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Between Two Elections: Whither US-Myanmar Relations?

By Kyaw San Wai and Christabelle He Shimin

Synopsis

US-Myanmar bilateral relations are being influenced by upcoming major elections in the two countries. Short-term gains by either side risk undermining rapprochement and the US' role in Myanmar.

Commentary

AFTER BEING frosty for two decades, United States-Myanmar bilateral relations have warmed significantly since 2011. President Obama has been instrumental in modifying US policy on Myanmar, balancing sanctions with engagement. He recognised the need for the US to work with the military, shifting American focus from the long-held goal of regime change to the more pragmatic approach of regime modification. The new approach has positioned the US to work more productively with regional organisations in encouraging reforms in Myanmar.

Obama would not have succeeded in mending bilateral ties without parallel moves by Myanmar's President Thein Sein. Alongside pushing a reform agenda, the nominally civilian government also worked to restore Myanmar's place on the international stage and revitalise ties with the West. The rapprochement had numerous breakthroughs since 2011: Hillary Clinton became the first Secretary of State to visit Myanmar since 1955; an American ambassador was posted after a 22-year absence; and Obama's 2012 visit was the first by a serving American president.

Between two elections

Although the US' role in Myanmar has expanded in recent years, it is now increasingly questioned by lawmakers and activists due to claims of stalled reforms, rights violations and regression of freedoms. This is more so in the run-up to major elections in the two countries.

In Myanmar, Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi remarked in early November that reforms have stalled. She was *de facto* gatekeeper of Myanmar's relations with the West in the past and her comments still carry weight. Constitutional changes - on whether Suu Kyi can run for president and on constitutional amendments - and an ever-elusive nation-wide ceasefire agreement - are seen as key

reform milestones. Any of these appear increasingly unlikely to occur in time for general elections slated for late October or early November 2015.

On 18 November, Parliamentary speaker Shwe Mann told a press conference that a referendum will be held in May 2015 to canvass public opinion but any constitutional amendment will be enacted only after the elections. Given how things panned out since 2011, it is difficult to predict what is in store for Myanmar in 2015. Some observers have even cast doubt on the likelihood of elections taking place. Sectarian violence, increasingly seen as instigated by forces linked to high places, risks flaring up as a deadly distraction before elections.

In the US, lawmakers have increasingly questioned bilateral relations with arguments that the US lost its leverage by rolling back sanctions. Human rights activists have also called for the US to pressure Myanmar over the plight of Muslim communities and uncertain media freedoms. The continued dominance of the military, the *Tatmadaw*, has been a perpetual thorn. 72 bipartisan members of Congress wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry in August 2014, warning that Myanmar had “taken a sharp turn for the worse”.

Furthermore, efforts to undermine President Obama, who portrays Myanmar as a foreign policy victory, and Hilary Clinton who oversaw the rapprochement as Secretary of State and is the most likely Democratic presidential candidate in 2016, have made Republican lawmakers more critical of developments in Myanmar. These lawmakers risk sacrificing the bilateral relations of long-term importance for short term gains at the next presidential election.

And as the planned 2015 Myanmar election draws closer, there is increasing pressure to allow Suu Kyi to run for president. With the Senate in Republican hands led by long-time Suu Kyi supporter Mitch McConnell, the combination of hyper-partisanship and genuine concern in Washington along with deadlock and uncertainty in Naypyidaw might lead to a souring of bilateral relations.

Long-term view needed

The reform process will be a long-term enterprise as Myanmar tries to move on from 50 years of military rule. However, there is an increasingly vociferous chorus casting doubt on the reforms’ prospects. Even among the low hanging fruits of political prisoners and media freedoms, the government’s track record is increasingly seen as patchy. Furthermore, various issues such as constitutional reform and sectarian strife are not simple two-sided tug-of-wars but rather multi-sided contestations involving an unholy mix of entrenched interests, political ambitions, shifting battle lines and grassroots factors.

It is amidst this tangled web of interests and high-stakes poker in both nations’ capitals that the US has to calibrate its presence in Myanmar. The opprobrium and regime-change approach of the 1990s and 2000s failed to bring about change whereas the current approach of engagement with both carrot and stick offers a better chance for the US to help foster change in the country. As echoed by a number of veteran Myanmar watchers, the US needs to envision outcomes in the long run in order to remain relevant and exercise influence.

Naypyidaw should also not squander international goodwill. Myanmar now has the best chance to develop and address the needs of its inhabitants. Foot dragging, personal interests and out-dated notions of identity could reverse these gains. Although the *Tatmadaw* continues to be the gorilla in the room, the political landscape has evolved since 2011 with a redrawing of interests and differences. President Thein Sein, besieged by an assertive parliament, ambitious politicians, unconvinced critics and the *Tatmadaw* recalibrating its loyalties and interests, needs to demonstrate stronger political will and leadership to ensure that his reforms survive beyond his tenure. The Myanmar political movers also need to think long term or risk condemning their country to another round of isolation and misery.

2015 outlook

The coming year will be important for both Myanmar and US-Myanmar relations. The 1990 election and recent events in neighbouring Thailand cast long shadows on what 2015 holds for Myanmar. Bearing in the mind the decades of isolation, Myanmar’s progress and recent role in hosting the 27th Southeast Asian Games and 2014 ASEAN Summit demonstrated its capabilities for change. The US

is a crucial partner in Myanmar's reform attempt, and needs to continue being a constructive partner with the long-term view in mind. The future awaits as Myanmar turns the page.

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