

ASIAN SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR

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Myanmar is in the midst of a new phase of its attempted political transition. As it has progressed, three regional democracies—Indonesia, India, and Japan—have individually taken positive if somewhat cautious approaches to support this change. There is an opportunity for deeper and coordinated regional engagement. These three major Asian democracies could help bolster Myanmar’s political situation and its new government as it faces the challenges of a budding democracy.

The authors traveled to Yangon and Mandalay in May 2016 to assess how Indonesia, India, and Japan are reacting to this new phase and the extent to which they are supporting a democratic outcome. They found these major Asian democracies are still circumspect in the amount of help they are willing to offer Myanmar’s democratic reformers. Though these countries’ support is still evolving, it has long been scattered and indirect. Stronger support would be a vital contribution to a successful transition in Myanmar. Interviews in Myanmar revealed a number of areas in which these Asian democracies could collaborate to strengthen Myanmar’s democratic change.

TRANSITION IN BALANCE

After winning about 80 percent of contested seats in Myanmar’s November 2015 legislative elections, the National League for Democracy (NLD) formed a new government in March 2016.

The formation of an NLD government does not in itself represent the advent of democracy. The military continues to play a substantial role in politics. The new government has left most ambassadorial positions in the hands of the military. Longtime bureaucrats who retain the mind-set of the junta era remain in place. While pact-making with the military is needed for a stable transition, the NLD’s lack of governing capacity is a serious concern.

The skills and capacity of the new government will be challenged by the social and economic issues it must handle. Despite Myanmar’s bountiful natural resources, it remains one of the poorest and most unequal countries in Southeast Asia. In all key human development indicators, Myanmar lags behind its Southeast Asian peers, with the exception of Cambodia. The country’s developmental challenges are evidenced in frequent power cuts, weak electric coverage, and poor transportation infrastructure. Millions of NLD supporters who voted for Aung San Suu Kyi’s

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comeback have great expectations that her government will bring tangible change to their lives. The director of the Sandhi Governance Institute, which provides public policy training to civil servants and parliamentarians, told the authors that it will be difficult for the inexperienced NLD team to meet the high level of public expectations. Indeed, blackouts have become more frequent in the last year.¹

The inexperience and weak capacity of the NLD is also being sorely tested by Myanmar's peace and reconciliation process. The Burmese experts and think tanks that were interviewed concurred that the new government has not yet come to grips with the basic concerns of warring ethnic groups. The junta's peace initiative made a breakthrough in persuading eight ethnic groups to sign a ceasefire agreement in 2014, but this peace process is now in tatters. The government is struggling to come up with a clear strategy to resurrect it.

Nowhere is the new government's resolve being tested more than on issues involving the rights and citizenship of minorities. Against a rising tide of Buddhist nationalism and Islamophobia, Suu Kyi's government is struggling to address the plight of Rohingyas—the country's most persecuted minority group. Tens of thousands of Rohingyas are now living in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), and they have little or no access to healthcare and education. Despite strong criticism on this issue from the international community, there is broad agreement that the new government is set to follow the junta's line on the Rohingyas while showing greater urgency and flexibility with other minorities, such as the Chin. Suu Kyi's move in May 2016 to discourage the U.S. ambassador from using the term "Rohingya" shows the difficulties that lie ahead on this crucial issue.²

Views are mixed about the influence Aung San Suu Kyi wields over the new government. Constitutionally barred from becoming president, she took the newly created position of state counselor—a position "above the president," as she promised during the 2015 election campaigns.³ Members of parliament from the military opposed this move. As state counselor, Aung San Suu Kyi accompanies President Htin Kyaw and plays a de facto presidential role. Her pronouncements tend to be taken up by ministers very quickly. Most of the people interviewed expressed concern over her degree of influence. Suu Kyi takes advice from

few people; political power is still very personalized and needs to be diversified away from her.

A somewhat similar tendency can be observed in regard to civil society. The government has made it clear that NGOs operating in the country must work for the national interest. It is widely recognized that Aung San Suu Kyi herself prioritizes national over individual interests. While this approach might help political stability, it raises a concern that single-issue NGOs may have difficulty serving a watchdog function. Indeed, Aung San Suu Kyi is said to disfavor single-issue NGOs. Civil society is still struggling to ensure the government's transparency and accountability.

The NLD's sweeping electoral victory and Suu Kyi's inspiring comeback mark the dawn of a new era in Myanmar's troubled democratic journey. But the challenges ahead are considerable. Despite its early missteps, Suu Kyi's government and Myanmar's baby steps toward democracy need extensive support, especially from Asian democracies. Indonesia, India, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) need to strengthen their support for Myanmar's fragile reform process.

INDONESIA SETS AN EXAMPLE

Indonesia is the primary reference point to which Myanmar's leaders turn when seeking to draw lessons from very recent democratic transitions.⁴ In particular, Indonesia offers Myanmar an instructive example of how to manage diversity and peacebuilding during a transition. Yet when it comes to supporting and strengthening democracy in Myanmar, Indonesia has followed a low-key, nonintervention strategy. Of course, political changes in Myanmar such as the NLD's victory have been well received in Indonesia and its political and civil society circles. But caution prevails in terms of what Indonesia is able or willing to do to advance reforms.

Indonesia took an active interest in Myanmar's democratic transition back in 2007. Amid the post-Saffron Revolution crackdown that year, Indonesia sent its retired General Agus Widjojo to persuade the junta to open up a degree of political space. However, it was after Thein Sein's government unveiled the seven-step strategy for democratic reforms in 2011 that Indonesia became far more vocal in supporting Myanmar's transition. The Indonesian government provided broad political

support to the junta's reform road map and backed its ASEAN chairmanship in 2014. The Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD), an NGO established by the Indonesian government in 2008 (and currently headed by one of the authors), was charged with planning and implementing tasks related to Myanmar's reform process. The IPD has worked with a number of Burmese counterpart organizations like the Myanmar Peace Center and Myanmar Development Resource Institute to share experiences from Indonesia's democratization. The outcomes of the dialogues between the IPD and Myanmar are often shared with state actors (in particular, the embassies of Indonesia and Myanmar and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Because Indonesia's focus is on sharing its experience and knowledge, the main method of support that Indonesia provides to Myanmar is engaging Burmese civic actors in dialogue. Not only are government officials invited to share their experience, but academics, members of the media, and civil society actors also participate and recount their observations. Since the IPD does not aim to export the Indonesian model, it has been able to host dialogues about military reform, which is one of the most sensitive aspects of Myanmar's nascent democratization.

While the IPD has gradually intensified its activities for strengthening Myanmar's fragile institutions, Burmese stakeholders expect much more from Indonesia. Many feel the Joko Widodo (or Jokowi) administration has yet to show serious intent in supporting Myanmar's reforms. It took nearly two weeks after the 2015 election for the Indonesian government to offer an official congratulatory statement.⁵ Describing the disappointment this created, the *Jakarta Post* stated "Indonesia's silence indicates that the country prefers the old-fashioned 'safe play' approach."⁶

Despite many promising interventions with Burmese officials and civil society, the IPD's dialogues cannot serve as a substitute for stronger engagement from the Indonesian government. The deputy chairman of the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) said that there is a strong desire in Myanmar for Indonesia to expand its support programs. Indeed, there is high demand in Myanmar for others to share their experiences about topics such as local election management, decentralization, and corruption.⁷ While the Indonesian ambassador to Myanmar has expressed interest in holding dialogues on lawmaking, facilitating interagency coordination on local elections, and

assisting with police reform, the Jokowi administration would have to show a much more unequivocal commitment to democracy support to make such an expansion possible.⁸

INDIA LOOKS TO COORDINATED EFFORTS

Aung San Suu Kyi's comeback has energized India, but New Delhi's practical support is unlikely to match Jakarta's for the time being. India's interest can be easily gauged from the significant editorial space that its mainstream media outlets have devoted to political developments in Myanmar. Given Suu Kyi's deep connection to India—including her time spent studying in New Delhi in the 1960s (when her mother was an ambassador there) and the considerable personal contacts she has built over many decades in India—the NLD's rise to power has generated tremendous interest in India. The Indian embassy in Yangon has become extremely active.

Proud of its record since 2006 of technical and infrastructural support and the constructive engagements it had with Myanmar's military rulers,⁹ India is now seeking to push its relationship with Myanmar to another level.¹⁰ Indian officials are optimistic about the country's democratic transition and committed to supporting political reforms. India seems fully behind the military's seven-step strategy to a "discipline-flourishing democracy," as the strategy stated.¹¹

Though wary of using the term "democracy promotion," the Indian embassy is involved in supporting political and administrative reforms in Myanmar. India is active particularly in revamping the country's ailing service-delivery system, providing capacity-building and technical assistance in conducting elections, helping upgrade the country's information technology and telecom networks, and providing technical and infrastructural assistance to educators and healthcare practitioners. India is among only a handful of countries that has contributed more than \$1 billion to strengthen Myanmar's institutions and help the country meet its developmental needs.¹² India also is keen to improve its previously tense relations with Suu Kyi, who has been critical of India's close relationship with the junta.¹³

However, Burmese stakeholders want India to be more proactive in supporting the transition. For instance, Soe Myint, who is the founder and editor-in-chief of the Mizzima Media Group and was

involved in the 1988 students' uprising against the junta, is pushing India to be more forthcoming in its help.¹⁴ Recalling India's defense of the 1988 pro-democracy protests and the country's laudable role in sheltering thousands of democracy activists in the 1990s and demanding Suu Kyi's release, he feels India has strong credentials to spur democratic developments in Myanmar. With Suu Kyi at the helm of Myanmar's affairs, India can provide support to strengthen the democratic process in a country that is struggling hard to distance itself from Chinese influence.¹⁵

Of course, other Burmese stakeholders lament that India is unlikely to step forward and support reforms more vigorously. A leader at a democracy promotion NGO said that "the current geopolitics will make India cautious of its moves, and the country may not put all eggs in one basket."¹⁶ One Burmese diplomat stressed that India currently focuses on very soft aid, as it did in Afghanistan.¹⁷ According to him, Myanmar badly needs more hands-on support from powerful neighbors like India. Some of the interviewees believed that India could help most through trade and transportation infrastructure linking India and Myanmar. India's ambitious Act East policy, which plans huge investments in physical connections between India and Myanmar, could be a highly valuable way to enhance Myanmar's economic prospects.¹⁸

On the larger question of India's collaboration and cooperation with other major Asian powers—particularly ASEAN and Japan—there was little detailed thinking among the people interviewed. While Burmese stakeholders want to see such coordination, India's chargé d'affaires in Yangon was skeptical about an alliance or arrangement among Asian powers.¹⁹ Yet a number of Asian ambassadors are talking about informal, joint road maps to aid Myanmar's transition. Recalling the active cooperation between India and ASEAN in gently nudging the junta to take steps toward democracy, Indian officials noted that cooperation among Asian powers should be considered. With the easing of sanctions by the United States and Europe and the active efforts under way to form a democracy axis in Asia (comprising Australia, India, Indonesia, and Japan), India increasingly wants to see coordinated action in Myanmar.

JAPAN OPTS FOR ECONOMIC SUPPORT

Meanwhile, Japan has focused on supporting practical efforts and work in Myanmar. This is because Japanese stakeholders have

positive views of the incipient transition, believing that Asian democracies could play a more beneficial role in Myanmar. For example, the chief representative of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Myanmar Office argued that the "Asian timeframe is different from that of Western countries," and he implied that a patient Asian approach is better suited to supporting political reforms that also maintain political stability.²⁰

Japan's patient approach is pragmatic. While the Japanese embassy and JICA recognize the value of democracy, they do not believe in a dogmatic democracy-first approach. Rather, they consider political stability and economic growth to be of greater importance, at least for the time being. That is why Japan has focused most of its support on the peace process with ethnic minorities (\$1 billion of support), economic and social infrastructure (\$6.4 billion in grants and technical assistance and \$25 billion in loans from 2011 to 2013 alone), and debt relief (\$3 billion).²¹ Indeed, most of the stakeholders interviewed believe that the government will not garner legitimacy unless it can address pressing socioeconomic problems within a year or two.

Japan's cautious approach is also influenced by JICA's mandate. JICA is a development-oriented organization, and it is not authorized under Japanese law to offer either political or military assistance. However, Japan has provided support for political reform in Myanmar in an indirect way. For example, Japan has provided scholarships for seventy former Burmese military officers to study at Japanese graduate schools each year.²² Just as the United States has utilized Fulbright scholarships as a soft-power tool to allow students from abroad to experience democracy and become pro-democracy actors, Japan's scholarships can provide opportunities for Burmese officers to experience democracy in Japan.

The head of MISIS said in an interview that Japan's support in the legal field has been especially valuable.²³ Since 2013, Japan has sent three experts to the Attorney General's Office and the Supreme Court to support the drafting of laws and offer advice on legislation related to the economy.²⁴ The chief representative of the JICA Myanmar Office favors support for economy-related laws as an entry point to help establish a healthy and independent legal system. Japan's work is based on the idea that lawmaking in less controversial areas of policy can provide valuable learning experiences regarding the importance of the rule of law, accountability, and transparency.

Within the field of the rule of law, however, Japan does not offer support to improve citizens' access to justice. U Kyaw Myint, an influential Burmese lawyer, emphasizes that support must be provided not only for the government but also for societal actors. He raises a plethora of issues in the legal sector, including corruption, the lack of ethics among judges, and judges' weak trust in lawyers. U Kyaw Myint established the Yangon Justice Center, the University Legal Clinic, and the Myanmar Legal Aid Network, all of which provide education on law and legal ethics. While Western donors such as Denmark, the EU, Norway, Sweden, the UK, and the United States have supported such activities, the Japanese government has chosen not to.²⁵ This is a major oversight given that Japan's broader work in Myanmar's legal field should enable it to leverage deeper judicial reform.

Japan could also begin to offer support for police reform, possibly in collaboration with Indonesia. According to the March 2016 Asian Barometer Survey on Myanmar, citizens' trust in the police is especially weak.²⁶ From 2007 to 2012, Japan supported the democratic reform of the Indonesian police. This had powerful political significance, given that the Indonesian military was trying to maintain its grip on public safety issues, even after the separation of the police from the military. The fact that both the current Japanese and Indonesian ambassadors to Myanmar are former police officers opens up the possibility of triangular cooperation on similar police reform. Indeed, the Indonesian ambassador to Myanmar is eager to launch a joint cooperation project to support democratic reforms in the Burmese police.²⁷ Increasing public trust in law enforcement would contribute to greater stability in the country.

In sum, Japan has so far largely adopted a wait-and-see stance on democracy support, while offering significant support on the socioeconomic side. While Japan avoids using the phrase "democracy support" in its aid, it could and should expand judicial reform assistance and begin to help police reform.

LOOKING AHEAD

While Indonesia, India, and Japan share a positive outlook on Myanmar's democratic transition, they are all hesitant to proactively promote democracy. Most likely, they are still influenced by their traditional sovereignty and nonintervention norms and share a common Asian perception that democracy should be homegrown.

Of course, all three countries prefer having democratic to authoritarian regimes in their neighborhood because they are seen as more predictable, transparent, and stable. However, for the sake of regional security, these countries also prefer gradual changes in lieu of rapid and potentially destabilizing changes. Thus, Indonesia, India, and Japan have opted for strengthening infrastructure, providing technical and capacity-building assistance, engaging in dialogue, and improving service-delivery institutions rather than directly pushing for a faster and more far-reaching democratic transition.

Given the enormity of challenges and difficulties that Aung San Suu Kyi's government will face in steering Burmese democracy, Asia's democracies could do much more. With the current NLD government keen on receiving greater and more tangible support from its Asian peers to assist its democratization process, the time is ripe for Asian countries to shed their inhibitions and redouble their efforts to strengthen the foundations of Myanmar's democracy.

As Myanmar's own sensitivity to intervention subsides somewhat, the three Asian democracies studied here could collaborate to provide better and more targeted support. While Japan has deep pockets and gives substantial development assistance, India and Indonesia can share their rich experiences of democratization and their expertise on federalism, power-sharing, peacebuilding, and ethnic reconciliation. In interviews, diplomats and officials from the three countries demonstrated a willingness to explore such upgraded coordination. It is important that the three governments move forward with concrete triangular cooperation projects with far greater urgency and generosity—or run the risk that the currently benign political context in Myanmar will once again begin to deteriorate.

NOTES

- 1 Authors' interview with the director of the Sandhi Governance Institute, Yangon, Myanmar.
- 2 Richard C. Paddock, "Aung San Suu Kyi Asks U.S. Not to Refer to 'Rohingya,'" *New York Times*, May 6, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/07/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-aung-san-suu-kyi.html?_r=0.
- 3 "Suu Kyi 'Will Be Above President' if NLD Wins Myanmar Election," BBC News, November 5, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34729659>.
- 4 Catherine Shanahan Renshaw, "Democratic Transformation and Regional Institutions: The Case of Myanmar and ASEAN," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32, no. 1 (January 2013): 29–54.

- 5 “Indonesia Congratulates Myanmar for the Official Result of Myanmar Election,” press release, Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 24, 2015, <http://www.kemlu.go.id/en/berita/Pages/Indonesia-Congratulates-Myanmar-for-the-Official-Result-of-Myanmar-Election.aspx>.
- 6 “Editorial: RI’s Silence on Myanmar,” *Jakarta Post*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/11/12/editorial-ri-s-silence-myanmar.html>.
- 7 Authors’ interview with the deputy chairman of MISIS at the MISIS office in Yangon; authors’ interviews with professors and lecturers at Yangon University.
- 8 Authors’ interview with Ambassador Ito Sumardi, the Indonesian ambassador to Myanmar, at the Indonesian Embassy in Yangon.
- 9 For a detailed account of India’s engagements with the junta at very critical junctures, see Rajiv Bhatia, *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015).
- 10 Authors’ interview with B. Shyam, India’s chargé d’affaires at Yangon.
- 11 This view was shared by a number of stakeholders including retired diplomats, peace activists, academics, and serving officials in Myanmar.
- 12 “Indian Ambassador Talks Trade, Connectivity, and the ‘Dignity’ of the Myanmar Election,” *Mizzima*, January 26, 2016, <http://www.mizzima.com/news-opinion/indian-ambassador-talks-trade-connectivity-and-%E2%80%98dignity%E2%80%99-myanmar-election>.
- 13 Aung San Suu Kyi made her displeasure known during her visit to India in 2012. Commenting on India’s change of stance leading to close rapport with the military junta, Suu Kyi commented that “I was saddened that India had moved away from us [NLD].” See Tint Swe, “Aung San Suu Kyi’s Visit to India: Some Observations from a Burmese Exile,” *South Asia Analysis Group*, November 23, 2012, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1071>.
- 14 For a profile on Soe Myint, see “Mizzima Media Kit,” *Mizzima*, May 2015, <http://www.mizzima.com/sites/default/files/photo/2015/05/Mizzima-Media-Kit.pdf>.
- 15 For an excellent account of China’s influence in Myanmar, see Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).
- 16 Authors’ interview with Harn Yawnghe, executive director of the Euro-Burma Office (EBO), Yangon.
- 17 Authors’ interview with U Wynn Lwin, Myanmar ambassador to India in the 1990s.
- 18 Authors’ interaction with Ambassador Nyunt Maung Shein, chairman of MISIS, Yangon. For an excellent summary of India’s connectivity mission in Myanmar, see Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Pratinashree Basu, *India-Myanmar Connectivity: Possibilities and Challenges* (Kolkata, India: Observer Research Foundation, 2015), <http://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/IndiaMyanmar.pdf>.
- 19 Authors’ interview with B. Shyam, India’s chargé d’affaires at Yangon; authors’ interaction with Ambassador Nyunt Maung Shein, chairman of MISIS, Yangon. In contrast to Shyam’s skepticism, the chairman of MISIS was quite effusive about the idea of Asian democracies creating a democracy arc to support democratic transitions in Myanmar and other countries in the region. Yet he felt that since most countries in Asia shy away from taking a clear stance on projecting values, the idea would need a great amount of support.
- 20 Authors’ interview with the chief representative of the JICA Myanmar Office.
- 21 Maiko Ichihara, “Japan’s Faltering Support for Burmese Democracy,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 22, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/01/22/japan-s-faltering-support-for-burmese-democracy-pub-58801>; “Support by the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation With Ethnic Minorities in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar,” press release, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 6, 2014, http://www.mofa.go.jp/sa/sea1/mm/page4e_000055.html; and “Japan’s Assistance to Myanmar,” March 2015, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mm.emb-japan.go.jp/profile/english/oda.html>.
- 22 Authors’ interview with the chief representative of the JICA Myanmar Office.
- 23 Authors’ interaction with Ambassador Nyunt Maung Shein, chairman of MISIS, Yangon.
- 24 Authors’ interview with the chief representative of the JICA Myanmar Office.
- 25 Authors’ interview with U Kyaw Myint.
- 26 Bridget Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang, *Myanmar’s Political Aspirations & Perceptions 2015 Asian Barometer Survey Report* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Center, 2016), <http://www.asianbarometer.org/pdf/MyanmarReport2016.pdf>.
- 27 Interview with Ambassador Ito Sumardi by Maiko Ichihara and I Ketut Putra Erawan.

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