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Negotiating democracy

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DESPITE or because of decades of self-imposed insulation against the rest of the world, Burma (Myanmar since 1989) retains the considerable interest of foreigners.

It has the power to cast a spell on even the most casual visitor. Even though Rudyard Kipling only spent a brief sojourn in Burma, his soldier's lament, *The Road to Mandalay*, and his impression of the Shwe Dagon pagoda (a golden mystery ...a shape that was neither Muslim dome nor Hindu temple spire), seem to epitomise the conception that "this is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land you know about".

Burma is, to me, just like Kipling described it.

The Europeans, the British, in particular, the Japanese and Thais know the independence of the Burmese people was and is remarkable.

The proud Burmese have never forgiven nor forgotten the British who destroyed the Burmese empire and absorbed it into British India in 1886, exiling King Thibaw and his court to India. Burma became a separate British colony in 1937.

In 1945, what remained of King Thibaw's palace in Mandalay was burned to the ground during fierce fighting between British and Japanese soldiers, adding another wound to the Burmese psyche.

Burma became independent in January 1948 and it was not altogether surprising it did not join the Commonwealth.

The socialists under U Nu ruled Burma but in 1962 General Ne Win staged a military coup. "Buddhist Socialism" was introduced, deepening Burmese isolation.

Free trade was prohibited; everything was nationalised. Two generals followed Ne Win, Saw Maung and, since 1992, Than Shwe.

Only the blithely ignorant or the blatantly biased will dismiss the Myanmar military regime as merely brutish.

The generals are a product of their own unique historical experience, and the international community's failure to understand their mindset has crippled what little influence it might have had on Myanmar's present and future.

Myanmar's highly ambiguous attitude to the rest of the world, and in particular the West, goes back into the mists of time. For the Myanmar, colonialism was a calamitous humiliation.

Even today, the Myanmar remain deeply suspicious of foreign influences. Despite relative poverty, their country is not as bad as it is made out to be.

A flourishing black economy, quite openly helps ease things. The Myanmar continue in a tradition of somewhat in-ward-looking self-reliance that strikes outsiders steeped in the material values of the 21st century as rather quaint.

In my previous visit as well as during my just-concluded six-day stay, I never met nor saw a depressingly unhappy Myanmar.

The Myanmar working in Malaysia - ranging from labourers to professionals - are diligent and self-effacing. As far as I can tell, among all the labour imports, they really like Malaysia best. But, unlike many of their employers, they have a distinct lack of love for the imported modernity that is contrary to their culture.

They hold their pride deep in their hearts with good reason. Myanmar used to be one of the richest countries in South-east Asia.

Since then, it has become a prime Third World example of high potential ruined by bad politics. But, for sure, it is changing for the better. I see it happening.

Myanmar's greatest tragedy was the assassination in 1947 of nationalist hero Aung San, who had just negotiated an independence agreement with the British, and most of his Cabinet. The murders created a dual legacy.

It left the country bereft of a leadership that enjoyed wide popular support and trust among the diverse political and ethnic forces that made up the Union of Myanmar, with disastrous consequences for democracy. And it left the armed forces to take over the mantle of Aung San's memory.

General Aung San had led the Burma Independence Army, and his successors continue to insist that the army remains the nation's natural guardian.

That belief was jolted by the dilemma of Aung San's daughter who emerged to lead the pro-democracy movement in the 1980s.

In the eyes of the military, which had engineered Myanmar's isolation, Suu Kyi appears to stand more starkly for the foreign bogey than anything else.

She had spent most of her life outside Myanmar. WELCOME: Chairman of the Myanmar State Peace and Development Council Senior General Than Shwe (left) with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Myanmar and married Michael Aris, an Oxford don.

Even so, she and her party won an election sanctioned by the military. Had she been allowed to rule, the course of history might be different. But that is a moot point.

The crucial thing now is to make amends for the mistakes of the past by both competing sides. Myanmar deserves a better fortune and future.

Myanmar, like some other former British colonies, has not been lucky economically since independence.

In our case, the aims of the Independence generation have mostly been realised, leaving political and generational change relatively painless. But only relatively, mind you.

Change is always daunting. And for the Myanmar ruling generals, who by doctrine and experience justifiably mistrust civilian government, the prospect of anarchic democracy is harrowing.

They won't give up power easily. The armed forces, like those in all countries, are the ultimate repositories of patriotism. It is a patriotism that rises to an iron fist the more the country is unable to govern itself. Some scholars argue that the military, as in Pakistan or Indonesia, is the only united force in Myanmar capable of maintaining stability against serious ethnic and social conflicts. They, therefore, argue that Myanmar should proceed slowly rather than take the radical leap of completely dismantling military rule.

The scholars are probably right. Myanmar is not singular in having an icon of the status of Suu Kyi. Neither is it particularly novel in its difficult transition to democracy.

Transfers of power from authoritarianism to popular rule are a high-water mark of the late 20th century. They have taken place across the world, from Eastern Europe to Latin America to Africa and Asia, and have been much studied and written about.

I think the best transitions such as in Chile and South Africa - have been a carefully negotiated process in which a mutually acceptable bargain was struck between the old regimes and the new democrats.

Myanmar's continuing limbo is, therefore, as much the responsibility of the junta as Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. I believe both sides are thawing, albeit slowly, as a result of the tireless efforts of Tan Sri Razali Ismail, the UN Special Envoy to Myanmar.

Suu Kyi's fans in Malaysia and elsewhere may dislike me in my attempt to

understand the generals but those who know me, like Razali, will not.

In hindsight, Suu Kyi might have painted herself into a corner by her uncompromising stand on the outcome of the 1990 election. She has had no meetings with the generals since her release from house arrest in May. But that may not be the case for long, I expect.

The generals are acutely sensitive to what they see as foreign interference. Since the lifting of international sanctions has been bound up with their treatment of Suu Kyi, they see any concession as a caving-in to outside pressure - as a surrender of their autonomy and the nation's sovereignty.

To remove even the slightest impression of foreign meddling, the generals have insisted on secrecy in their dealings with outsiders. In Razali, they have found someone they can trust.

Razali has kept his word, and his mouth shut. As a result, he has been able to go further than anyone, intently persuading the generals and Suu Kyi to think about resuming the process of national reconciliation. We, the friends of Myanmar, must keep our fingers crossed.

Myanmar's situation thus argues forcefully for constructive engagement. It is the right policy and should be pursued vigorously even if the results are meagre initially.

Malaysia and Singapore, on their own and within Asean, take an even less judgmental position than the United Nations.

Our policy is to promote relations with all its positive gains, in trade, investments, etc - no matter who is in charge. Of course, being a parliamentary democracy ourselves, we would like Myanmar to follow a similar pattern, if possible.

Still, the question of whether to have democracy or not is best answered by the Myanmar people themselves.

Lt General Khin Nyunt - the third-ranking member of the ruling junta - said there would be democracy but it will be a gradual one, and in the image of Myanmar.

I think Myanmar will eventually ascend to democracy. But as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the general said, it will be a measured return.

It is not up to me or any other foreigner to state when or in what form the transition should take place. That will have to be decided by how well Suu Kyi engages the generals.

Myanmar problems require Myanmar solutions. I do believe both sides are not inaccessible.

Perhaps reconciliation and national consolidation will take place sooner than people dare to believe. Myanmar knows that it must simply move on, even at its own pace.