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# BURMA: SUU KYI'S MISSTEPS

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In November 2015, something rare and extraordinary happened in Burma: Democracy won, or seemed to have won, a rousing triumph. In a country ruled by its military for more than five decades, voters went to the polls and handed the longtime oppositionists of the National League for Democracy (NLD) a landslide win. The NLD found itself with 255 seats in the 440-member lower house of parliament, enough to form a government without the need for coalition partners. With this victory came a historic chance to begin addressing vital national tasks related to economic recovery, democratic transition, and broad ethnoreligious reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> Great hopes rested on the party's founder and leader, 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. She had been essential to the NLD's performance at the polls. When she took the post of state counsellor (in effect, prime minister) in March 2016, many looked to her to lead Burma forward.

Yet the two years since then have been mostly a tale of lost opportunities. The country has made little progress toward economic reforms to improve the prospects of the poor, toward the promotion of democratic values, or toward ethnoreligious reconciliation (this last despite Suu Kyi's decision to make it a paramount goal). Suu Kyi herself, moreover, has seen her once-sterling international reputation tarnished by her silence since August 2017 (only partly broken by a September 19 speech) on the intensification of ethnoreligious conflict in western Burma's Rakhine State and the military's large-scale repression of members of the Rohingya Muslim minority there.

To be fair, the constraints on Aung San Suu Kyi have been and remain formidable. First among them is the military-designed political system within which she must work. Burma's 2008 Constitution lim-

its what any elected government can do. Written by the former ruling junta, this basic law gives the armed forces (known as the Tatmadaw) a continued leading role in politics. To cement that role, there is a military veto on constitutional amendments: Any change requires the votes

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of three-quarters of the legislators plus one, but the military by constitutional provision controls a quarter of all parliamentary seats. The “power” ministries overseeing internal affairs, border control, and national defense are likewise reserved for Tatmadaw appointees, while the senior general has the authority to name six of the eleven members of the powerful National Defense and Security Council.

In the past two years, the generals have made no major concessions to the NLD. All they have done—all they have had to do—has been to stick

to their constitutionally guaranteed rights and privileges. The Tatmadaw remains Burma’s strongest political institution. The generals have given up nothing that matters to them.

This has been no accident. Almost fifteen years ago, the military laid out a plan—officially called the “Seven-Step Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy”—and has more or less followed it since. The steps included the drafting of the new constitution, its public endorsement through a national referendum, the election of legislative bodies, the opening of the new parliament, and finally, the realization of a “modern, developed, and democratic nation.” Not every step turned out precisely as the scheme called for, but the generals stopped neither President Thein Sein’s reforms (which they likely saw as going too far) nor the election of Suu Kyi. After all, the Tatmadaw and its dominant position in the new polity are secured by the constitution.

The hard realities of Burmese politics are these: There has been no significant transfer of political power from the generals to elected civilians, and there will be no such transfer unless and until the Tatmadaw wants it to happen. In all respects that truly matter, the generals are still in charge. If they are to cede any influence or control, it will have to be voluntarily. The only authority that can limit the military’s power is the military itself. At present, it is hard to see any compelling reason why the generals would want to reduce their own political clout.

The second challenge has been Aung San Suu Kyi’s own lack of governing experience and (related to this) her overly personalistic leadership style. Holding the posts of state counsellor and foreign minister, she is now the face of government in Burma. As head of the NLD as well

as innumerable commissions and committees that she has created, she dominates the landscape of civilian politics and hence must bear a large share of responsibility for her administration's unimpressive record. Running a government requires a different skill set from resisting one, and the former is a skill set that she seems to lack. Although she likes to say that she has always been a politician rather than a democratic idol, her actions in office suggest that her understanding of the nature of politics, to say nothing of what publics expect from politicians, is limited.<sup>2</sup>

Suu Kyi's weaknesses as a political leader were already on display during the 2015 campaign. Although her knowledge of the numerous pressing issues facing Burma was modest, she surrounded herself with people known mainly for personal loyalty to her rather than proven expertise. She rejected the chance to unite the opposition, at least in part out of a seeming reluctance to share center stage with long-suffering but less famous democracy activists. She refused to enter into electoral alliances with civil society organizations—most important among them the highly respected 88 Generation Peace and Open Society—or with any of the numerous ethnic parties that should have been the NLD's natural allies.<sup>3</sup> During the campaign, she repeatedly asked citizens to “vote for the party, not the candidate,” an implicit acknowledgment of her NLD nominees' shortcomings.

Suu Kyi's late husband was British, and her sons hold British passports. With her in mind, the military placed in the 2008 Constitution a rule that bars anyone with a foreign spouse or child from serving as president. In 2015, the generals refused to relax this provision. In March 2016, parliament chose Suu Kyi's longtime advisor Htin Kyaw to be president while placing Suu Kyi herself in the newly created post of state counselor. She repeatedly declared that she would be above the president, and she has been; Htin Kyaw's role has been entirely ceremonial. The military named as first vice-president Myint Swe, who as a general had overseen the brutal repression of the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

Suu Kyi's cabinet choices confirmed fears that she would hand crucial portfolios to her loyalists with little regard to their competence. Finance and Planning Minister Kyaw Win claimed to have advanced degrees from “Brooklyn Park University,” which is essentially a website run by a Pakistani company selling fake diplomas. Commerce Minister Than Myint boasted graduate degrees from Pacific Western University, an unaccredited correspondence school that was closed in 2006 after being sued by state authorities in Hawaii. Despite the inevitable domestic and international ridicule, they have kept their jobs. For Aung San Suu Kyi, apparently, replacing them would have meant admitting that she had erred in appointing them, and this was too much.

During the campaign, the NLD offered no specific policy proposals but relied on vague promises of national reconciliation, prosperity, and democracy. In government, the NLD's inability or unwillingness to

communicate a clear public program has continued. Some believe that the problem is rooted in Suu Kyi's top-down, imperious style; her penchant for lectures over dialogue; and her reluctance to delegate authority. One sad result has been the poor quality of parliamentary debate. Party leaders hold the nearly four-hundred NLD legislators serving in the two houses to a Leninist standard of party discipline: Lawmakers must clear their questions from the floor with party leaders, who rule out queries deemed awkward. A culture of personal loyalty to Suu Kyi permeates the NLD and the government. Unsought advice and constructive criticism are unwelcome.<sup>4</sup> Legislators complain that Suu Kyi personally makes all important decisions; their own roles seem trivial by comparison, and the idea of voting against the government is unheard of.<sup>5</sup>

Suu Kyi's lack of an overall strategy, her lieutenants' extreme deference to her, and her own tendency to micromanage cause much inefficiency. Even high-ranking officials wait for her to weigh in on issues well within their areas of responsibility. The results are bottlenecks and even virtual paralysis despite an urgent need to make decisions.<sup>6</sup> Suu Kyi's domination of the NLD has another troubling side effect. She is 72 years old, but has made no known arrangements for a successor or a generational changing of the guard.<sup>7</sup> Despite a recent shakeup, septuagenarians still vastly outnumber younger and better-educated people in the NLD leadership.

## Unforced Errors

Despite the NLD's limited room for maneuver, there are things that it could be doing differently and better in order to move the country forward. Instead, it has missed opportunities and made unforced strategic blunders. Aung San Suu Kyi became the leader of Burma's opposition three decades ago. She spent fifteen years under house arrest and upon her release became deeply involved in Burmese politics, first entering the legislature in 2012. Her party won the election in November 2015, but did not begin governing until five months later. Despite having had all this time to work with, Suu Kyi and her advisors have failed to frame a coherent political and socioeconomic program. Instead, they have preferred to fall back on platitudes about "democracy," "peace," and "the rule of law" rather than offer policy specifics together with an explanation of how they will help to achieve these broad aims.

Perhaps Suu Kyi's gravest strategic mistake has been her decision to make her priority the pursuit of ethnic peace, meaning an end to the multiple (mostly ethnic) insurgencies that have plagued Burma across its entire seven-decade history as an independent country. This is a phenomenally complex and risky undertaking, and (even more to the point) in a policy area that is largely outside her government's control.

Here a bit of history is helpful. Aung San Suu Kyi's father, General

Aung San, the founder of modern Burma, promised ethnic minorities a federal arrangement at the time of independence from the British in 1947. He was soon assassinated, however, and neither the civilian government nor the military junta that took power in 1962 were interested in a country not fully controlled by the Bamar (ethnic-Burmese) majority. In 2015, Thein Sein managed to conclude a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with eight of the more than twenty active Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). All told, the EAOs field forces totaling about eighty-thousand fighters and operate in or actually control roughly 30 percent of Burma's national territory, especially in peripheral regions along the borders with China, India, and Thailand.<sup>8</sup> As noted above, the EAOs have been fighting the Tatmadaw on and off for decades. There is, as might be expected, a great deal of bitterness and suspicion on all sides.

Upon entering government, Suu Kyi made a significant tactical error by announcing that she was making the peace process *the* national priority. She also linked that process to constitutional amendments that would level the political playing field by ending the military's privileged position. This approach has guaranteed that the Tatmadaw—loath as it is to change the constitution—will never go along.

In one large-scale conference held during August 2016 and in another held during May 2017, the government did induce more than a dozen EAOs to meet with military representatives, but nothing concrete has come of these encounters. No new groups have signed the NCA, and in several regions—most notably Rakhine State, but also in Shan State—conflicts have intensified. In late August 2017, a member of the government's peace commission admitted that its plans for dialogue were “still at the draft stage.”<sup>9</sup>

This outcome is hardly surprising. The EAOs, the military, and the authorities across the border in China's Yunnan Province all have major political and economic stakes in the continuation of hostilities. The four EAOs that form the Northern Alliance, plus the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and its thirty-thousand soldiers (who make it by far the largest EAO, a true standing army rather than a guerrilla force), refuse to sign the NCA. They will not sign, they say, because disarming and demobilizing (as required by the NCA) would put them at the mercy of the Tatmadaw, their bitter enemy of many decades.

The military, meanwhile, has been able to go about exploiting Burma's natural wealth (timber, jade, precious metals) under cover of the ongoing hostilities while also enjoying the bigger budgets, larger force sizes, and outsized political role that the fighting affords it. The generals refuse to pull their troops out of areas where non-Bamar ethnic groups predominate, making the idea of peace talks a nonstarter.<sup>10</sup> On top of this, the Tatmadaw refuses to create a federal army representing all nationalities—the top brass claim that the armed forces are already

inclusive—even as the generals insist that any final accord must contain a nonsecession clause, despite the EAOs' well-known abhorrence of the same.

The two EAOs most resistant to talks, the UWSA and the Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance, receive arms, training, and logistical help from China. The vast bulk of those in the UWSA speak only Wa, while the Kokang people overwhelmingly speak Mandarin Chinese. Only a single UWSA leader, Kyauk Kaw An, can speak Burmese.<sup>11</sup> A number of the insurgent groups use Chinese currency, arms, and equipment. China's central authorities seem to want ethnic peace in Burma: Beijing persuaded seven nonsigning EAOs to attend the May 2017 conference as observers. Of particular concern to Beijing is trouble-wracked Rakhine State on the Bay of Bengal. China has made large pipeline and other infrastructure investments there, and has plans to build a seaport as a window on the Indian Ocean.<sup>12</sup> Yet one should not forget that Yunnan Province has been doing well by trading with rebel-held areas. The cross-border trade has created relationships that business interests in Yunnan fear would be disrupted by a large political change such as a peace accord might bring.

### Opportunities Missed

Suu Kyi's pursuit of ethnic peace has caused her to spend vast amounts of time, energy, and political capital on a hugely complex problem that her government has little power to resolve. Meanwhile, reforms of the economy, education, and healthcare have languished even though these policy areas *are* under her control and the public (or at least the ethnic-Bamar majority, as surveys confirm) finds them pressing.<sup>13</sup> The NLD government took office in March 2016, but did not produce a statement on economic policy until July. That document, moreover, turned out to be not much more than a general outline listing some wishes but no ends, means, or deadlines.

The new administration's main achievement so far has been the partial modernization of the legal framework governing business affairs. In January 2016, the lame-duck parliament passed an arbitration law intended to build a safe environment for investors. The government touted the October 2016 passage of an investment law as a major accomplishment, but in fact this legislation mainly simplifies and harmonizes existing rules while specifying investors' privileges. The government admits that even in the area of legal reform, the hard part is still ahead; in many other areas of economic life, little has been done.

Details of the new laws' implementation will be crucial. Here, things may not go smoothly. Corruption is pervasive in Burma; of the 176 countries covered by Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, only 35 scored worse.<sup>14</sup> Tackling corruption, however, is

a most sensitive task. Untangling the many obscure strands of personal and institutional relationships—most involving the generals and their associates—will require determination, perseverance, and tact from the new regime. Nevertheless, the “cronies”—the English word is widely used in Burma to designate the businesspeople whose wealth stems from their ties to the military—seem to enjoy Suu Kyi’s protection. She likes to say that she does not care where people got their wealth, and she urges the public to stop saying “cronies” and say “tycoons” instead.<sup>15</sup>

Although GDP growth remained brisk at 6.3 percent for 2016, it had been 8.4 percent as recently as 2013. Behind the decline is flagging investment, which in turn likely reflects sustained doubts about the quality and extent of economic reforms.<sup>16</sup> When the NLD won the election in late 2015, many expected an upsurge of foreign direct investment (FDI), but that never came. In fact, across the NLD government’s first year in office, FDI dropped from US\$9.5 to \$6.9 billion.<sup>17</sup> Inflation, meanwhile, shot up from 5.9 percent in 2014–15 to 8.9 percent two years later. Commodity prices have risen and job growth has been anemic. Current tax receipts, meanwhile, are equal to only about 8 percent of GDP, roughly half what one would expect from a country at Burma’s level of economic development.<sup>18</sup> The country remains heavily agricultural—farming yields over 37 percent of GDP and employs, directly or indirectly, about 70 percent of the labor force. Yet decades of uncompensated land seizures by the Tatmadaw and its cronies have disrupted the agricultural sector, leaving numerous small growers in want and misery. The return of confiscated land to its rightful owners and the enforcement of land ownership and land-use laws are crucial prerequisites of further agricultural reforms.

What might the NLD have feasibly accomplished by now? To begin with, it might have improved the electrical grid. More than two-thirds of Burma’s population lacks access to power, and blackouts are frequent even in posh Rangoon hotels. Economic growth has put additional pressure on the electricity supply, and shortages are likely to get worse. Making electrical power more available and reliable would have been good for the economy, and would have greatly increased the NLD government’s popularity. Yet not until August 2017 did Suu Kyi seem to grasp that stepping up the electrification of Burma’s tens of thousands of villages should be a major goal.<sup>19</sup>

The junta neglected Burma’s infrastructure generally, and beyond the power grid it offers many opportunities for improvement: Roads and railways are inadequate and in bad repair, as is public transport, even in Rangoon, a city of seven million. The poor infrastructure hampers every sector of the economy and scares off potential investors. This is where Suu Kyi and her government should have aimed their attention; a proper focus on these areas could have made a major difference, and in fairly short order.



Also holding back Burma's economy is a welter of needless licensing requirements that do little more than create opportunities for bribery and corruption. For example, in order to receive a construction permit, a firm must go through an application process requiring sixteen different licenses; to gain access to electricity, five separate procedures must be navigated.<sup>20</sup> In the World Bank's ranking based on ease of doing business, Burma still languishes in the bottom 20 percent. A government campaign to cut red tape is well warranted—there are many more regulations than officials can effectively administer—but here too the Suu Kyi administration has done nothing. Even easy and popular changes with immediate benefits for people's daily lives, such as allowing longer banking hours, have been left unmade. It is hard to escape the conclusion that, over the last two years of governance, much more could have been done.<sup>21</sup>

A coalition-building opportunity was also missed. Instead of conciliating the ethnic organizations, Suu Kyi has sown mistrust between them and her party by making unfortunate and easily avoidable mistakes. One of these has been her refusal to consult local leaders before running NLD candidates in ethnic areas. And despite her criticism of the 2008 Constitution's antidemocratic provisions, she has used these to make NLD members the chief ministers of Rakhine and Shan states, even though candidates from local ethnic parties had won popular elections in these ethnically sensitive jurisdictions.

Suu Kyi finds it hard to admit mistakes or adjust course. A small but telling example from early 2017 involves the name of a new bridge in Chaungzon Township, Mon State. The government decided to name it after Suu Kyi's father, even though he already has thousands of things in Burma named after him, while ethnic-Mon locals wanted to use the bridge to honor a figure from their own community's past. There were public demonstrations, but the NLD stubbornly refused to budge. In April 2017, its performance in a Mon State by-election was half what it had been less than two years earlier. Much to the NLD's embarrassment, the seat went to a candidate from the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).<sup>22</sup>

The NLD has also declined the chance to work with Burma's many and increasingly active and sophisticated civil society organizations. By failing to embrace their energetic activists, the governing party is forgoing many political benefits. Now, key prodemocracy leaders such as Ko Ko Gyi, whose name was omitted from the NLD's candidate list in 2015, are preparing to launch parties that will compete with the NLD in the 2020 national elections. Recent history is replete with inspiring examples of how democratic champions from Nelson Mandela to Václav Havel have done their best to aid, compensate, and celebrate the victims of dictatorship. The tens of thousands of Burmese political prisoners who suffered unspeakably under military rule have not been so fortu-

nate; the very government their sacrifices helped to bring about has been acting as if they do not exist.<sup>23</sup>

### *Erstwhile Icon of Democracy*

The most disappointing aspect of Aung San Suu Kyi's term in office is that it has been coterminous with stark setbacks for civil and human rights in Burma. Clearest among these has been the state's attack on free speech and its clampdown on the press and social media. Scores of journalists, activists, and others who have criticized Suu Kyi, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the government, or the military have been jailed. Section 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law provides for up to three years in prison for (among other things) "defaming" or "disturbing" anyone by means of a telecommunications network. There have been reports of charges against more than seventy people for online defamation under this law.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the Information Ministry has provided crucial cover for the Tatmadaw in its "clearance operations" in Rakhine State by barring independent journalists from the area and by "running a propaganda campaign reminiscent of the days of full military rule."<sup>25</sup>

International criticism of Suu Kyi and her government for their abysmal treatment of Burma's more than two-million Muslims has been vocal. One of the NLD's founders, the popular and charismatic poet, translator, satirist, and former naval officer Maung Thaw Ka, was Muslim. He served on the party's central committee, advised Suu Kyi, and died in 1991 while an inmate in one of the junta's prisons. Early in its 2015 campaign, the NLD faced questions when it failed to nominate even a single Muslim to be one of the more than a thousand candidates that it was then fielding to fill parliamentary seats and other offices. In late January 2017, after the prominent Muslim lawyer and Tatmadaw critic U Ko Ni was assassinated in Rangoon, Suu Kyi stayed silent for weeks although eventually she did call his death "a great loss for our NLD" and described him as a "martyr."<sup>26</sup>

The approximately one-million Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State enjoy no civil rights—they constitute the world's largest group of unregistered stateless people—and have suffered multifaceted institutionalized discrimination for decades.<sup>27</sup> Suu Kyi largely avoided mentioning them during the 2015 campaign, well aware that anti-Rohingya prejudice is so deep-seated among Burma's mostly Buddhist populace that being seen as a defender of Rohingya interests could cost numerous votes. Since becoming state counsellor, she *has* taken some steps to alleviate communal conflicts and promote economic development in Rakhine. She established a commission, headed by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, to address the longstanding human-rights issues pertaining to the Rohingya and other marginalized ethnic minorities.

Annan presented the commission's report to the government in August 2017, the same month that renewed clashes broke out in Rakhine State. Many observers are deeply skeptical that the report's recommendations will ever be implemented, chiefly because the military—the institution that would have to put the suggestions into practice—has no stake in doing so.<sup>28</sup>

The already tense situation in Rakhine grew worse in October 2016, when Rohingya insurgents killed nine members of the national border police. The Tatmadaw retaliated with extrajudicial killings, rapes, and the burning of hundreds of villages. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled to neighboring Bangladesh, where authorities say about three-hundred thousand of their coethnics from Burma had already found refuge before the fresh exodus.<sup>29</sup> International human-rights organizations have criticized Suu Kyi and her government for banning reporters from the troubled areas and seeking to discredit media reports of Tatmadaw atrocities. Information Minister Pe Myint rejected these criticisms, saying that the attack on the police was “like 9/11 in America, we were targeted and attacked in a huge way.”<sup>30</sup>

Many hope that growing international attention to Rohingya suffering and the threat that Islamic extremists could succeed in recruiting among them will spur the Burmese government to find a long-term solution, but this so far remains only a hope. Suu Kyi's advocates claim that speaking out in defense of the Rohingya would be suicidal for her political party. She and her government have no control over military units and no means of reining them in. She is dealing, moreover, with a society in which intense anti-Rohingya feeling is entrenched across all classes. Buddhist extremists—who are manipulated by the military and who enjoy its tacit support—are already publicly calling her a “Muslim-loving whore” (to use one of their printable epithets).

Still, the studied silence of this Nobel Peace Prize laureate on the abuses in Rakhine—she and other Burmese officials will not even say the word “Rohingya”—and her decision to ban UN fact-finders from the conflict zone have left many of her one-time admirers around the world feeling shocked and disillusioned. Her mocking Facebook dismissal of a Rohingya woman's charges of sexual assault by soldiers as a “fake rape” story sparked outrage across the globe but likely scored high with many at home in Burma.<sup>31</sup>

Suu Kyi has clearly been unwilling to pay the political price of doing the right thing by putting her voice—and her enormous global prestige—into the effort to defend a persecuted people who are facing ethnic cleansing and perhaps even genocide.<sup>32</sup> While she of course lacks direct control over the army, she could have called it out and brought pressure to bear on it rather than close ranks with it, as she has chosen to do. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army is violent, but the Tatmadaw's description of it as an “extremist Bengali terrorist group” and use of

“war on terror” rhetoric to justify military excesses are distorted and manipulative. The NLD-appointed national-security advisor, former diplomat Thaung Tun, pitches right in with this approach, insisting that the military’s actions are “all legal.”<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, hopes of solving the crisis peacefully are going up in smoke. Some Rohingya are embracing radicalization and bolder assaults on authorities while the Tatmadaw keeps pressing ahead with its scorched-earth tactics.<sup>34</sup>

## Sticking to the Plan

As the foregoing account of how the NLD government has run public-relations “interference” for the Tatmadaw in Rakhine State should suggest, the biggest institutional beneficiary of the NLD administration so far has been the military. In many ways, the generals are far better off than they were a few years ago. By letting the results of the 2015 election stand—something many feared would not happen, given the army’s track record—the Tatmadaw leaders gained a measure of legitimacy at home and abroad. The messy work of daily governance is now the NLD’s problem. The generals can stand easy on the sidelines, shouldering no accountability for social and economic policies. In late October 2017, tens of thousands turned out in downtown Rangoon to show support for the Tatmadaw and to protest the international condemnation leveled against it.

By accepting a measure of political openness, the generals achieved a coveted goal. They shed their old status as pariahs with whom only fellow authoritarians would consort. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his entourage have recently toured Austria, Germany, and Japan, and Burmese military personnel have participated in training courses in Australia, Britain, and elsewhere. This is precisely what the generals have long wanted. They are now allowed to deal as respected equals with professional militaries from outside Burma, including the armed services of democratic countries.

Just as important, the Tatmadaw’s economic position has improved. A major step was the October 2016 removal, at Suu Kyi’s request, of most remaining U.S. sanctions on Burma. A number of members of the U.S. Congress, as well as human-rights organizations and regime critics in Burma and abroad, protested this move. They argued that it was not time to give up the leverage on the generals that sanctions bring, and that the extent and durability of changes in Burmese politics did not warrant doing so. But their protests were to no avail.

The Tatmadaw remains entirely free of civilian oversight. Its budget is no longer secret, but the generals still decide how big it will be and how it will be spent. The defense minister is Lieutenant-General Sein Win, whom the military named to that post several months before the November 2015 election. His ministry receives a bigger share (currently about 13

percent) of the national budget than any other single ministry. Indeed, in the NLD government's first budget, defense received as much money as the education and health ministries *combined*, even though the junta had long neglected these two policy areas.<sup>35</sup> The

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Tatmadaw retains control over the sensitive matter of dealings with the non-Bamar ethnic groups. It runs its campaigns against the Rohingya insurgents and other EAOs with a free hand. And as we have seen, it now benefits from the shroud of secrecy that the elected NLD government has colluded with the generals to throw over the military's actions in the Burmese provinces.

Suu Kyi and her lieutenants treat the army—the institution whose half-century rule did so much harm to the freedom and prosperity of so many Burmese—with utmost restraint and deference. The NLD distances itself from anyone who dares to question the army's political role. Phyo Min Thein, an NLD member and former political prisoner who is Suu Kyi's appointee as chief minister of the Rangoon Region, learned this to his discomfiture in July 2017. That month, he spoke to a meeting of fellow former political prisoners about the senior general's exalted political status, complaining that “this is not democracy.” The army responded by filing a formal complaint with the government, which conspicuously failed to defend its official and would only say “we have instructed him to do what he needs to do.”<sup>36</sup>

What the NLD has managed to achieve in this climate, such as creating a post for Suu Kyi, setting up the Annan commission, and naming some judges to the constitutional court, it has been able to do because the generals deemed these matters not worth squabbling over. Even so, a general who holds one of the military seats in parliament accused the NLD of “democratic bullying” when it passed legislation creating the post of state counsellor.<sup>37</sup>

The economy remains under the domination of senior military officers, their retired colleagues, and various cronies of the first two groups. These personages, who number no more than about fifteen thousand in a country of more than fifty-million people, own the vast bulk of Burma's hotels, enterprises, and factories. When I asked a Burmese expert on business and economics, himself a retired general, whether my information that these people controlled at least 80 percent of the economy and commerce was accurate, his reply was, “Only 80?”<sup>38</sup> The General Administration Department (GAD), the huge bureaucracy that runs every village, town, city, and region, remains under the military-dominated Ministry of Home Affairs. The GAD is staffed overwhelmingly by military appointees and retired Tatmadaw personnel.<sup>39</sup> Although it has not played an obstructionist role, the GAD does give the army valuable on-

the-ground information from every corner of the country that the NLD government has no way of obtaining.

Aung San Suu Kyi is still widely popular, especially among the majority Bamar people. They see no alternative to her. In areas where ethnic minorities predominate, however, she and the NLD have already lost some support, owing mostly to their own avoidable mistakes. For swing voters, defined as those who may have benefited from military rule or who at any rate were not harmed by it, the Tatmadaw-backed USDP is looking better with every mistake the NLD makes. Most ordinary people in Burma and other developing countries base their voting decisions on economic issues. Given the brutality, incompetence, and longevity of Burmese military rule, the NLD still enjoys a substantial reservoir of patience among its supporters. Yet there should be little doubt that Suu Kyi and her party would be well advised to focus on projects that they *can* control, and especially those that promise some rapid and tangible improvement in the living standards of numerous voters.

Burma's experience confirms two important lessons of democratic transitions: Heroes of the struggle for democracy may not make great democratic leaders in the longer run, or even be talented politicians. And democratic transition will stall unless the armed forces are brought under civilian control in the context of a balance between the executive and legislative branches of government. Democracy can exist only where soldiers are the servants and not the masters of the state. The Tatmadaw is unlikely to assume the servant's role, but until it does, the prognosis for Burmese democracy cannot be good.

## NOTES

I thank Denzil Abel, Ko Ye, and Des Molloy for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.

1. For an analysis of the electoral campaign and the results, see Zoltan Barany, "Moving Toward Democracy: The 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Myanmar," *Electoral Studies* 42 (June 2016): 75–77.

2. David I. Steinberg, "Potholes in Myanmar's Road to 'Democracy,'" *East Asia Forum*, 28 May 2017.

3. Zoltan Barany, "Myanmar's Divided Opposition," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 October 2015.

4. Confidential interviews with long-term Suu Kyi associates (Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and Rangoon, September 2015, May 2016, and August 2017).

5. "A No-Talking Shop," *Economist*, 3 June 2017, 32; "A Hero Disappoints," *Economist*, 1 April 2017, 11; and off-the-record interviews with members of parliament (Rangoon, August 2017).

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