

New Doors are Opening in Burma
Asia Sentinel
17 January, 2012
By Johan Lagerkvist and YaleGlobal

Thein Sein's support rises

With the release of several prominent political prisoners by the Burmese government last week, hope is beginning to replace doubt for a freer and better Burma. The release of political prisoners has injected new energy and boosted the spirit of reconciliation in the nation.

Thein Sein, who made the final decision to free the prisoners, has now won the support and confidence of the people and cemented his leadership position despite the fact that he came to his post through the controversial rigged election in 2010.

People even cheered "Long Live Thein Sein" in front of Insein Prison, something entirely unimaginable at this time last year.

As was clearly intended, opening the prison gates also opened the door for Western nations to adjust their relationship with Burma. The US immediately announced that it would normalize diplomatic relations with the Southeast Asian nation that it had not long ago isolated and labeled a "rogue" state.

Norway followed suit, saying that it would no longer urge Norwegian companies to refrain from trade and investment in Myanmar, although it would continue to align itself with the EU sanctions regime.

Other Western nations will likely offer reciprocal gestures to President Thein Sein's bold decision as well. When meeting with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said that France and the EU would respond "positively and in concrete terms" to the reforms made by the Burmese government.

Thein Sein's release of more than 200 political prisoners on Friday also wiped away the disappointment of his meager Independence Day amnesty on Jan. 3, when most had expected a substantial number of prisoners to be set free.

It is now believed that the ruling body known as the National Defense Security Council (NDSC) was unable to reach a consensus by Independence Day. However, presidential aides assured the local and international media on Jan. 5 that there would soon be surprises.

In addition, before the release of the small first batch of political prisoners, Home Affairs Minister Ko Ko, an NDSC member, had a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi. Political analysts believe that he informed her of the new release date and the reason for the delay. Interestingly, she said afterwards that the Burmese military is still wielding important power, there are dangers to look out for and reform is not unstoppable.

Then last week, Thein Sein exercised his executive power to free the prisoners under article 401 (1) of the Criminal Procedure Code, which states that the president may suspend the execution of a prisoner's sentence or remit the whole or any part of a

prisoner's

punishment

Political observers note that this means the release is conditional, and political prisoners could still be required to serve the remainder of their sentences if the government so decides. While it is unlikely that Thein Sein would choose to lose face by detaining them again in the near future, there is no guarantee that a successor to his position would feel the same reluctance.

Regardless of the terms, however, the release of several prominent pro-democracy activists, including 88 Generation Students group leader Min Ko Naing, was extremely welcome news.

Upon being released from Taungoo Prison, Min Ko Naing was first mobbed by supporters and then picked up right where he left off in 2007. Despite the fact that excessive political rhetoric could land him back behind bars, Burma's most brilliant orator inspired the crowds as they cheered "Long live Min Ko Naing."

"We were involved in the movement since 1988 because we wanted to help wipe away your tears, but we ourselves had to cry when we saw the atrocities," Min Ko Naing said emotionally soon after stepping out of prison.

He even had to spend overnight on the road to Rangoon, as people along the way stopped his entourage and asked him to give speeches. The former student leader spoke eloquently about unity, reconciliation and the ethnic conflicts.

Upon arrival in North Okkapalapa in Rangoon, Min Ko Naing said that the Burmese people were smart and could no longer be manipulated and cheated. He stressed that even the authorities now have to accept democracy and said the people have been vindicated after more than two decades of relentless struggle.

Min Ko Naing, 49, has spent 20 of the years since 1988 in prison. In 2005, when he was released from his first stint of 16 years in jail, most of it in solitary confinement, he was uninformed about the outside world and the outside world was uninformed about him.

But with Suu Kyi under house arrest, Min Ko Naing and his colleagues formed the 88 Generation Students group and led the peaceful pro-democracy movement. At the start of the 2007 Saffron Revolution, however, they were once again detained, and afterwards were sentenced to 65 years in prison and sent to remote jails.

Many observers feel that this time around, Min Ko Naing and his 88 Generation Students group colleagues—including Ko Ko Gyi, Min Zeya, Htay Kywe and Mya Aye—have come out stronger and more up-to-date than before. Though they lived in appalling prison conditions, they appear healthy and fit and are poised to play a crucial role in Burmese politics.

All now in their 40s or early 50s, they are veteran members of Burma's democracy movement who, along with injecting new hope and energy into the pro-democracy opposition movement, will be lead strategists and drivers behind policy implementation in the new phase of political struggle.

It is still unknown whether or how Thein Sein and the other government leaders—who are now reaching out to ethnic groups, Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and other opposition groups—will establish contact with Min Ko Naing and his 88 Generation Students group.

However, these newly freed pro-democracy leaders have the respect and admiration of the Burmese people, will be key players in the country's efforts to reform and achieve national reconciliation and will likely be looking towards the 2015 general election.

Thein Sein made the bold step of freeing Min Ko Naing and the other 88 Generation Students group leaders, now the next step is to open another door and offer them the ability to participate in the conversation he has begun with Suu Kyi. This is not only necessary for Burma to move forward, it is also smart politics. Because where Min Ko Naing and his colleagues lead, the people will follow.

Copyright © 2005 - 2012 Asia Sentinel.

Source: http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4142&Itemid=168