process. The result has cost countless lives, displaced entire communities, led to a vast array of human rights abuses on all sides, and allowed illicit industries to thrive.

Under Thein Sein's government, however, the prospects for turning ceasefires into lasting political solutions have steadily improved. Negotiations between the government and ethnic armed groups have resulted in ceasefires with ten of eleven major non-state armed groups (the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/A) being the exception as of this writing).³ The next step is to unify these separate bilateral agreements under a national framework and begin an inclusive political dialogue to address underlying questions of political, economic, and cultural rights, as well as justice, autonomy, and the distribution of power. Progress on this front is inextricably tied with constitutional reform, as integration will require a redefinition of the relationship between the ethnic states and the union government.

RAKHINE STATE

Despite some positive momentum between the government and the ethnic nationalities, inter-communal violence, largely against Muslim communities, spiked over the past year. This violence began in Rakhine State, the country's second poorest state, which lies along Burma's western

border with Bangladesh. Incorporated forcefully into Burma in the early nineteenth century after hundreds of years of independent kingdoms, the Rakhine people combine a deep national pride with a profound resentment toward successive Bamar governments.

Given this history, and with a state population of just over three million bordering a Muslim nation of more than 160 million, Buddhist Rakhine leaders have a deep-seated sense of victimization and vulnerability. Many Rakhine have felt they have few if any allies inside or outside the country who understand their history or concerns. They assert they are in danger of being overwhelmed demographically by a growing population of what they consider “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh,” a group they and others in Burma call “Bengalis” but who self-identify as “Rohingya,” the term recognized by most in the international community. The Rakhine view the term “Rohingya” as offensive, associating it with ambitions to

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carve out an independent Muslim state. The Rohingya, for their part, consider the term “Bengali” offensive for implying the population is alien and not Burmese. They assert they have been present as a people in Rakhine State for generations, if not centuries, and only seek the right to citizenship and equal protection and other rights under the law.

However one views the relative merits of these positions, deep-seated fears about threats to Rakhine “national identity” permeate the state’s Buddhist population, including its religious leaders, and are echoed elsewhere in the country. Indeed, preserving Burma’s identity as a fully sovereign

actor given a geography that puts the world’s two most populous nations, China and India, as well as a large Muslim-majority state on its borders, is Burma’s fundamental concern and lies at the heart of the country’s historic insecurity. How the country decides to handle that sense of insecurity in ordering its internal affairs—for instance, focusing violently on perceived “enemies within,” or focusing on rule of law, peaceful settlements, and dialogue—will remain a key determinant of the future stability and success of the country.

In June 2012, the rape and murder of a Rakhine woman, apparently by three Rohingya men, and the retaliatory murder of ten Muslims by a Rakhine mob, sparked a spate of violence in the state. In October 2012, violence flared again, with systematic attacks on Muslim villages.⁴ The result has been hundreds of deaths, thousands of destroyed homes, and tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs), many of whom live in camps that lack sufficient food, shelter, health services, water, and sanitation. In each case, the Muslim population has suffered disproportionately. In the name of stability and security, Muslims' freedom of movement has been severely curtailed, as has their access to livelihoods, making them prisoners where they sit, in clear contrast to their Buddhist neighbors. In desperation, thousands of Rohingya have tried to flee by boat, hoping to land in a country that would accept them as refugees. Many, however, die at sea, are turned away at foreign shores, or if "successful," suffer in prisons, immigration detention centers, and shelters.

The government's leadership in addressing the situation in Rakhine State has been mixed at best. Communal tensions remain high, and human rights abuses remain rampant. The government formed a commission to investigate the roots of last year's violence and offer recommendations to prevent recurrence. Implementation of the report's recommendations, however, has lagged. The United States has worked closely with the United Nations and an array of interested partners in the diplomatic and donor community to keep a spotlight on the situation in Rakhine State. Additionally, we have worked to ensure the government addresses not only all immediate humanitarian needs but also the root causes of conflict, including a citizenship process for Rohingya, accountability, security, rule of law, and economic development. Only then will a lasting solution be found that brings peace, justice, harmony and development to the people of Rakhine State.

THE SPREAD OF ANTI-MUSLIM VIOLENCE

Alarmingly, the insecurities that sparked violence in Rakhine State have fueled a more general, if heretofore latent, insecurity among the broader Buddhist population toward Muslims. In March 2013, an argument in a gold shop in Meiktila, a town in the Mandalay region, escalated into a conflict that displaced 12,000 people. Anti-Muslim violence then spread across central and eastern Burma in ensuing weeks, resulting in destroyed homes, businesses, and mosques, and brutal killings.

The source of the anti-Muslim violence is unclear. It is certainly true that messages promoting a uniquely Buddhist vision for Burma and

propagating conspiracy theories about the intentions of Muslim communities have created an atmosphere conducive to violence. Facebook postings and other inflammatory media explicitly encouraging violence have fanned those flames. Some have claimed resentment stems from relative Muslim affluence. The well-known “969” campaign,⁵ despite its promotion of Buddhist tenets as a literal matter, has also promoted division and anti-Muslim attitudes through the campaign’s origins as a response to the perceived transgressions of Burma’s Muslim population.

At the same time, rumors abound that powerful figures from the old guard in Burma, with vested interests in derailing reform, have opportunistically manipulated religious tension for their purposes. Indeed, soon after an incident occurs somewhere, locals consistently report that youthful “outsiders” appear to take part in relatively organized violence against Muslim interests. While suspicions are widespread, however, no concrete evidence has surfaced about who these organizers of “troublemakers” may be, if they do indeed exist.

Though President Thein Sein has condemned the violence in strong terms and made public speeches promoting a multi-ethnic, multi-religious future for the country, the government has been slow to take bold action in response to these episodes of religious violence. Strict accountability against all those who committed violence is essential, as is more assertive central government leadership and effective public communication to make clear that all of Burma’s people will be protected equally according to law, and that violence, division, and exclusion will not be tolerated.

THE U.S. ROLE

National reconciliation and unity is ultimately a task for the people of Burma. That said, the United States, in close cooperation with others in the international community, has a limited but potentially important role in support of this goal. The U.S. Embassy engages intimately with a full range of ethnic groups and travels regularly to each ethnic state to listen, learn, consult, and communicate our support for an inclusive and transparent peace process. These groups want to know they are not forgotten and that their interests are not overshadowed by the brighter lights of Rangoon, Mandalay, or other parts of the “Bamar center.”

The international community may also play a role to help rebuild trust within ethnic nationality communities, encouraging former combatants, survivors, and communities to work together on common problems, for instance through landmine risk education and assistance to victims and

advocating for humanitarian access to all those in need. At the same time, we have pushed for the inclusion of local civil society organizations in the peace process to promote a conversation that adequately reflects the multitude of ethnic nationality interests beyond the traditional military and political voices. Indeed, as the ceasefires give way to wide-ranging political dialogues, those local voices, which have long taken a back seat to the conflict-driven political and military leadership, should become more prominent. In the end, to truly bring Burma the peace, stability and national reconciliation long denied it, the peace process itself must reflect the values, interests, and democratic process many envision for Burma's future.

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UNITY THROUGH DIVERSITY

Next year, Burma will assume the ASEAN chairmanship, and in 2015, it will hold its next general election. The world's gaze will be fixed on Burma as its transition undergoes these and many other crucial tests. The skeptics might say Burma cannot simultaneously pursue so many grand tasks—that it simply does not have the capacity to handle the country's complicated ethnic and religious dynamics, while it also pursues democratic and economic reforms.

However, the United States is confident in the tenacity and determination of the Burmese people to build a peaceful, just, and prosperous society. While the challenge ahead is great, the United States, along with many in the international community, stands ready to assist. We are increasing humanitarian aid, expanding assistance for institutional and individual capacity-building and urging Burma to embrace its rich, multi-ethnic, multi-religious heritage as a source of national strength.

At the government's invitation, and at times through our own initiative, the U.S. Embassy and other members of the diplomatic community have visited the various sites where violence has occurred to bear witness, deliver assistance, and provide recommendations for action. We continue to meet with religious leaders and interfaith representatives to amplify those voices calling for peace and have engaged with ethnic nationality representatives on all sides of the national divide.

In the end, there is reason to feel encouraged. People throughout the country—across ethnic, communal, religious, and cultural lines—are joining hands to oppose violence and division, taking on Burma’s “defining challenge” to chart a new peaceful and prosperous future for themselves and their families. They understand well what is at stake if they fail to grasp this opportunity to overcome division and embrace reform. No one expects the historical legacies of the past to be overcome easily or soon. But they can envision Burma’s diversity finally becoming a source of strength, not weakness. Only with such a vision may a “new Burma”—one that is truly stable, democratic, unified, and prosperous—become a reality. *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Barack H. Obama, “Inaugural Address,” (speech, Washington, D.C., January 20, 2009), The White House, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/President_Barack_Obamas_Inaugural_Address.
- 2 For years, many in Burma referred to Aung San Suu Kyi as ‘The Lady’ as both a code and sign of respect.
- 3 The government and the KIO/A had concluded a cease-fire in 1994, but fighting began again in June 2011 when a local skirmish spread rapidly, revealing deep-seated bitterness within the Kachin community over the military’s local activities and government’s failure to engage in a promised political dialogue. As a result, thousands of new IDPs have fled to the Chinese border. The flare-up in the Kachin conflict from 2011 into 2013 is the most glaring counterpoint to positive momentum in the peace process over the past two years.
- 4 This included “Kaman” Muslim villages. The Kaman are a Muslim community who, unlike the Rohingya, are accepted as citizens and recognized officially among the country’s 135 “national races.” Despite the difference, Kaman were targeted equally by those instigating violence in Rakhine State and find themselves among the desperate IDP population.
- 5 “969” is a numerical abbreviation of the nine supreme qualities of the Buddha, six books of the Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings), and nine qualities of the Sangha (the community of monks).