Myanmar's Search for Normalcy in an Abnormal World

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For much of the past seventy-plus years since its independence, Myanmar, often known as Burma, was an isolated military dictatorship plagued by seemingly perpetual civil war. Widespread protests in 1988 resulted in extreme military brutality and further entrenchment of autocratic rule. In the decades after, however, the country's pro-democracy activists became an inspiration to many around the world. Since then, perceptions of the country have oscillated between hopeful—that the country can successfully transition to peace and democracy through a historic reform process—and dismay that the country is not progressing as so many around the world had wished. This disappointment has been punctuated most starkly by accusations that its military committed genocide against the country's Muslim Rohingya population in 2017.

Myanmar's evolution from military dictatorship began in 2010. While much has changed in the years since, much has not. After two semi-elected governments and a third set to take office next year, it is a good time to reflect on the project of changing Myanmar—its intents, successes and failures, and prospects for the future. For those questioning the nature of the transition, starting with its intentions, achieving a shared sense of "normalcy" seems to be the most common denominator. Across a wide range of actors—the military, democracy advocates, businesspeople and social activists—the goal, in

simplest terms, is to no longer be an isolated pariah state rife with cripplingly poverty, oppression, and ethnic strife.

This essay reflects on how a grounded sense of "normalcy" is desirable for Myanmar's transition, showing that any sober assessment of the military's involvement in politics and the state's entrenched dysfunction requires that the international community dispense with grand hopes for the country's transition. Instead, international actors should seek to embrace the country's complexity in order to support its pursuit of normalization.

Myanmar's transition can thus be understood as a "search for normalcy." Generally speaking, the world has embraced this search. What "normalcy" ultimately looks like is surely different for different countries, but most longed for a Myanmar that was no longer a global outcast comparable to North Korea. Many countries, from the United States to China, accordingly engaged the military in a structured process to support change, hoping that gradual reforms would add up to structural changes in how the country is governed. Even the West saw positive change as possible, albeit only tentatively in the early years.

Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), also implicitly accepted this gradualism when they contested the 2012 by-elections for national parliament. Despite deep reservations about the military's claim that they would manage the transition towards "discipline flourishing democracy", this nonetheless signalled that the party was joining the transition project for the duration. Working within the confines of the 2008 Constitution would be the medium through which the NLD sought to achieve full democratization, which, in turn, could possibly include reforming or replacing that constitution.

The military, for its part, seemingly realized that they had to welcome the NLD back into the political process. Aung San Suu Kyi was then a global icon of democracy; excluding her and her party was simply not an option. instead, the military appreciated that achieving economic growth and international acceptance required her involvement in the transition. If Suu Kyi remained under house arrest and actively derided the 2008 Constitution as regressive and undemocratic, the international community would never accept the transition, thereby leaving crippling sanctions in place.

Indeed, Suu Kyi's decision to participate in the 2012 by-elections, where she and her party members won a good number of parliamentary seats, gave global legitimacy to the changes unfolding in Myanmar. Her participation encouraged greater international engagement with the Thein Sein government, even if this required international actors to accept the parameters of change laid down by the military in their 2008 Constitution. After winning elections in a landslide in November 2015, however, Suu Kyi assumed executive power as the "State Counselor", thereby effectively overcoming the Constitution's prohibition on those with children who are foreign nationals—as she does—from holding the presidency.

ENTRENCHED STATE DYSFUNCTION

In 2016, the *de facto* head of state Aung San Suu Kyi, together with her NLD, assumed responsibility for a state apparatus that was far from fully under their control. The military had meticulously designed the 2008 Constitution to ensure outright military control over both the security apparatus and their major economic interests, along with prosecutorial immunity for past transgressions and a veto-proof presence in parliament over the constitution. As the cherry on top, the military guaranteed itself one vice-president post and a majority in the National Security Council. Myanmar was thus left with a split government—one that was nominally democratic and led by civilians, but with the military securely immersed in the country's politics, governance, and economy.

Unsurprisingly, the military defined the transition by its own prerogatives. Pro-democracy political parties like the NLD, as well as the dozens of ethnic armed groups, repeatedly contested those privileges, refusing to accept a political settlement that was not based on consensual federalism achieved through negotiations. Hence, the transition has essentially been a contest of "competitive governance" between the military and elected civilian government. This, in turn, is framed against questions of who belongs in Myanmar and how they should jointly rule the country; sensitivities of this sort manifest most starkly in Myanmar's many insurgent groups, but they are present across the incredibly diverse country.

After decades of misrule and stagnation, the political jockeying for control of the state—and hence control over setting the transition forward—was lamentable. Myanmar in 2010 was plagued by deep and widespread poverty, ongoing conflicts across the periphery in its near entirety, and a state apparatus that not only had little capacity to provide services but was habituated towards autocratic rule through surveillance and coercion. Reforming the state apparatus was always going to be a massive challenge.

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This general dysfunction meant that for the newly elected governments, particularly the NLD in 2015 but to some extent also the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that assumed power in 2011, the transition needed to initially show basic competence to govern in the most rudimentary ways—by improving healthcare, education, infrastructure, and jobs—rather than focusing solely on achieving major structural reforms. This is not to say that the latter were not sought; they were, and some were achieved, notably in telecommunications, currency exchange, debt relief, and decentralization.

What is often missed in the story of Myanmar's recent past, however, is just how weak the state was in terms of basic competence. The country's previous military dictatorship did not translate into a strong state apparatus. The state was able to stifle the opposition with predatory bureaucracy and brutal military crackdowns, but behind this façade state function was spectacularly limited.

Myanmar could not afford to be a heavy police state such as those seen in the Soviet bloc or in modern day North Korea. Instead, much of its oppression was left to and achieved by the banal levers of local administration. Myanmar's counter-insurgency campaigns involved the widespread use of proxy militias, who were left to run loose and brutally clear civilian populations. This was, to put it simply, counterinsurgency on the cheap.

Since 2010, the sheer extent of the country's dysfunction has overshadowed prospects for change. Myanmar's would-be reformists—ranging from those merely wishing to push a façade of change to bolster economic growth all the way to the true believers—faced the seemingly overwhelming problem of how to structure and sequence reforms. When everything needs reform, where do you even start? The magnitude challenge of overcoming Myanmar's compounding social, political, and economic ailments seemed near insurmountable. The complexity of it all overshadowed and threatened

to overwhelm reforming even the most banal aspects of basic governance.

A foundation of such governance needed to be laid to achieve the state building that similar countries had done post-independence in the 1950s and 1960s. With the state near dysfunctional from the top down and an economy lagging decades behind its regional peers, the need of basic competence—to manage budgets, improve basic education and health, build roads—was imperative. In this sense, the "transition" was less about emerging from dictatorship and more about achieving rudimentary coherence as a state, something that should have been done decades before. International actors seeking to put Myanmar on a path to "normalcy" were far too often blind to the country's need for basic governance structures.

AN ENDURING ROLE FOR THE MILITARY

President Thein Sein's USDP government, which reigned from 2011 to 2016, sought reforms in economic governance, ceasefires and a peace process, and engagement with the West. The USDP pursued these reforms because party leaders longed for a sense of normalcy, and hence legitimacy, from both the international community and Myanmar's public. Yes, these leaders were former military, but they too were tired of Myanmar's global pariah status. During the USDP government there were tensions at times with the military—for instance over leadership of the peace process—but generally, the government and military worked together well enough. These tensions were often overshadowed by the feud between the speaker of the lower house of parliament—Shwe Mann, who had been the number three general in the junta—and his former colleagues in the military and presidency.

Even as the NLD assumed power in early 2016, many political analysts were surprised by the extent of accommodation the military seemed to be giving the new government. Building off its earlier themes of wanting to shed pariah status, there seemed to be a pragmatic realization that ongoing *détente*, and even engagement with the NLD and Suu Kyi, was needed, at least publicly. With that in mind, and despite some performative critiques, the military accepted the creation of the State Counselor position and her *de facto* role as head of state.

It is unclear, though, if the military ever expected the NLD to come to power when they drafted the 2008 Constitution. While the military undoubtedly wanted the transition to proceed in terms of "discipline flourishing democracy"—i.e. at a pace it felt comfortably in control of and especially if it produced significant economic growth while protecting their core security interests—the military was also happy to let the civilian government take responsibility, and hence blame, for any of the country's misfortunes. As such, by 2016 military leaders were distancing themselves from many matters of routine governance so as to allow the NLD government to proverbially hang itself with its own rope.

For decades in Asia—and in Myanmar (then Burma) during and after the 1962 coup—debates have raged over the merits of autocratic but relatively competent governance, including that led by generals, in comparison to the seeming chaos and ineptitude of electoral democracy. Militaries in Asia, like those in many other regions, have long claimed that they are simply more competent to develop countries economically and provide stability; in return, their respective publics must accept the loss of rights. Autocratic populism has seen a surge of popularity in recent years across the world, including in the West.

Opposition towards electoral democracy has similarly not disappeared in Myanmar. Since 2010, such opposition has occurred regularly, with the military encouraging Buddhist nationalists to support discriminatory race laws and questioning the NLD's competence and intentions. The military has also excelled at placing Suu Kyi and the NLD in awkward political positions that would expose them to criticism from both Western and domestic supporters. A prime instance was placing her on commissions to investigate violence in Rakhine State in 2014 where she would become front and centre to both international and domestic debates over the Rohingya crisis. Indeed, the military has since 2010 repeatedly put the country's democrats in "lose-lose" situations. Doing so has for the military become something of a rather refined art form.

CHOOSING A WAY FORWARD

Compounding these tensions and adding complexity to the country's politics are contested narratives of change and legitimacy. Many in Myanmar believe that a better future will come with parliamentary democracy, while others insist on starting with a negotiated peace settlement premised on federalism. While not necessarily mutually exclusive, these two positions are nonetheless hard to synchronize emotionally and politically across the spectrum of Myanmar's society and politics. It is also hard to make them coexist in the practical terms of specific near-term reforms, such as with decentralization efforts. These tensions raise all sorts of "chicken-or-egg" conundrums, including whether there should be constitutional reform or decentralization before a peace agreement lays out a federal future.

Amid these quandaries, it is useful to focus on what is feasible for the country in terms of transitioning to what can be understood as "normal", or at least on a trajectory towards "normalization". As Myanmar's Southeast Asian peers indicate, "normalcy" can refer to controlling state territory through consent, providing basic governance and social services, and growing an economy based on legitimate sources of income that can lift the wider population out of poverty. There may be autocracy and illicit economies present but not enough to result in global condemnation and isolation. With time, Myanmar might even grow a healthier sense of nationalism—i.e. as an "imagined community"—that dissuades widespread

insurrection. Perhaps a shared sense of what is "normal" and a palpable sense of progress towards it is the only way to overcome massive ethnic, religious, and social cleavages.

Indeed, as the transition was beginning, *The Economist* remarked that compared to the violence concurrently unfolding in the Middle East's "Arab Spring", Myanmar's historic flux appeared to be progressing as a "revolution without losers" (7 April 2012 Edition). Most stakeholders did, in fact, accept that gradual evolution, rather than abrupt, seismic change, was needed to bring the country from military dictatorship to something else that would be roughly democratic and market-oriented, as well as more accommodating of the country's diversity. Simply put, Myanmar just wanted to be another "normal" Southeast Asian country, generally trending for the better but with the ups and downs experienced by everybody else. This observation often escaped outsiders looking in, who generally had grand expectations of quick change, be it economic, political, or for a peace deal. Domestically, however, the idea of some potentially quick winner-take-all revolution had lost its appeal.

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Within the country there is an immense amount of hope for change but also exceptional levels of pragmatism and patience. Outsiders have tended to romanticize or sensationalize the country, for better or worse. Within Myanmar, though, more moderated hopes are prominent. It is from a greater sense of these expectations from within Myanmar that the country's transition should be weighed.

When Suu Kyi famously said she was just a Myanmar politician rather than a global icon for democracy, it was a plea for acceptance of her relative normalcy as a party leader and legislator. Or, it was at least a hope to be left alone to get on with what she wanted to do most—reform Myanmar, rather than save the world. Her parameters for what was needed and possible were defined by Myanmar's domestic politics and her political capital to widen and shape the

confines of the 2008 Constitution's path for the country. She certainly did not turn down the global accolades that came her way, but one would be hard pressed to show that she was driven by achieving global fame rather than securing a better future for her country. Many Nobel laureates have enjoyed lucrative lives dispelling wisdom around the world, but she chose to stay home. It is worth remembering that.

Even the military, the Tatmadaw, has its complexes about what it means to be "normal". Since its earliest days, the Tatmadaw has been gnawed at by what could best be understood as an inferiority complex. Shortly after independence, Karen National Union insurgents nearly succeeded in capturing Rangoon, today Yangon, and the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang incursion in 1949 onwards left large parts of the country under foreign control. This deepened in the military a sense of weakness and inadequacy that manifested itself brutally over time as the armed forces took autocratic control of the country. More recently, reading the Tatmadaw's 2015 White Paper on defense policy, one is struck by the sense of it wants to shed the toxic abnormality of its modern history and become a "professional" military. It is telling that one of the first reform areas that international agencies succeeded in engaging the military was preventing child soldiers. Self-respecting militaries simply did not partake in such wretched practices.

More significantly, for the military, an economic rationale for change has been primary: normalcy means economic growth. The refrain amongst the country's elite over the 2000s that they were "tired of being poorer than Laos" was grating. As that decade wore on, over-dependence on China and the risks of outright economic collapse in much of Myanmar were more of an existential threat than anything else; the military recognized that.

Perhaps most significantly, the country's complexes about wanting to be "normal" extend to the most odious event of recent years. The 2017 exodus of the Muslim Rohingya from the Rakhine State, where they faced vicious persecution from the Tatmadaw, understandably provoked global outrage. Across the world, many were aghast that so much of the country's leadership, including Suu Kyi, and public seemed ambivalent about the plight of the Rohingya. Such sentiments were widely true: At best, most Myanmar citizens do not hold the Rohingya in positive regard, to say the least; at worst, most refuse to even consider the Rohingya rightful members of Myanmar's national community. What was striking within the country, however, was the resentment that Myanmar's citizens near-universally felt about the term "genocide."

Few words have such uniquely negative connotations for a country. The accusation of "genocide" thus grated across Myanmar's political spectrum because it again made the country a global outcast facing scorn from Brussels to Washington and beyond. Even for those Myanmar people who saw the Rakhine crisis as the military's fault, it was hard for them not to resent the global accusation, which risked superseding all the positive changes that had and were still unfolding.

This observation neither condones the actions taken by the military nor lower expectations of positive change by the NLD

and Suu Kyi. Instead, it highlights the grossly myopic hopes that pervaded international expectations for the country in the early years of the transition until the pendulum swung the other way and the country was wholly condemned for singular issues in Rakhine. All of these hopes were based on perceptions of the exceptional. This was particularly true for the West, whose leaders personalized their hopes for the country in Suu Kyi herself. Her near deification abroad, especially in the West, was ultimately counterproductive for the country. These expectations never could have been met.

CELEBRATING NORMALIZATION IS OKAY

Although it is hard to see Myanmar as "normal" right now, it is important to remember that the country is in the midst of an important process of normalization. There are near endless reasons to let cynicism and doubt drive international understandings of the country because there are still massive problems unfolding, such as the Rakhine crisis and the drug trade. Rather than undermine one's hopes for Myanmar, these issues should remind outsiders to have more pragmatic expectations for the country. The military designed the transition so that they could manipulate the pace and scope of change in the country; Myanmar's present reality is thus a story of five decades of military dictatorship and about seven to eight years-worth of conditioned reform.

In other words, what is needed is patience and the celebration of relative normalcy in all its boring forms, like planning and budgeting, building new roads and ensuring garbage collection, empowering communities to participate in development, and nudging forward an economy that was stuck between the socialist planning of the 1960s and the crony capitalism endemic after the 1988 coup. The country's exceptionalism was over-sold for far too long. Celebrating normalcy does not mean accepting dysfunction, mediocrity, and violence, just more thoughtful, grounded expectations of what is possible in what is going to be an extended process of gradualism—at best, a slow but steady change spread across many reform areas.

For those who believe in liberal democracy within the country and across the world, there is an onus to help Myanmar's elected governments show that they can govern. Myanmar's public needs to believe that democracy can lead to the normalization of the country, represented by economic growth, international acceptance, increasingly representative government, and improved living standards. The best leverage elected governments have against the military is proving their competence to govern and deliver the essential changes that the public desires most—jobs and poverty alleviation, stability and progress towards peace, basic infrastructure such as local roads and bridges, and improving social services like health and education.

Framing Myanmar's domestic prospects is also the reality that the last decade has been distinctly abnormal for the whole world. The rise of autocratic populism, rising geopolitical tensions between China and the United States, economic flux and technological revolutions, and now an historic pandemic are evidence of that. If Myanmar's transition

had started a decade or two earlier, it might have achieved different results or at least been in better sync with the times. For instance, it might have captured some of the market success pioneered by the Asian Tigers; geopolitics, meanwhile, might have been more conducive to international cooperation in Myanmar. Rather, economic growth models have moved on, Great Power geopolitics have intensified, and the liberal international order is more widely questioned. The United Nations is weaker than ever before and divided by squabbling powers. There is widespread resentment within developing countries over what are perceived to be lopsided applications of international justice.

Within these wider considerations, the project of changing Myanmar—its intents, successes, failures, and prospects for the future—remains cloudy. The sheer complexity of the country and its entrenched dysfunction means that there is no quick fix and will be no singular moment of massive change. Those who care about the country must, accordingly, question the grand plans—that a single peace process is feasible or that the constitution can be amended or replaced just once—that have become entrenched behind paradigms of international support for Myanmar.

Moreover, many of the conceptual frameworks that help define international support now seem archaic and misplaced in Myanmar, stuck as they are in the early 2000s of liberal-minded state-building. Try to frame Myanmar in one way or another and it all blends together as an alphabet soup of conceptual frameworks that lead to over-simplification and false hopes. There is no magic paradigm for understanding Myanmar; it is too complex. Trying to frame the country in such terms results in over simplified hopes for the linear progression that the international community was so keen to support. A single peace process and a couple elections were never going to change the country.

Outside actors must, therefore, pursue what is possible rather than what is simply wished. Namely, observers should ask, "what is the target for change when everything seems so problematic and exceptional?" and seek a sense of normalcy relative to what is possible for Myanmar. The country is searching for a semblance of normalcy, mostly benchmarked against the relative successes and failures of its neighbors in Southeast Asia. Reform does not mean crossing a clear threshold whereby the country is blessed with normalcy; rather, it means working methodically to untangle the messy, convoluted knot that is Myanmar's governance, politics, and economics and being patient throughout the process. All things considered, Myanmar is progressing in important ways that should neither be taken for granted nor forgotten. ■

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Myanmar's Search for Normalcy in an Abnormal World

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For much of the past seventy-plus years since its independence, Myanmar, often known as Burma, was an isolated military dictatorship plagued by seemingly perpetual civil war. Myanmar's evolution from military dictatorship began in 2010 when a wide-ranging reform process began. While much has changed in the years since, much has not. Myanmar's transition can best be understood as a "search for normalcy." Since 2010, the sheer extent of the country's dysfunction after decades of military dictatorship has overshadowed prospects for change as has the mass exodus of Rohingya in 2017 after a brutal campaign by the military. Amid these quandaries, it is useful to focus on what is feasible for the country in terms of transitioning to what can be understood as "normal", or at least on a trajectory towards "normalization". Framing Myanmar's domestic prospects is also the reality that the last decade has been distinctly abnormal for the whole world. Reform in Myanmar means working methodically to untangle the messy, convoluted knot that is Myanmar's governance, politics, and economics and being patient throughout the process. All things considered, Myanmar is progressing in important ways that should neither be taken for granted nor forgotten.

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