

# Democratization in Myanmar: Prospects, Possibilities and Challenges

Md. Abdul Hannan

Lecturer, Department of International Relations,  
Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Dhaka, Bangladesh

## ABSTRACT

This paper endeavors to provide a comprehensive overview of the democratization process in Myanmar. As today's reality in Myanmar cannot be well understood without referral to its history of democratic struggle, it starts with a brief history of Myanmar that gives an account of several significant incidents that the country experienced from the pre-independence period to the last democratic election in 2015. The next section discusses about some specific features of the incumbent government of Myanmar which gives an understanding of how much democratic the government has been actually. In the subsequent section, identifying some important areas whose proper management or utilization can take the democracy in Myanmar to the next level, it concludes.

**KEYWORDS:** *democracy, military, ethnic-groups, media, human-rights groups*

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## INTRODUCTION

Democracy, by many, is said to be the best form of government to install and sustain peace and stability in both domestic and international spheres. And the Democratic Peace Theory, as given by Immanuel Kant, holds that democracies do not fight each other and thus maintains peace and stability (Kant, 1795 trans. by Humphrey, 2003: 9). That is why people in many parts of the world are aspirants of democracy and more importantly the established democracies have concerns to democratize the non-democracies although their aims and roles in this regard, get questioned many times.

Myanmar, a Southeast Asian country, has a long history of being ruled by non-democratic or 'so called' democratic administrations after it got independence from Britain in 1948. The Burmese people, however, have always been aspirant of democracy and hence, despite the enactment of various restrictive measures by the non-democratic governments, they managed to fight for the establishment of democracy in their limited capacities. The people's power uprising in 1988, the saffron revolution in 2007 and other such kind of protests were there but it is only in 2015 when people of Myanmar could actually experience a free, fair and inclusive election and thus hopes mounted for the solidification of democracy in Myanmar.

However, one cannot hold on to these hopes, if a critical lens is employed to evaluate the level of democracy being practiced by Myanmar's current regime. Arrangements like

twenty five percent preserved seats for the military in the parliament, requirement of more than 75 percent parliamentary votes to take decisions on key issues or to amend the constitution, failure or inaction to ensure the security of the ethnic minorities and disabling the media, NGOs and human rights groups from operating in specific areas, give pessimistic impression about democratic transition of Myanmar.

Still optimism for further democratic development finds ground if we look at the flexible gestures of the Burmese military, equate the long struggling history of today's established democracies with that of Myanmar, compare the realities of Myanmar before and after 2015 and expect responsible and effective involvement of the U.S.A., E.U., China, India and ASEAN. Despite the current de facto leader Suu Kyi has miserably failed to live up to the expectations of international community, the ball is still in her court to maneuver with prudent leadership to take the democracy in Myanmar at least to the next level.

**Emergence of democracy in Myanmar:** Democracy in Myanmar, to whatever extent it is being practiced today, possesses a long struggling history. And it cannot be well understood or evaluated without having complete understanding of the history behind this.

**Myanmar under the British rule:** This ex-British colony gained its independence in 1948 after a prolonged war and

devastation. But before the British could establish their grip on Myanmar, they faced strong resistance. Three Anglo-Burmese wars were fought between Myanmar (then Burma) and the British force within the period of 1824 to 1885. The British brought in social, political, economic, cultural and administrative changes there. However, the people of Myanmar, being vehemently dissatisfied with the British rule, started to revolt. Initially, it was mainly the Buddhist monks who being disrespected by the British rule, started raising their voices to protect the Buddhist religion than the Burmese nation (Walton, 2015). They could successfully convince people in favor of them and then students, civil society members and workers also stood against the British rule. Soon the movement took a bigger shape and turned into the movement for independence. A profound influential person Aung San who is said to be the father of the nation, led the movement against the British. But unfortunately, he had got killed just six months before Myanmar got independence from the British authority. However, on January 4, 1948 Myanmar came into being as an independent country and was officially christened as "Union of Burma".

**Myanmar under military rule:** The people of the newly independent Myanmar was not only in cheers for their long-cherished independence but also, they refused the membership of the Commonwealth unlike other former British colonies. However, these cheers and colors started to fade away as the country went under a military rule. March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1962 is the day when the military led by General Ne Win overthrew Prime Minister U Nu and took the control of Myanmar by a coup d'état. The people of Myanmar fell into a trap of military rule at least for the next fifty years. General Ne Win founded the Burma Socialist Program Party and managed to hold its Chairmanship until 1988. He started "Burmese way to Socialism" which was a blending of Marxism, extreme nationalism and Buddhism. The state was run on the basis of complete economic isolation from the western world. Even the World Bank was not allowed to operate (Holmes, 1967). As a result, all the institutions to run the economy got dismantled (VoA, 2009). Everything, from economic production to education sector, medical sector, media, got nationalized. The activities of media and people having different voices were also strictly controlled (Holmes, 1967). The unchecked control of the army over the country thus resulted into rampant corruption, unchecked smuggling and ubiquitous black markets (VoA, 2009). All these were there only to deteriorate the condition of the life of common masses. Until 1988, Burma was ruled under one party system and the country became impoverished in a sheer manner.

**People's power uprising 1988:** This is also called '8888 uprising'. It is actually a pro-democracy movement against the malpractices and exploitations of the 'Tatmadaw' regime (military in Myanmar is called Tatmadaw). The uprising initially was installed by the students of Rangoon Arts and Sciences University and Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT). On August 8, 1988, students started to protest in Yangon (then Rangoon). This protest spread throughout the country. Besides students, people of many other spheres-Buddhist monks, doctors, housewives, children joined this protest. The movement was violently suppressed by the military and according to the human rights groups 3000 people were killed (BBC, 2007). However, the uprising found

an end on September 18 when there was a bloody military coup as a result of which General Ne Win resigned. The new military authority formed State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and promised elections.

**Election of 1990:** As promised by the military authority, a fresh national election was held in 1990. This time Aung San Suu Kyi- daughter of the pivotal nationalist leader Aung San, became a national icon. 'The lady' (Suu Kyi is also known to be as 'The Lady' to the people of Myanmar) in collaboration with some other leaders formed a political party in 1988. The party has been named as National League for Democracy (NLD) which adopted democratic socialism and liberal democracy as its core ideology. Under Suu Kyi's leadership the party contested in the 1990 election. The party collected 59 percent vote and won 392 seats in the parliament out of 492 (The Australian, 2009). So, it was a big win and a clear indication that people of Myanmar no more want military rule. However, later is a different story. The military junta declined to hand over power, deprived NLD of its due right to form a government, suppressed the party and continued to rule Myanmar. Later on, Suu Kyi was kept under house arrest in 1989 and she got released as late as on November 13, 2010. The military led SLORC continued to rule until 1997 and then it was reconfigured and named as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The SPDC ruled Myanmar till 2011. Meanwhile in 1997, Myanmar got the membership of ASEAN. Also, another thing to note that, after the 1990 election Suu Kyi was considered as a face of democracy and freedom to the west. And in 1991 she was awarded Noble Peace Prize.

**Road to discipline-flourished democracy:** On August 30, 2003, Prime Minister General KhinNyunt announced Burma's roadmap to a democratic transition which was officially called "Road to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy". The roadmap involved a seven-step plan to restore democracy notable of them are: reconvening the National Convention- to consult with different ethnic groups, drafting a new constitution, holding free and fair elections and finally building a democratic nation. But how all these ambitious targets would be achieved was not envisioned. However, why the Than Shwe led regime inclined to such a change is still under debate. Yet Barany identifies some meaningful reasons: interest for liberalism even among military personnel, Burma's long enduring poverty and backwardness, a number of western sanctions etc. (Barany, 2016 a).

**Saffron revolution:** The junta regime came up with the roadmap but corruption and exploitation happened not to wither away. To this was added five-fold rise of the fuel price which came as an utter surprise to the people. Also, there were steps for demonetization. People fumed at all these arrangements and embarked on the Saffron Revolution against the junta regime. Several protests and demonstration took place during August, September and October 2007 in Myanmar in non-violent way. Democracy, protection of human rights, free elections were in their demand. The protests had wider reach to the society. Students, political activists and Buddhist monks actively participated in the protest. Pointing to the active and wider participation of the Buddhist monks and their saffron colored attire, many started to call this protest as saffron revolution (Al Jazeera, 2007). Some prominent figures were seen embracing the

spirit of the protest. Than Shwe, Aung San Suu Kyi, Kenji Nagai (a Japanese journalist) are some of them. However, in response, the junta regime arrested and detained many protesters. The number of casualties is not properly figured out and estimate varies the number from 13 to 31 (ABC News, 2007). The government also blocked all websites and services that could carry news and information about Myanmar but people could be able to use them other way. International community- the USA, EU, Canada imposed a number of sanctions upon Myanmar in response while China and India kept mum over it indicating this as an internal issue of Myanmar. Senior General Than Shwe remained in power until he retired in 2011.

**Constitution of 2008:** The sanctions of international community after the saffron revolution and the devastation caused by cyclone 'Nargis' in 2008 put the junta regime in an uncomfortable position. The economy was in nadir. So, the junta started to liberalize economy but could not get out of their rent-seeking tendencies (Barany, 2016 b). In 2008, the military composed a constitution that successfully ensured their grip on the control of Myanmar for the long term despite democratization process was to begin under the "Road to discipline-flourished democracy". However, the constitution albeit curtailed, but not nullified the scope and role of the opposition parties (Ibid).

**National Parliamentary election of 2010:** The 2008 constitutional referendum paved the way for the 2010 national parliamentary election. The election was rigged heavily and resulted in the victory of the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Some 37 parties contested in the election but the party of Suu Kyi boycotted it from which the junta barred international observers (RFI, 2010). Again, being placed in an adverse position both domestically and internationally, the USDP led government went for more economic liberalization. Myanmar started to open up to the world, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest, the then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar. All of these were assumed as a gesture of the junta regime to democratize Myanmar. In the 2012 by-election Suu Kyi's NLD won 43 of its contested 44 parliamentary seats (Olarn, 2012). West started to lift sanctions, economy started to enjoy growth, NGOs and investors rushed to the recently unlocked Myanmar and also the media started enjoying freedom.

**Election of 2015:** November 8, 2015 will remain marked in the history of Myanmar- the day the country held the first free and openly contested election since 1990 that was aspired by all its people as well as international community. In this election, Suu Kyi's party NLD achieved a landslide victory. It gained 135 seats in the upper parliament which is 60.26% of all seats and 80.35% of the seats it was allowed to compete for (The Guardian, 2015). The military backed USDP achieved only 5.36% of the total seats (Ibid). Also, in the lower house, NLD won highest number of seats and took the number of seats in total 77% (Ibid). The party formed government in 2016 with Htin Kyaw became the first non-military president since the military coup of 1962 and Suu Kyi as the State Counsellor- a newly created post akin to Prime Minister which the junta regime abolished in 2011. However, there were much skepticism among the election pundits and the local people on whether the election would be a transparent one and whether the Tatmadaw regime

nullify the election result if the NLD wins, which happened in 1990. But this time the 1990 was not revisited and the junta regime let the NLD form a government.

So, this is how an elected government started to govern Myanmar after several decades. And democracy finally found a root in Myanmar.

**Analyzing democracy under Suu Kyi's regime:** The 2015 parliamentary election in Myanmar, its result and subsequent formation of government should be convincing for one to think that there has been democratic restoration in Myanmar. But a deeper insight is to be employed into the activities and abilities of the current government to realize exactly how much democracy the people of Myanmar have been able to experience under this regime. Here are some key aspects of the government:

**Seats preserved for the military in the parliament:** According to the third and latest constitution of Myanmar which was adopted in 2008, one fourth of the total seats in both the parliaments are to be preserved for the military (Constitution of Myanmar, 2008). It is quite bizarre when we talk about democracy. Militaries are meant to ensure and protect the security of a country. But in Myanmar the military is in the parliament in a significant percentage to monitor their civil partners and to influence and affect their decisions.

**President and vice-presidents:** The chapter 3, no 59(f) of the constitution also prohibits anyone with a foreign spouse or foreign children from being the president of Myanmar (Ibid). This actually went against Suu Kyi and she could not hold the chair of presidency. The constitution also demands the president to have military experience according to its chapter 3, no 57(d). That is not all. The military has also appointed a vice president and he is the hard-liner Mint Swe. Swe is a retired lieutenant general who oversaw the repression of the 2007 saffron revolution and is known for his brutal treatment of the dissidents (Mahtani and Myo, 2016). He is in the U.S. sanction list.

**Control over key ministries:** And more importantly the Myanmar military has taken the charge of three key ministries which are the ministries of defense, border affairs and home affairs. So, three very important ministries are in the hands of the military which actually explains how much powerful and influential military is over the civil government in Myanmar.

**Decision making or passing bills:** The military drafted 2008 constitution also holds that any decision to be made in the parliament or any bills to be passed require more than 75 percent vote of the parliamentarians (Constitution of Myanmar, 2008). As the military accounts 25 percent seat of the parliament, it is easily comprehensible that without their green signal the government cannot take any decision. In other words, the civilian government's hands are intangibly tied up by the military and gets movability only when the military wishes so.

**Amendment of the constitution:** So, given this ability and power of the military, it is not easy to hope for any amendment to the constitution and more democratization in Myanmar as of now. 'The lady' was vocal about the

amendment of the constitution (Barker, 2015). But she has not been able to achieve anything concrete in this regard.

**Ensuring ethnic rights:** It remains as a thorny issue in Myanmar. In case of ensuring rights of the minor ethnic communities, Myanmar always stands at the back point. The military regime is infamous for their despicable treatment to the ethnic minorities especially to the Muslim Rohingyas living in the Rakhine region. Now with Suu Kyi came into power who is considered as the face of democracy and human rights and achieved Nobel peace prize, it was expected that she would stand by those fate tortured people. But suppressing all the expectations, Suu Kyi did not come forward to manage this issue. The lady even kept on saying that her government will avoid the term 'Rohingya' (Slodkowski, 2016). In 2016 when tensions again mounted and the military again persecuted the Rohingyas in an egregious manner, Suu Kyi remained completely silent. Even after an interview with a BBC journalist Mishal Husain and being questioned on Rohingya issue she was heard saying "No one told me I was going to be interviewed by a Muslim" (Fisher, 2016). This inaction of Suu Kyi instigated mass protests around the world. Even there were demands from various parts of the world to take back her Noble peace prize.

**Freedom of human rights groups and media:** The current government prohibits the journalists, NGOs and human rights and assistance groups in accessing in several regions of the country. This happened to the Rakhine region as well. At present time too, journalists are not allowed to access many regions of Myanmar and are threatened for covering news. It has been reflected in the voice of Aung Marm (37) who is the Editor-in-Chief of the Development Media Group (DMG). Speaking about Myanmar's current government's attitude towards media and journalists, he said, "They blocked media, restrict media agencies, banned news, punish journalists. Media is the lifeblood of democracy in the country. Without media, how can democracy survive?" (Marm, A, quoted in Reuters, 2020). About the level of democracy being currently practiced in Myanmar, he said, "Democracy is already dead," (Ibid).

So, the abovementioned arguments give us a closer outlook of the ability and activities of current ruling regime of Myanmar. It, from every side is surrounded by the military and there is hardly any way to circumvent that surrounding. To this, is added its failure or inaction to ensure ethnic rights and offer freedom to the media, NGOs and human rights groups. As a result, it is really difficult to hold on to any optimistic view about the development of democracy in Myanmar.

**Future of democracy in Myanmar:** Despite the fact that democracy in Myanmar is miserably creeping to survive and sustain, its future should not look all negative. It is true that without the cooperation from military, more democratization in Myanmar seems to be impossible. Some issues are identified here which explain why there is still hope for Myanmar to go for further development in terms of practicing democracy:

**Flexible attitudes of the Tatmadaw:** The Tatmadaw, with the excuse of the constitution drafted by themselves, might

exercise enormous power. But Barany points out some areas where their attitude and activities give some good signals: unlike earlier times they did not repeal the election result rather let Suu Kyi form government, they held a number of their members accountable for their criminal activities and publicized their prosecution, an effective reduction in forced conscription in army and unlike earlier times they are much opened up to the media- hold press conference, give interviews etc. (Barani, 2016 b).

**Civil-military relationship:** As more advancement towards democracy is not possible without cooperation from the military, it is a must to persuade the military about what their proper role is and what they are actually meant to do. They should also be made aware about the future of the country and its people. To do so there should be extensive training and workshop for the military about standard Civil Military Relations (CMR) so that the military becomes more convincing and flexible. And in this regard, the developed democracies especially the U.S.A, the E.U. should come forward to provide training, to conduct joint exercise and other related things.

**Role of the U.S. and other established democracies:** The established western democracies have much larger role to play here. They should be more engaging with Myanmar in more functional areas so that the military as well as the government find it convincing to go for more liberalization and democratization. Just as Suu Kyi, they should pay importance to the military so that they feel they are not ignored by the west. High profile visits could be made to Myanmar and the high-profile foreign leaders should meet the military leaders of Myanmar and try to make them convinced about the importance of larger move to democracy.

**Role of China and India:** At the same time China and India have significant role to play. It has been noted earlier that during the military regime of 2000s when the west imposed several sanctions on Myanmar, the Tatmadaw started to side with China. Even in these days that relation continues. On the other hand, Suu Kyi has much connection with the west. So, this should not be a fear factor for China which can make the relationship between China and Tatmadaw stronger. And this in turn, could be a threat to democracy in Myanmar. So, responsibility lies with Suu Kyi to convince China that her government is much committed to remain in good terms with China and more democratization will just take this relation to its peak.

Also, Myanmar's South Asian neighbor India- the 'largest democracy in the world' can play a pivotal role in promoting democracy in Myanmar. There is already some collaboration and joint exercises between Indian and Burmese army. The Indian army here should take the responsibility to persuade their Burmese counterpart about proper CMR so that stability exists in this region which can yield much benefit to India.

**Role of ASEAN:** The ASEAN countries have long been identified in the world as deficit democracies. So as a responsible regional organization, ASEAN can also play meaningful role to promote democracy in Myanmar which can significantly uphold ASEAN's international image.

**Lessons from Arab spring:** One thing very important is that there should be no repetition in Myanmar of what has happened to several Arab countries. The so-called 'Arab Spring' invoked western interference in many Arab countries and it is claimed by many that instead of protecting the interests of the Arab people, external powers were actually busy in securing their own interest (Fitzpatrick, 2013). As a result, the Arab countries has been suffering in a drastic manner. So, in Myanmar, not power rivalry or realization of vested interest, rather betterment of the common people and establishment of proper democracy should be the reason of the outside power's involvement.

**Conclusion:** Current political structure in Myanmar might not be much favorable for democracy to sustain as there is every possibility that if the military finds any effective threat to their corporate interest, they would not be hesitant to demolish this development. But yet, looking at the former days of Myanmar, one must admit that Myanmar has come a long way in terms of its transition toward democracy. And, example lies with every established democratic countries that they have achieved and sustained it at the cost of long struggling history. And their struggling and fearsome history should motivate the people of Myanmar not to lose heart. At the same time prudent and astute leadership of Suu Kyi and active and responsible participation of the outside powers can give the creeping democracy a boost in future. So, Myanmar has no other way but to avail all these opportunities and go for a change that benefits people of Myanmar and the world as well.

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