

PERSPECTIVE

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Democratic Myths in Myanmar's Transition

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In post-independent Burma (1948-1962) elite efforts to consolidate democracy largely failed due to low trust, hate speech and factionalism
- Popular support of the National League for Democracy (NLD)'s "Time for Change" that swept it to victory in the 2015 elections led to high expectations of the "the 100-day projects" announced after the NLD government took over responsibilities of state
- In the six months since taking over the reins of government, the NLD has spent much time in preparation. Yet, various obstacles to change including bureaucratic inertia prevented full implementation of the NLD government's guidelines, despite public expectations of "real change"
- State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has cautioned however, that this is just the beginning of the journey.
- The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is now assumed to be the main opposition party, but its future political role is now uncertain due to internal challenges and low public support. Doubts have increased that the USDP can take up the check-and-balance role as an opposition party, and this may create a one party democracy which will be unhealthy for the future.
- While the ruling party's objectives are for amendment of the 2008 constitution and civilian supremacy, the *Tatmadaw* retains a politically and economically important role in state affairs.
- Thus, one main concern is centres around inter-elite relations between (former) *Tatmadaw* personnel and the civilian polity where the majority is from the NLD party and its allies.

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INTRODUCTION

The people of Myanmar voted in the NLD in the November 2015 elections, throwing their belief behind the NLD election promise of “real change.¹” But in practice, even before change could really take place, the majority of NLD members had to spend much of their time in preparations to take over administrative and economic priorities.² Despite widespread public expectations of change for real, the reality was that not all the bureaucracy could be expected to work in line with the NLD’s priorities for change, as, under the 2008 Constitution, the ministries for defence, home affairs, and border affairs would have ministers appointed by the Commander-in-Chief. .

The people of Myanmar have been anticipating “democracy” since the 1988 democracy protests that catalysed a nation-wide uprising.³ The 2015 elections thus showed people revealing their high hopes for the NLD and for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to assume a leading role in the country’s politics. The people’s desire for a democratic state was re-affirmed by the installation of a true civilian President, U Htin Kyaw⁴ which seemed to indicate that political objectives had been accomplished.

In fact, the game has just begun. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has highlighted in her address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 21 September 2016 that the democratization of Myanmar is just the beginning of the road.⁵ The NLD-led government thus needs to prove by performance, and produce tangible results within the limitations of conditions handed over from previous military governments. In such a scenario, the NLD-led government is dealing with a mix of expectations and myths.

¹ Three key messages for NLD election platform: Time for Change, Change for Real and Vote for NLD

² “နိုင်တော်၏အတိုင်ပင်ခံပုဂ္ဂိုလ်နှင့် စီးပွားရေးလုပ်ငန်းရှင်များ၊ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးမှုမိတ်ဖက်များ
တွေ့ဆုံးအခမဲ့အနား”၊ ကြေးမှု၊ ဒောက်တိဘာ ၂၃၊ ၂၀၁၆။ “Meeting with entrepreneurs and
developers”, *Kyaemon*, October 23, 2016. Remarks in Myanmar language by Daw Aung San Suu
Kyi at a meeting with entrepreneurs on the sidelines of the Myanmar Entrepreneurship Summit
held at Naypyitaw on 22 October 2016, and reported in the Kyaemon Myanmar edition of 23
October 2016.

³ Scholars have doubted the Myanmar people’s understanding of democracy at that time.

⁴ Most people may not argue about different kinds of democracy. President U Htin Kyaw’s first
speech however stressed a “federal democratic union”, ဖော်ဒရယ် ဒီမိုကရေတာစ် ပြည်ထောင်စု
which is new term introduced by the NLD government and stressed as 7-point guide lines
announced at an anniversary of Nationwide Ceasefire Agreements (NCA) on 15 October 2016 by
State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/zg/> (accessed on
October 11, 2016) and <http://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/zg/node/338> (accessed on October 21,
2016)

⁵ (a) An address by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, *Asia Society*, September 21,
2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5Wbda6Z_jc (accessed on September 23, 2016)

(b) The State Counsellor’s Office Website home page displays the sentence, “This is just the
beginning of the road. Not the end.” <http://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/zg/> (accessed on
September 29, 2016)

The article engages with questions about the democratization of Myanmar, a process in which mainly elites including the NLD and USDP have had an impact in different ways. It will also highlight the “lessons learned” from the experience of Myanmar parliamentary democracy during 1948 to 1962. And it analyses the post-2015 picture in the country.

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES: THE PAST EXPERIENCES OF MYANMAR PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

Like other newly independent nations, Myanmar walked into democratic ways after she gained independence from the British in 1948. Unfortunately, this democracy lasted only fourteen years due to various mistakes by the elites.

In successive elections held in 1948-56, 1957-58 and 1960-62, people continually voted for the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), which had led the independence struggle. The AFPFL government was led by Prime Minister U Nu, who implemented the first phase of Myanmar's democratization. Initial popular support for U Nu's economic plans, including the famous slogan of "Everyone has a private car, a brick-house, and 800 kyat monthly income," claimed by Prime Minister U Nu.⁶ To this end, the Pyi Taw Thar Plan (ပြည်တော်သာမီမကိန်း) (State's Welfare Plan) was established by U Nu in 1952, but, generally speaking, none of the economic plans were completely carried out.⁷

Some argue that foreign input for such projects had mainly served their interests rather than those of the Burmese people.⁸ In reality, there was also corruption which led to bad governance and eventually caused a bad reputation.⁹ Other factors adding to the economic policy's failure included the ideological differences between the AFPFL's Socialist-Democracy faction led by Swe-Nyein (U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein) and the Democratic-Socialists led by U Nu.¹⁰ This political factionalism ironically had the effect of giving the growths for the *Tatmadaw* to build up its economic (power) base Burma Economic Development Committee in the name of counter-insurgency¹¹ Holding and Enquiry Centre and Military Intelligence Training Centre were set up in the democratic government on 1950

⁶ : At the time, Myanmar had one of the top GDP in Southeast Asia.

⁷ ဝင်းတင့်ထွန်း။ အမောင်ကြားကမြန်မာပြည်(အနီးဆောင်ပဲမာပြည်နိုင်ငံရေးလျှပ်ရားမှုသမိုင်းအကျဉ်းသဇ္ဇာ-၂၀၀၀)။ လူ ဘောင်သစ်ဒိမ္မကရက်ပါတီ၊ ၂၀၀၇၊ စာ ၁၄၃ ။ Win Tint Tun, *Burma in Dark*, Lu Baung Tit Democrat Party, 2007, p. 143.

⁸ Dr. Maung, Maung, *Myanmar Politics and U Ne Win*, Third Printing, Yangon, Thu Yi Ya Sar Pe 2014, p. 289.

⁹ (a) ကျော်ဝင်း။ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံရေးလောဘန်းစစ်ချက် [၁၉၄၈-၁၉၈၈] ။ Plastic Rainbow Publishing
။ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၂၀၁၂။ ၁၁- ၁၂၀။ Kyaw Win: *Myanma Naing Ngan Yae Sit Tan 1948-1988 (Case Study of Myanma Politics, 1948-1988)*, Plastic Rainbow book Publication, July 2012, Yangon , p. 120

(b) Win Tint Tun: *Burma in Dark*, pp. 163-165.

¹⁰ *Ibid* pp.297-298.

¹¹ (a) *Ibid.* pp. 248-249.

(b) Tatmadaw run Myanmar Economic Holdings can be linked to BEDC.

and 1951 respectively.¹² These centres later became notoriously famous in Myanmar politics. Many people, from students to prime minister, had been visited there for a ‘temporary’ purpose of custody. Moreover, *Tatmadaw* affiliated associations such as Union Solidarity Associations (ကျိုးခိုင်ရေးအသင်း) was also set up.¹³

The elites were also criticized for not paying attention to the Constitution and democratic culture. U Nu’s cabinet members have observed that he (U Nu) sometimes made decisions in private without consulting them, and did not pay attention when people tried to explain matters to him. A former cabinet member stated U Nu did not understand the collective responsibility of the Cabinet. U Nu neglected other people’s opinion.¹⁴

Splits among parties and Myanmar leaders also caused major difficulties. Senior politician U Thu Wai has commented, “[it] was true that ten-year democracy survived not because of U Nu-led government. But, democracy had been survived just because of factional spirit of opposition groups again and again.”¹⁵ Factionalism is a reason why the split in all sectors of Myanmar politics started.¹⁶

Thus, although the Myanmar people faithfully supported their leaders in the context of democracy, the elites were wrapped up in their ideologies and in-fighting. As a result, democracy declined with the military’s rising inclinations to be more involved in Myanmar politics and economic life.

If today’s elites in Myanmar wish to consolidate democracy, it is better to assess how the earlier efforts at parliamentary democracy failed. Learning from these past mistakes, today’s leaders can hopefully separate the myths from realities. Of course, some of the challenges are not exactly the same as those today. But, history provides useful parallels for similar myths that kill democracy.

EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES: POST 2015 ELECTION

Many analysts and experts have given their views on the ‘landmark’ 2015 Elections.¹⁷ But not many have come forth with their views on what happened post elections. In order to

¹² *Tatmadaw History*, Vol. IV., 1948-1962, War History Museum , Tatmadaw Archives, 1996, p. 106 တပ်မတော်သမိုင်း၊ စတုတွေတွဲ၊ ၁၉၄၈-၁၉၆၂၊ စစ်သမိုင်းပြတိက် နှင့် တပ်မတော်မော်ကွန်းတိုက် မူးရုံး၊ ၁၉၉၆၊ စာ ၁၀၄

¹³ Win Tint Tun: *Burma in Dark*, p.258.

¹⁴ ၁၉၅၈-၁၉၆၂ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံရေး (ပထာမတွဲ)၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ တဗ္ဗာသိလ်များပုံနှိပ်တိုက်၊ ၁၉၉၁၊ ၁- ၁၀၄။
1958-1962 Myanmar Politics, Vol. I., Yangon, Universities Publishing, 1991, p.104

¹⁵ ဦးသုဝေ၊ ပါလီမန်ဒီမိုကရော်နှင့်ကျွန်တော်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ လွှားတော်၊ ၁၂၈၂၂၊ စာ ၁၄၈။ U Thu Wai, *Kyun daw hnit Parliamentary Democracy (Me and Parliamentary Democracy)*, Yangon, Lwin U Publishing, 2012, p. 148.

¹⁶ *1958-1962 Myanmar Politics*, Vol. 1., Yangon, Universities Publishing, 1991, pp.99-104.

¹⁷ Former US Ambassador to Myanmar have enjoyed to talk about his experience on 2015 Election Day when he encountered Myanmar people who excited for their purple fingers after they

meet the people's expectations for change, the NLD government initiated "100-dayplans" in all government sectors since the start of its administration.¹⁸ In fact, not all the government institutions had the capacity to produce the targets that the NLD administration had been expected to meet in the short term.¹⁹ Daw Aung San Suu Kyi admitted in her address to the United Nations that the NLD government had spent almost half a year in "preparation time".²⁰ The inertia seems almost ironic as many public servants had been concerned about losing their jobs when the NLD took office.²¹

Another consideration is that the majority of NLD members had spent long periods of incarceration as "political prisoners."²² This has hampered their capacity to pick up speed in policy and other administrative functions. But, the majority of the members of the government are appreciated as being the least corrupted administration in the country's history thus far.²³ Several ministers in the NLD government have been appointed on the basis of having "administration experience." This has caused some criticism by some members of the NLD party as to the political credentials of these cabinet appointees who had not undergone prison terms.²⁴ This was cited by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as one of the "various reasons" for the slow pace of change²⁵

had cast votes to NLD. "The United States and Myanmar: Next Steps," **CSIS**,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ_PwYIefvI (accessed on September 15, 2016)

¹⁸ For 100 day plans/projects launched by new government, some ministries understood as plans while some figured out as projects. Some had difficulty to carry out, for example, MOFA.

¹⁹ (a) To draw attention, Myanmar civil servants tried to add the outcomes of 100-day projects on paper.

(b) နိဂုံးဂျာနယ်၊ ၁၀ ဒောက်တိသာ ဂျာ။ D-Wave Journal, October 10, 2016,
<https://www.scribd.com/document/327117816/D-Wave-Journal-Vol-5-No-38-pdf> , (accessed October 12, 2016).

²⁰ (a) An address by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, **Asia Society**, September 21, 2016.

(b) Chief-minister U Phyo Min Thein admitted less capacity of NLD appointed administration staffs although he pointed out the team is good at team work, transparency, and no corruption. "Interview with U Phyo Min Thein (Part I)" by Ko Ko (Set Hmu Tatkkatho), Live Broadcasting, **Skynet Up-to-date Channel**, October 19, 2016.

²¹ Pyae Thet Phy, "NLD pledges not to axe bureaucrats," **Myanmar Times**, December 21, 2015.
<http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/18218-nld-pledges-not-to-axe-bureaucrats.html> (accessed on September 29, 2016).

²² Even people who have close relations with NLD members had been suspected under the previous successive military governments.

²³ (a) Personal Interview with an officer, President Office. October 11, 2016.

(b) Daw Aung Suu Kyi however admitted that only ministers' level are clean, other staffs remain unchanged. "Meeting with entrepreneurs and developers", **Kyaemon**, October 23, 2016

²⁴ (a) During NLD campaigns for 2015 elections, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi told as NLD slogan: Vote NLD Not look NLD people. Moreover, when she had been criticized by a well-known business man about the NLD people incompetency, she asked him "do you know who's who in the country?"

(b) It is contradict to what State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi used to select party member which is based on "character rather than skill." It is similar what General Ne Win used to say,

"လူကောင်းလူတော်" ("Honest man first, smart man later.").

²⁵ "Meeting with entrepreneurs and developers", **Kyaemon**, October 23, 2016.

While the NLD is continues to deal with its new governmental role, the USDP is also dealing with so-called re-organization.²⁶ The USDP is now trying to appear as a “true” major opposition party. After a wide-ranging reorganisation exercise on 24 August 2016, the USDP is now led by a new chairman, U Than Htay, a retired lieutenant general.²⁷ The government newspapers, however, have stated that the opposition party may not be respected if it cannot maintain public support.²⁸ The USDP has not made any clear positions on important issues facing the current administration.²⁹ In a situation where no “true” opposition party can provide an alternative view and position, a single-party democracy may be unhealthier for the long term.

Ironically, one of the top public worries is not actually about whether the state is going to be democratic, but about inter-elite relations between former *Tatmadaw* personnel and the civilian polity where the majority comes from the NLD party and its allies. President U Htin Kyaw has stressed in his Thingyan (Water Festival) speech that fruitful and warming civil-military relations is necessary for building the state.³⁰

In reality, it is difficult for both sides to have an entirely shared view of important topics on the national agenda. When the State Counsellor announced the aim of a democratic federal union as the NLD government’s guiding principle, Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing warned not to skip steps outlined in the Nation Wide Ceasefire Agreements (NCA) that the previous USDP government had negotiated.³¹ Myanmar analysts have pointed out that the Myanmar politicians are stuck in their fixed ideology or

²⁶ Of course, NLD too have been trying not to have more splitter groups such as National Democratic Force (NDF) who joined 2010 election while NLD boycotted.

²⁷ (a) USDP Website, <http://www.usdp.org.mm/> and *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, August 25, 2016, <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/usdp-elects-new-chairman/> (accessed on September 15, 2016).

(b) ပြည်ထောင်စုနှင့် တို့၏ ဥအောက်တိုဘာ ၂၀၁၆။ *Pyi Htaung Su Nae Sin (Union Daily)*, October 9, 2016,

http://uniondaily.net/News/DetailView_EditorView.aspx?id=60122&path=EditorView.aspx (accessed October 13, 2016).

(c) ပါတီဥတ္ထုပြီးသန်းငွေးနှင့် ပြည်တွင်းပြည်ပမိန္ဒာများ တွေ ဆုံးခြင်း၊

ပြည်ထောင်စုကြံ့ခိုင်ရေးနှင့်ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးပါတီ၊ Press meeting with U Than Htay, *USDP Official Website*, 24 August, 2016, <http://www.usdp.org.mm/> (accessed on September 16, 2016).

²⁸ အယ်ဒီတ္ထုအာဘော်၊ မြန်မာ့အလင်းသတင်းစာ၊ ၁၉ စက်တင်ဘာ ၂၀၁၆။ Editor Perspective, *Myanma Alin*, September 19, 2016, <http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/?q=editor-remark/19/09/2016/id-48598> (accessed on September 19, 2016).

²⁹ မောင် မြင့်၊ “USDP နှင့် opposition mindset” *The Voice*၊ အောက်တိုဘာ ၇၊ ၂၀၁၆။ Maung Myint, “USDP and Opposition Mindset,” *The Voice*, October 7, 2016.

³⁰ Skynet Live Broadcasting , 12th April 2016.

³¹ ကြော်းအောက်တိုဘာ ၁၆၊ ၂၀၁၆။ *Kyaemon*, October 16, 2016.

မြိုင်းအောက်တိုဘာ ၁၆၊ ၂၀၁၆။ *Myawaddy*, October 16, 2016.

own logic. There are only a few who are flexible, but those usually do not last long on Myanmar's political scene.³²

Discussions on civil-military relations are also affected by the hate-speech that occupies much media space. The *Union Daily*, issued by the USDP, has said that State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's continued criticism of the role of *Tatmadaw* reflects old thinking, and that she talked about democratization without the cooperation of *Tatmadaw*.³³ The *Union Daily*'s view is that without the *Tatmadaw* playing a role, no one can improve the political situation, including NLD, for important aspirations such as the 21st Century Panglong Conference.³⁴ It goes on to refer to the Myanmar proverb, *kyee-ko-bote-yo-tae-bote-ko-kyee-yo-tae*, which means mutual respect is important.

While the ruling politicians want 2008 constitution amendment and civilian supremacy, many analysts raise the question of the Defence Service Personnel representatives as members of parliament (or "Military MPs") in Myanmar's Hluttaw. In addition to these military MPs, a large number of mid-level or senior-level officers have been "retired" or "exported" from military to civilian posts, in a practice that started from the military-led governments of the past. Almost all government institutions have been run by soldier-cum-civil servants in senior decision-making positions. There is no legal means to remove such personnel at the moment. It is thus easy for such soldier-officers to run the inter-ministry administration through their network.³⁵ Moreover, time and budget to train new administrative officers is limited.³⁶ Thus, the Tatamdaw retains a politically and economically important role, and this is another reality that all civilian leaders have to live with.

There is also a gap between Myanmar people and NLD elites on the topic of the country's economy. The NLD has highlighted national reconciliation as the first priority of its 12-point economic policy announced in late July 2016. In addition, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has said that the "crony class" should be encouraged to cooperate for the country's business to meet "the global business practice." She has also observed that Myanmar's success is the

³² ကျော်ဝင်း၊ "ကြိုးတင်ထုပ်ပိုးထားသော အိုင်ဒီယာ ဖတ်နှီးလောဂျစ်နှင့် နိုင်ငံရေး" *The Voice* । အောက်တိုဘာ ၈၊ ၂၀၁၆။ Kyaw Win, " Fixed idea and Politics," *The Voice*, October 8, 2016.

³³ (a) ပြည်ထောင်စုနေ့ ၀၉၊ ၂၀၁၆၊ Pyi Htaung Su Nae Sin (*Union Daily*) September 28, 2016,

http://uniondaily.net/News/DetailView_EditorView.aspx?id=59312&path=EditorView.aspx (accessed on September 28, 2016).

(b) It is interesting to learn while USDP emphasized about this, *Tatmadaw* issued paper Myawaddy remained silence.

³⁴ Unlike NLD government beginning days, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi finally appreciated U Thein Sein administration and people who devoted for NCA on its first anniversary event. မြေတိနေ့ ၀၉၊ ၁၆ အောက်တိုဘာ ၂၀၁၆ । *Myawaddy* , October 16, 2016 http://myawaddy-myawaddy.blogspot.sg/2016/09/blog-post_13.html (accessed October 16, 2016).

³⁵ အကိုကြီး၊ ညီလေး Brotherhood spirit or senior-junior relations, trained in their respective military schools, eventually help when they need to work together under different capacities.

³⁶ Interview with U Tin Aye, former Chairman of UEC,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0QTP63yTtY> (accessed on September 28, 2016).

world's success. But the Myanmar people have different views of the cronies and want to see tangible results immediately. The only advantage is that the NLD government has large international support for reinvigorating the economy. However, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has also frankly admitted that the economy has not progressed that fast..³⁷

If the leaders and people of Myanmar are aware of the failure of the previous parliamentary democracy mentioned earlier, the goal of democratization is within reach. If Myanmar's civil and military leadership can deal with each other in a manner that is free from hate speech, free from low trust, and free from factionalism, there is every possibility that the dream of Myanmar people having good income, a private car and owning a house will come true at last.

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³⁷ Remarks in Myanmar language by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at a meeting with entrepreneurs on the sidelines of the Myanmar Entrepreneurship Summit held at Naypyitaw on 22 October 2016, and reported in the Kyaemon Myanmar edition of 23 October 2016.