

Myanmar: Problems and new Vicissitudes in Politics

Md Farid Hossain^{*}

Abstract: In the twenty-first century military rule has become rare in world politics. Now, most of the military regimes have either been turned into some form of democracy or changed into another form of authoritarianism. Myanmar is not exceptional in this case. The present article discusses the structure and roles of major state institutions in the political process of Myanmar. This article also evaluates the terms and restrictions of participation of different political actors, regime ideology, legitimacy, and key facts of political contention and conflict. Based on these, the article explores how the military rulers are detaching from politics and which political vicissitudes are occurring in Myanmar. Finally, the paper proposes that the new situation can be attributed to changing internal and external factors such as ideological cohesion, organizational structure, personal interest, internal and external security impacts, military's moods and motives as well as its nature to interfere in Myanmar.

Keywords: Military, Vicissitude, Political System, Political actor, Conflict, Ideology, legitimacy, Myanmar.

Introduction

Southeast Asia is one of the significant regions in the world for its history, culture, politics, and economy. This multi-linguistic, ethnic, and multicultural region is well-recognized for its drastically economic growth. Southeast Asia has become a model for its economic development to developing countries. In this region, except Thailand, all other countries have colonial experience. Myanmar's political system was influenced by the colonial power both in positive and negative senses. Consequently, Myanmar is one of the unparallel and controversial countries in South Asia for its military politics and political system. The name of the country had controversy. Most of the European and other countries knew Myanmar was 'Burma' (Than, 2001: 203-247). A serious political struggle is in progress in Myanmar today which turns on the idea of freedom (Silverstein, 1996:211-228). Till the beginning of 1988 politics and opposition had been controlled unlawfully by the military ruler. Since then, Myanmar has been trying to obtain democratic values. In July 1997, Myanmar has been able to be recognized by the ASEAN and began a new journey for its economic development. Nonetheless, Myanmar has seen an unprecedented political opening in the recent years, which has clearly transformed the long term oppressive military administration. Since President U Thein Sein took power in 2011, he has started political liberalization that has reduced the repressive type of political practice and created opportunities for participation in institutions selected by the military (Macdonald, 2013:20-36). These reforms have opened the space for the opposition forces and civil society. As consequences, the international community has started to approve the political reforms of Myanmar. Particularly in 2013 government has taken numerous new political initiatives that positively marked Myanmar to the international community (Bunte & Dosch, 2015:3-19). In the present situation, Myanmar

^{*} Lecturer, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka-1342,

can no longer be classified as a case of direct military rule and this process shows a steady decline of military regimes worldwide in the last two decades. This phenomenon has been especially strong in Asia, where till 1987, half of the continent countries lived under military or military backed rule. Since then democracy has replaced many military or quasi-military regimes in South and Southeast Asia (Bunte, 2011). This article explores why did military leave the driver's seat, and what accounts for the transition from military rule to democracy in Myanmar?

By using secondary sources (e.g. related books, journals, research papers, newspapers) and expert comments, present article deals with the above-mentioned research question. As research methods, the study follows content analysis and exploratory method as approaches to the study.

Structure of the Political System of Myanmar

The political system is the set of formal legal institutions that constitute a “government” or a “state”. On the other hand, political structure refers to institutions or groups and their relations to each other, their patterns of relations within political systems and to political regulations, laws and the norms present in political systems in such a way that they constitute the political landscape of the political entity. In the social domain, its complement is social structure. The political structure also refers to the way in which a government is run (Avery, 1991:29-34). The basic political structure of modern nation-state has formed by three major organs that are executive, legislature, and judiciary. The additional institutional structure has been shaped by this basic structure. In democracy strong executive, representative legislature and independent judiciary with the balance of power are very important. Due to ensuring of democratic values check and balance among three organs are also significant. Checks and balances refer to the different mechanisms that prevent one branch of government from gaining too much power and dominating the other branches.

The Southeast Asian countries political institutions and political culture have been influenced by the colonial legacy. The nation-building process of Myanmar was in progressed began by the eleven century with the name of Burma. In 1885 Myanmar captured by the British colonial power. But at that time, Myanmar was not directly governed by the British government; they ruled through the local elites like ethnic chiefs with under the British control. Colonial Burma never had a governor-general. It was the British Government of Burma Act of 1935 which separated Burma from India in 1937. Thus, nation-building process of Myanmar had been influenced by the indigenous nationality. In indigenous nationality everyone was loyal to their ethnic chief, nonetheless, this spirit of nationality was demolished when the modern nation-state building in Myanmar was started (Win, 2013:9).

After the independence, Myanmar has introduced west minister type of government with a bicameral legislature and it's divided into central and state government. The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) established the first government in Myanmar. In 1958 intended for civil war, the political conflict began and the AFPFL was divided into two factions. That was the most significant event for the Myanmar because military

derived to its own power. In 1962 General Ne Win founded a Revolutionary Council (RC). The RC also formed the corps known as Burma Socialist Program Party (BSP). Consequently, Burma started a new political order with a new political philosophy. Finally in 1974 Myanmar constitutionally became a socialist country.

Myanmar is administratively divided into fourteen regions, seven states with seven divisions. Excluding national capital, each state and division have a regional capital. The other administrative structures have designed with 64 Districts, 324 townships, 2471 wards, and 13747 villages. In September 1993, Myanmar has fixed 104 basic state principles by the National Convention Convening Commission (NCCC). The basic point has recognized secular republic with seven regions and seven states having equal status (Than, 2001:203-247). Myanmar has also fixed hierarchy under the direct presidential administration, designed self-administrative areas with the national races as a basic state structure.

Both central and provincial legislatures have reserved seats for the military person. As a chief executive, President of Myanmar is elected by the Electoral College. Cabinet and other higher administrative posts were controlled by the president. As a result, military chief in commander and the president became the most powerful persons in Myanmar politics.

After independence, during first fourteen years, Myanmar continued with parliamentary democracy. Judiciary is composed of Supreme Court and High Court. Nevertheless, under the military rule, the judiciary is controlled by the junta government.

Roles of Major State Institutions in the Political Process

Since first coming to direct political power in 1958, Myanmar military (tatmadaw) has dominated the country's politics and controlled the state machinery. The major political institutions of Myanmar like parliament and judiciary had no democratic role in its political process. The executive had personalized by the army; the legislature of Myanmar contained feeble, non-representative, and rubber stamp characteristics. It is a well-known fact that the independence of the judiciary is the basic requisite for ensuring a free and fair society under the rule of law. Rule of law, responsible for the good governance of the country, can be secured through the unbiased judiciary. But the Judiciary of Myanmar was controlled by the military and not able to protect the public interest. On the other hand, Judiciary stayed inferior to the military ruler and always was undermined by the Parliament.

In Myanmar, political opposition is depressed and until 2011 mass media was controlled by the military ruler. Bureaucracy and civil society were unlawfully controlled by the army. In this process, military and police force always played an obedient role to the military ruler. The military junta has increased its force to the counter of communist insurgency and control ethnic minority rebels. Consequently, since the Ne Win regime, the military became an important force and support base of the authoritarian regime in Myanmar that still remained as well. The total military force with navy and air reached about 400,000 (Yoshihiro, 2013:291-316).

From 1988, little changes were visible in politics, society, and economy of Myanmar. Military junta of Myanmar has started some restoration of democratic liberalism due to the public protest movement. In November 1988, Myanmar government has started its market for a foreign investor. Change in the military leadership is another notable thing in Myanmar politics (Bunte, 2014:3-19). From 1996 to 2000, because of the student movement, the junta government closed universities and relocated the University of Yangon and Mandalay which was the main centers of the student movement. That time Aung San Suu Kyi became a popular leader due to her link in the movement. On the other hand, the military government continued with stop fire negotiation by proposing a political deal with the Burma communist party and ethnic rebels. Junta government reached conciliation with 17 insurgents groups; by the time in 2009 border guard force (BGF) has started functioning Myanmar.

In recent times, Myanmar government has declined its military and another nonproductive budget. It is also a positive change to politics of Myanmar. In the 1990s the military budget of Myanmar was 30 percent of total budget, that was declined 20 percent in 2000 (Yoshihiro, 2013:291-316).

Terms and Restrictions of Participation of Different Political Actors

Elections have been the common mechanism by which modern representative democracy has operated since the 17th century. But in Myanmar electoral process has been destroyed by the military ruler. Political parties who participated in the elections they must follow the laws fixed by the military. Intended for the election campaign, political parties were given a fixed time to speak in the national media. Voters and candidates were also selected by the military junta. In 1990 election, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election but junta government did not transfer power.

During the last 20 years, political parties had no right in doing politics and getting an executive position in Myanmar. As the chief executive of Myanmar, the president controlled national and central level administrative power. In national or regional elections, winning political party faced an undemocratic decision by the military government. If the majority party's leader took the executive position then he or she must have to sacrifice his or her party affiliation.

On the other hand, in 1991, the military government had prohibited politics for the public servant. Conversely, in the Parliament, people's representation was not reflected, in the bicameral Parliament since both chambers were occupied by the military officers. That time about one-quarter of the total seats in both chambers of parliament was entitled to the military officers who were nominated by the Chief in Commander of the defense of Myanmar (Than, 2001:203-247).

Nonetheless, 2011 was a year of change in Myanmar. Much of this change was symbolic, impressive, but enough of it was real to suggest that reform in a number of areas was at last happening. The new government that had emerged from the faulty election of the previous year engaged in discussion with the country's opposition movement. Officials lifted certain restrictions on press freedom and parliamentary debates, initiated limited economic reforms and released some political prisoners (Turnell, 2011:148-154).

Sources of Regime Ideology and Legitimacy in Myanmar

During the British colonial period, few British people, soldiers, and businessmen were staying in the peak of the society of Myanmar. The bulk of the people of Myanmar were not satisfied with the British rule. Nevertheless, the elites were contained the western political system until the 20 century when the anti-colonial movement had increased by the socialists. In 1942, during the Japanese attack, the British Indian army became weaken and Japan occupied Myanmar. After the capture of Myanmar, Japan established an indigenous administration. In 1943, Japan government gave the nominal independence to Myanmar. During Japanese era, Myanmar was influenced by the Japanese military ideology and fascist practice (Owen, 2005:322-334). The nationalist elite influenced by such fascist ideology is still remaining in Myanmar.

In the period of parliamentary government, Myanmar adopted democratic socialism ideology with an economic nationalism against foreign economic interests. In the period of 1980s, the junta government failed to introduce a state ideology. However, they were trying to establish non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of the national solidarity, and consolidation of sovereignty as the state ideology. The politics of Myanmar was guided and served for the military junta. Southeast Asian countries mostly Thailand and Indonesia have experienced military rule nonetheless Myanmar is an unrivaled for its intense and long term military control.

State legitimacy depends on its economic consideration, development, and mass people economic condition. Nevertheless, from 1988 to 2010, the government of Myanmar had failed to accelerate its economic growth like other Southeast Asian countries. Similarly, legitimacy also depends on governmental performance to upholding of human rights. But Myanmar had also failed to maintain human rights. Consequently, since then, Myanmar was known as an authoritarian state to the international community (Martin, 2012:351).

Key Facts of Political Contention and Conflict in Myanmar

The concentration of wealth and power by the military is one of the major causes of conflict in Myanmar. Myanmar is one of the multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural society, another root cause of the conflict. On January 4, 1948, Myanmar achieved its independence. In 1948, Myanmar introduced its first constitution under the British control. In the first constitution, the leaders of small ethnic-linguistic minority lost their power and were excluded from governing position. After independence, indigenous ruler and its one-time communist allies became locked in a civil war. The communists began an armed insurgency against the government. Similarly, Karen insurgent groups began to fight for independence. Thus, the government was trying to build up a strong military force to control this instability. At that time India, United Kingdom, and some other countries supported Myanmar for its anti-communist action. In the early 1960s, the government refused to adopt a federal system, to the shock of the insurgent groups such as the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), who proposed adopting the system during peace talks. By the early 1980s, politically motivated armed insurgencies largely disappeared, while ethnic-based insurgencies continued (Licklider, 1995:681). During

political reforms, 1911-1915 periods, several rebellious groups have negotiated ceasefire and peace agreements with consecutive governments; but also mostly failed.

On March 2, 1962, the army of Myanmar captured the state power and imprisoned many politicians, suspended the constitution and started a new movement for building a new type of society and state structure led by the Revolutionary Council. It saw the end of Burma's multi-party democracy that started in the year of 1921 (Owen, 2005:322-334).

The ethnic policy of Myanmar is a relic of the colonial era. However, Myanmar officially declared 135 national racial groups constituting eight broad ethnic categories. They accord each of eight major national ethnic races a designated statelet. The rest of the 135 officially recognized groups are classified as sub categories of these (Than, 2001:203-247). Among the total population of Myanmar, only 3.9 percent is Muslim and among this Muslim, only 1.3 million are Rohingya Muslims. Rohingya Muslims are denied citizenship in Myanmar, which considers them illegal migrants from Bangladesh, and most live in poverty under a form of state-sanctioned apartheid. Many ethnic Rakhines worry that if Rohingyas are recognized as a group and granted citizenship, they will start agitating for their own state. As U Thein Maung, an NLD member of Rakhine's parliament puts it: "I have nothing against any religion or any kind of people. But I will not accept a single inch of my fatherland becoming Rohingya land." Thus, Myanmar government has emphasized for discussion about the rights of ethnic groups and conflict (Namtú & Sittwe, 2016). The Rohingya insurgency in Western Myanmar is continuing. The conflict between the government of Myanmar and insurgent of the Rohingya ethnic minority in Rakhine State (Arakan) still remain a big challenge for Myanmar politics. According to BBC News in 2012 about 200 and in 2014, 40 Rohingya men, women, and children were killed in Rakhine state in a communal riot.

On October 9, 2016, Rohingya militants attacked border posts near Maungdaw, a town in the north of Rakhine state in western Myanmar, killing nine Burmese border guards. For these consequences, emerged mass arrests, torture, the burning of villages, killings of civilians and the systematic rape of Rohingya women by Burmese soldiers. At least 86 people have been killed. Human Rights Watch said that soldiers have burned at least 1,500 buildings including homes, food shops, markets, and mosques. Amnesty International said the army's "callous and systematic campaign of violence" may be a crime against humanity. However, Myanmar's government denies all such claims, dismissing many of them as falsehood (Namtú & Sittwe, 2016).

The ethnic crisis is creating huge problems for the Myanmar. One is the possible growth of jihadism. Until now the Rohingyas have exposed little interest in Islamist extremism. But many of them see a miserable, hopeless future in Myanmar. The International Crisis Group thinks the attacks in October 2016 by Rohingya militants were planned by a well-funded insurgent group whose leaders had been trained in guerrilla-war strategy. This affected Rohingyas attract sympathy the world Muslim community.

On the other hand, the rise of fighting will obstruct Myanmar's economic development. Furthermore, due to communal riot, many Rohingyas have illegally migrated to Bangladesh and they are living in refugee camps in inhuman condition. Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral relation is warning because of Rohingya matter.

Concluding Remarks

The new constitution of Myanmar took effect in May 2008 following endorsement in a referendum by the 92.45 percent of voters. Under extremely controlled election in 2010, the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) formed the government and the both chamber of the parliament again blocked by the army officers. The government was formed by President Thein Sein in 2011 and cabinet formed by the ex-military officers. This government provides some civil liberty, but the most important issue is government compromised with Aung San Suu Kyi to build a new capital city in Nay Pyi Daw in August 2011. About 500 political prisoners were released in Myanmar by January 2012. In this state of affairs, National League for Democracy (LDP) registered and participated the 2012 by-election and win 43 of 45 parliamentary seats. By this series of initiatives, the relation of the military backed government with the United States and European countries is improving. The reason for the military withdrawal from the politics of Myanmar is internal. The main motive was the succession of the leadership of the armed forces. Once power was transferred, external factors also came into play. This shows that external and internal developments are strongly interrelated and the outcome can be explained only by taking both factors into account.

Nonetheless, in Parliament, the opposition was not strong enough for ensuring government responsibility to apply parliamentary tools. Thein Sein's power was very secure until 2015 election because he holds the 80 percent seats in the Parliament. The regime is well- functioning because of the charismatic presence of Aung San Suu Kyi. The Recent political transformation may be defined as a strategic game between the soft liner reformers versus hardliners with a particular focus on the elite actors.

Currently, various positive changes softness of military rulers and some democratic practices make a positive aspiration. An author observes, "The heritages of military rule and the continued dominance of the military in the affairs of the state combined with a remobilized society suggest that Myanmar will likely transform as a diminished authoritarian regime in the coming years, perhaps in a similar fashion to that of contemporary 'democratic' Thailand" (Huang, 2013: 258). In this situation, Myanmar government should take quick initiatives to establish a democratic government and restructure its constitution with the flavor of democracy. Intended for democratic consolidation of Myanmar, I would suggest that consociational democracy is suitable because Myanmar has faced ethnic conflict and civil war. Consociational democracy can decrease religious and ethnic polarization that one of the major elements of ethnic conflict and civil war. Nevertheless, in 2015, the last national parliamentary election, NLD got a majority and 15 March 2016, Myanmar's parliament elected a close friend and confidant of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi making Htin Kyaw the first head of the state who does not come from a military background since the 1960s. Thus it can be said that it is a good start for Myanmar toward the democratic process.

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