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Myanmar: Learning from the Philippines' democratic transition

By Julius Cesar I. Trajano

Synopsis

In pursuing democratic reforms, Myanmar may take a leaf from the experience of the Philippines' difficult transition from authoritarianism to democracy. But as demonstrated by the Philippine case, democracy alone cannot address all the challenges besetting Myanmar.

Commentary

Philippine President Benigno Aquino III offered his government's assistance in Myanmar's democratisation during the visit of Myanmar's Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin on 14-15 June 2012. Aquino related to him the Philippines' democratic transition and pledged Filipinos' readiness to share their experience.

The Philippines was once one of the harshest critics of Myanmar's human rights record. Filipino human rights officials plan to visit Napyidaw to train their counterparts in the recently-established Myanmar human rights commission. Indeed, Myanmar can draw some valuable lessons from the strengths and shortcomings of the Philippines' democratisation.

Military's involvement in politics

During the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos (1972-86), military officers were deeply embedded in politics; they were appointed to many civilian posts in government agencies; and were involved in rigged elections and suppressing anti-dictatorship movements.

The restoration of democracy after the 1986 People Power Revolution did not stop some factions in the military from conspiring to seize political power and/or influence political decisions from outside the democratic institutions. Rebel soldiers launched seven coup attempts during the term of President Corazon Aquino (1986-92). During the presidency of Gloria Arroyo (2001-10), two instances of military mutiny were staged against her by a faction of junior officers denouncing corruption in the military and demanding reforms.

The Philippines' democratisation process had a hard task putting the military under effective civilian control. Moreover, many self-serving politicians used some factions in the military to cause political destabilisation in democratically-elected presidencies, highlighting the failure to bring political nonpartisanship to the military.

In Myanmar President Thein Sein's political reforms could still be undermined given the wide political power that the military still has. Immediately before Aung San Suu Kyi and her partymates took their parliamentary oath in May, the military filled its 25% membership quota in the parliament with high-ranking officers in order to bolster its influence in legislation. In order to prevent any military coup like what happened in post-1986 Philippines, Myanmar needs to steadily establish civilian control over the military, take over its businesses and begin professionalising its ranks.

Despite pronouncements about political and economic reforms, President Thein Sein has never talked about military self-financing. Aside from its bloated budget, the military also sources its funds from the revenues of its conglomerates: the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and the Myanmar Economic Corp. Myanmar's oil export revenues reached US\$2.9 billion last year which were deposited to off-shore bank accounts owned by the military. It will be hard for the civilian government to control the military if the latter has its own sources of funds.

Upholding human rights

Upholding the rights of all ethnic groups is crucial for national reconciliation and political stability. However, there is no guarantee that human rights are protected until an independent and effective judiciary is in place in the country. Myanmar needs to look at the not-so-good human rights record of the Philippines in order to realise the importance of strengthening an impartial judiciary and prosecuting violators.

Despite the introduction of democratic reforms human rights violations continue to be reported in Myanmar. In the first 14 months of the Thein Sein presidency NGOs recorded 85 cases of torture, 59 cases of forced labour and 114 cases of confiscation or destruction of property. Most of the abuses are related to the continuing armed conflicts in some parts of the country, the most recent ones in Kachin and Rakhine states.

In the Philippines, despite President Aquino's promise of reforms, extrajudicial killings of journalists and political activists, allegedly committed by state security forces, continue to threaten human rights. Upon his assumption of office in 2010, he inherited 150 unresolved cases of politically-motivated killings, while more than 10 cases occurred under his watch. Among the challenges in the prosecution of human rights cases are the reluctance of the Philippine military to cooperate in investigations and weak judiciary and law enforcement agencies.

Expanding the role of civil society

While the Philippines' democratisation suffered shortcomings in important reform areas, a thriving civil society has been regarded as the country's biggest democratic achievement which can be emulated by Myanmar. NGOs have been deeply involved in providing public goods such as housing, education, health care, environment protection, and combating corruption, among others. In developing countries like the Philippines, civil society assumes the role of helping the state in providing basic and social services. This can be adopted in Myanmar, given the bureaucratic and financial limitations faced by its government in improving the country's economic and human development.

Under the Thein Sein administration, Myanmar's civil society remains vulnerable to government control. Bound by the Law of Founding an Organisation, NGOs face restrictions in the registration process such as the prohibition on them to be involved in politics and advocate for good governance; the steep registration fee of US\$600, and regular submissions to the government on their activities and finances. Hence, many local NGOs are not registered with the government. By the end of 2011, around 280 NGOs had registered, out of the estimated total of 20,000 NGOs in the country. The challenge now for the Thein Sein administration is to allow local NGOs to operate independently from the government and constructively participate in political affairs by easing the stringent requirements for NGO registration.

While Myanmar may take a completely different path in pursuing democratisation, there are still ample opportunities for the Burmese people to learn from the shortcomings and potentials of Philippine democracy. As seen in the case of the Philippines, democracy alone is not a silver bullet that will solve all political, economic and social ills. Democratic reforms must be complemented with transparency, accountability and good governance.

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