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Burma

What new wind is blowing in Burma?

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What is happening in Burma? On January 12 a presidential amnesty led to the release of approximately 300 political prisoners. A strong gesture which seems to want to send a message to the country and to the international community that Burma is taking the road of democracy. This announcement comes in a political context of significant change on at least three levels: the political scene and relations with the opposition; the question of the armed ethnic groups who are at war with the Burmese state; and international relations.

These changes illustrate a turn in the situation of the country, which between 1962 and March 2011 knew only military dictatorships. But considering that only a year ago Burma was governed by a predatory military junta and was one of the most closed countries in the world, it is difficult to imagine that the Burmese military has been converted to democracy. So what are the motives that are pushing them to begin reforms that they refused for decades? What are the real prospects for democratization and an improvement in the living conditions of the Burmese people?

Political change and relations with the opposition

The first significant political change took place with the elections on November 7, 2010, presented as the outcome of a "road map towards democracy" initiated by the military junta in 1993 and re-launched in 2003. Far from being a democratic process, the elections were closely controlled. The principal opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and several parties representing ethnic groups had been dissolved or prevented from standing candidates.

Following the elections, a semi-civilian government was formed in March 2011. It is composed of a large number of former soldiers. The new President, Thein Sein, was himself a general and the last Prime Minister of the junta before occupying his new functions.

Breaking with the methods employed by the military junta when it was directly in power, the new government has sought to establish relations with the opposition and in particular with Aung San Suu Kyi. Official meetings have taken place at the highest level of the state. The first two meetings took place last summer between Aung San Suu Kyi and the minister Aung Myi Thaz. The discussions between the two parties have not been revealed in detail, but it seems that Aung San Suu Kyi and Aung Myi Thaz discussed the need to obtain additional humanitarian aid to improve the situation of this very impoverished nation. More conflictual questions, such as the situation of political prisoners or the constitution of 2008 would also have been discussed [1]. The second meeting was followed by a Joint Declaration stating the willingness of the two parties "to cooperate in seeking stability and national development", "to avoid conflictual points of view and to cooperate on a reciprocal basis" [2]. A new threshold was crossed on August 19, 2011, when Aung San Suu Kyi was invited by President Thein Sein himself. The meeting had a highly symbolic character and the two participants were photographed under a portrait of Aung San, father of Suu Kyi and national hero of Burmese independence.

Following this meeting Suu Kyi declared that she believed that President Thein Sein sincerely wanted to democratize the country and that she was ready to take on a role in government after the by-election which will take place on April 1, 2012. Recently, the NLD was officially re-registered, after having been dissolved in 2010, and Aung San Suu Kyi announced that she would be a candidate in the next elections.

What new wind is blowing in Burma?

The revolts of 1988 and 2007 led to bloodbaths and very harsh repression. In a context where the Burmese opposition is much weakened, Suu Kyi seems to be taking a chance that real evolutions are possible by supporting the current changes, even though they still are very limited.

Parallel to the detente with the opposition, the government has evolved on the question of human rights and democratic liberties. Political parties and trade unions are now authorized, as is the right to strike, even though it does not really materialize in practice. The government has also set up a commission on human rights, thus recognizing that there are problems of this kind in Burma. This is a first.

The government has also lifted the ban on some Internet sites and opposition radios, such as *The Irrawaddy*, the BBC, Democratic Voice of Burma and Radio Free Asia. They are now accessible in Burma, even though that remains episodic. After 23 years of censure, Suu Kyi was authorized to publish an article in the newspaper *Pyithu Khit News* and the newspaper *The Messenger* carried a front page interview with the Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Lastly, the release of 651 prisoners attracted attention on the international level. It is one of the conditions imposed by the Western powers for the lifting of economic sanctions. Important figures of the opposition, such as the leader of Generation 88, Min Ko Naing, the ethnic leader Shan U Khun Tun Oo and the leader of the monks, U Gambira, benefited from it.

But according to the Association for Assistance to Burmese Political Prisoners (AAPPB), only 272 of the 651 released prisoners are prisoners of conscience. Their release was effected "under the terms of article 401 of the criminal procedure code, which implies that these releases are conditional. According to this article, the sentences of the prisoners are suspended but are not cancelled. So they can be rearrested at any time and forced to serve the remainder of their initial sentence" [3]. The political prisoners have not received any excuses from the new government for the injustices of which they were victims, some of them having been imprisoned for more than 20 years. Apparently there are still about 1,000 political prisoners in Burma, not recognized as such by the Burmese authorities.

Towards a settlement of the ethnic conflicts?

The Burmese political situation is, however, much more complex than a confrontation between the government and the army on one side and the Burmese democratic opposition on the other. Practically since independence in 1948, Burma has been afflicted by armed conflicts between ethnic minorities and the state, governed by Burmese. The ethnic groups demanded the right to autonomy and were opposed to the Burmese nationalists, whose goal was the establishment of a centralized unitary state. Some conflicts between ethnic groups and the Tatmadaw (Burmese army) have gone on continuously for more than 60 years, causing immense losses in human lives and preventing the economic development of entire regions.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the military junta signed a series of ceasefires with 17 of the most important ethnic groups and with many factions. The situation improved in certain zones but the ceasefires were never followed by talks which would have led to a lasting peace. The demands of the ethnic minorities which were behind the conflicts were never discussed.

The situation with the armed ethnic groups again worsened considerably in 2009. As the junta prepared to transform itself into a civilian government, the army wanted to force the armed groups to become part of a new force of frontier guards, which would have placed them under the command of the regular army. The majority of the armed groups refused, and in reprisal the junta declared all previous ceasefires null and void.

In the following months, fighting broke out again, including in zones where a ceasefire had been respected for very many years. Since the installation of a civil government, the situation on the ground has not at all improved; the number of people displaced because of attacks or abuse in the zones of conflict has doubled, going from an annual average of 70,000 to almost 150,000.

In September 2011, the situation took a new turn. The President recognized the importance of the ethnic question and offered to open a dialogue with all of the armed groups. In particular, he abandoned absorption of the groups into the frontier forces as a prerequisite for any agreement [4]. Three of the main ethnic groups have since signed a ceasefire agreement and contacts have been established with the majority of the armed ethnic groups. On the ground, however, the situation remains conflictual. The armed groups remain very being wary and sceptical as to the real intentions of the government. It is not the first time that there have been ceasefire agreements and none of them has ever led to a lasting peace.

No democratic state will come into being in Burma without taking into account the specific demands of the ethnic groups, which represent approximately a third of the population of the country. The minorities, ethnic or religious, but also populations of Indian or Chinese origin, suffer discriminations and are not treated as equal by the Burmese majority. A lasting peace cannot be established without taking into account their demands, which relate to equal rights, autonomy and economic development, and the question of a federal Burmese state.

Evolution of international relations

The reforms also had consequences on the relations of Burma with its neighbours and in the first place with China. The military junta always maintained very strong links with Beijing. China invested billions of dollars in the country, in infrastructures and in contracts for the purchase of raw materials, without the Burmese population benefiting from it. Among the big projects, Beijing had undertaken in 2009 was the construction of the gigantic Myitsone dam on the Irrawaddy river, in the Kachin state. Ninety per cent of the output of the dam was to be conveyed to Yunnan in the South of China. As of the signature of the contract in 2006, the project met with very strong opposition, in particular among the Kachin people. But with liberalization in progress, the criticisms found an echo at the national level. Faced with the strength of the opposition, the President preferred to suspend *sine die* the construction of the dam, without even giving Beijing advance notice. This decision also seems to indicate a willingness of the government to broaden its support on the international level and not to remain too dependent on Beijing.

The relations of Burma within the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are also evolving considerably. The government obtained the rotating presidency of ASEAN in 2014, two years before its turn. This international position should enable it to establish its legitimacy in Burma in advance of general elections, which must be held in 2015.

A coveted economic market

The amnesty of prisoners of conscience, the thaw in relations with political opponents and the evolution on the ground of democratic liberties have been greeted as "major advances" both by opponents in the country and by the international community. The reforms of the government, still unthinkable a year ago, are not however the result of a conversion to democracy. President Thein Sein is seeking as a priority the lifting of the economic sanctions which would allow the return of Western investment in the country. The changes undertaken by the new government are taking place in a very backward economic context. The junta in power had no other vision for the country than the personal enrichment of its members, plundering and diverting the wealth of this rich country, with its abundant natural

What new wind is blowing in Burma?

resources. After 60 years of military dictatorships, the country has been bled dry and is among “the least developed in the world” (United Nations source). Economic backwardness is such that it is doubtless now impossible to continue to grow rich without starting real economic reforms.

On their side, the big Western powers consider each new measure, however limited it is, as a step forward towards democracy, in order to justify their return to the country. The development of Burma is an immense potential market, which is sharpening the appetites of the multinationals. Burma is rich in natural resources (timber for construction, ores, precious stones, gas and oil, among others). It is located at a strategic crossroads between India and China, with access to the Indian Ocean. It is not difficult to understand why we are seeing a procession of representatives of the Western powers (the United States, Australia, the European Union, the United Kingdom, France, Norway...) who are acting as sales representatives for the big national and multinational companies.

The army seems to want to ensure a political transition that would keep them in charge of the economy and business, while presenting a face that is at least acceptable to the Western powers which are likely to invest in the country. But the passage from a military dictatorship to a democracy (a democratic facade) is not an easy matter. President Thein Sein has made an agreement with Suu Kyi in order to be able to carry out reforms without upheavals in the street. He is giving pledges to the Western powers, which are only waiting for the lifting of sanctions to invest in the country. But the social movement which developed around the Myitsone dam seem to indicate that things might not be so easy.

See also Danielle Sabai's blog [Asia Left Observer](#).

[1] Aung Zaw. “The eye of the storm”. [The Irrawaddy Magazine. Vol. 3, September, 2011](#).

[2] International Crisis Group. Briefing n°127 – “Major reform underway”. p.3

[3] “Update: Amnesties of January 12, 2012.” [Info Birmanie](#).

[4] 4 – [International Crisis Group. Report 214 “Myanmar- a New Peace Initiative”](#).