Breaking Out of Burma's Time Warp

by Ian Holliday

FOLLOWING ON FROM its crushing defeat of monk-led popular protests last September, Burma's entrenched military junta in early February sprang one of its periodic political surprises by announcing forward movement in its tortuously slow democratization process. In May, the country's hitherto disenfranchised citizens will participate in a referendum on a draft constitution. In 2010, they will vote in multiparty elections and usher into being the peaceful, modern, developed and discipline-flourishing democratic nation to which the generals have long pointed.

Coming from a regime prone to making unexplained policy shifts—notably the abrupt relocation of government functions to a partially built new capital, now named Naypyidaw, in November 2005—it was only to be expected that few details would accompany the announcement. No consolidated constitutional document was presented to the people and, remarkably, none seems likely to be made available for public inspection ahead of the referendum. No information about voting arrangements for the plebiscite was released, and even when some rules were laid down later, key details such as the polling date remained shrouded in mystery. Nor were any fresh insights into future governance arrangements given.

Nevertheless, it seems certain that in its draft constitution the ruling State Peace and Development Council will hold firm to the 104 basic principles devised near the start of a reform process launched in 1993, and characterized since 2003 as a seven-stage roadmap to democracy. These mandate that the state presidency and 25% of parliamentary seats be reserved for the military, that key ministerial positions be placed under army control, that military leaders be given broad emergency powers, and that human rights be only weakly protected. It is abundantly clear that the polity envisaged by Burma's generals will be long on centrally imposed discipline, and short on popularly inspired democracy.

Many early reactions to this turn of events focused on the scheduling of the

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junta's announcement, and on the possible role of neighboring China in prompting it. For a country with so much at stake in Burma, it is unfortunate, or perhaps strikingly apt, that the Beijing Olympics will open precisely 20 years after Burma's great democracy uprising—08-08-08 as a somewhat grim reflection of 8-8-88. Indeed, without this exact anniversary, Burma's constitution makers could still be toiling over their draft.

More important than speculation about what prompted the SPDC to gamble on pseudo-democracy was, however, the array of positions taken by its leading opponents. Divergent reactions from the democratic camp, ethnic minority groups and stakeholders in the wider world quickly revealed that dealing with Burma's democratizing dictatorship may be no easy matter.

Inside the country, some of the democracy activists who evaded the SPDC's dragnet in 2007, and thereby avoided lengthy jail terms, issued instant denunciations of its plans. Most radical were the 88 Generation Students, who held the junta's roadmap to be a declaration of war on the nation, and cast the referendum as a major battlefield. Closely aligned with this position were the Alliance of All Burmese Buddhist Groups, formed during the 2007 "saffron uprising," and a number of ethnic minority groups. "Vote No" quickly became an insistent referendum refrain.

More ambiguous was the stance of the National League for Democracy, led under house arrest by Aung San Suu Kyi. Determined always to remain within the sphere of legality, the NLD identified fundamental flaws in a constitution drafted by 54 junta loyalists, cast by the regime as very nearly a state secret, and shielded from open debate by a panoply of prohibitions and penalties. It demanded full public participation in the reform process. At the same time, however, it acknowledged that any constitution supported by the people in a referendum conforming to basic standards of fairness would be legitimate. In this way, it sought both to hold the junta to procedural norms found in other parts of the world, and to stay in the political game even if the generals were to secure a victory on their terms in May.

Outside Burma, while many reactions to the generals' unfolding roadmap merely rehashed existing positions, opinion likewise divided not only across major groups, but also within them. Among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, though many argued that the junta's democratization gambit should be given the benefit of the doubt, both Indonesia and Singapore came out in favor of a more open reform process. In the West, though leading powers denounced the referendum and election as a sham, some officials indicated that if the May referendum were tolerably inclusive and transparent, it could garner international support.

What, then, is to be done about Burma's democratizing dictatorship? It is of course not beyond the bounds of possibility that blatant SPDC mismanagement of the reform process will provoke either another popular uprising, or the split in military ranks that has been awaited ever since a March 1962 coup first placed generals in positions of supreme power.

At the same time, however, parties and groups on all sides of Burma's complex political system need to prepare for the possibility that, in pressing ahead with a referendum in 2008 and elections in 2010, the SPDC has found a way to outfox its rivals and secure its long-term interests. Internally, it retains considerable political advantage, not least through the climate of fear in which its brutal military prowess has enveloped a nation of 54 million citizens. Externally, the deliverance from military rule that is sometimes floated is not currently in the cards. Pragmatic intervention by China is beyond the scope of

present thinking. Rambo-style intervention by the United States belongs to the realm of fantasy.

In many respects, then, the SPDC holds the upper hand in the reform process, and prospects for thoroughgoing political change in Burma remain bleak. That said, there are none the less opportunities in the current situation. As the United Nations' special envoy Ibrahim Gambari noted, the junta has for the first time released a timetable for political reform. Furthermore, internal and external pressures for change will ensure that no more than minor backsliding is possible. Important elements within the army, the business community, civil society and the wider region all have a stake in meaningful progress. In the generals' democratization agenda, there is therefore something to build on.

To grasp the opportunities that now exist, however, it is necessary to take the wrenching step of moving on from the 1990 general election that saw the NLD win 60% of the vote and 80% of the seats, yet find itself utterly excluded from politics for a generation. Nearly two decades on, a successful referendum in May will mean that the best chance of change lies not in reaching back to 1990 and thereby pushing the junta back into its bunker, but rather in working with the grain of its reforms and taking every chance to extend them.

Inside the country this will mean seeking ways to cooperate not only with the SPDC, but also with the rather sinister Union Solidarity and Development Association it has built to a membership of 24 million over the past 15 years. Outside, it will require major nations to engage in constructive dialogue with the generals as they pore over the concluding stages of their roadmap. For all key stakeholders, it will mandate that every opportunity be taken to push the junta beyond its comfort zone not through confrontation, but rather through sustained engagement.

Its many shortcomings notwithstanding, the U.N. remains the obvious forum for this kind of strategy. It was U.N. pressure in October 2007 that persuaded the junta to liaise with Aung San Suu Kyi through Labor Minister Aung Kyi. Five rounds of talks conducted by early 2008 yielded little but, in a context of limited trust, halting early progress was inevitable. It was also the U.N. that sent special envoy Mr. Gambari into Burma three times in six months following the September 2007 saffron uprising, as well as on serial trips around the region. Again, progress was anything but dramatic, but merely keeping the conversation going was something.

Additionally, in December 2007, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon formed a 14-nation Group of Friends on Burma to bring together the five permanent members of the Security Council plus, from the immediate neighborhood, India, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam and, from farther away, Australia, Japan (Burma's biggest donor), Norway and the occupant of the European Union presidency (currently Slovenia). This group, which held its second meeting in February 2008 to discuss the junta's democratization agenda, constitutes the best consultative forum for external political engagement with a regime that is notoriously prickly about perceived infringements on its sovereignty.

If the path of engagement is taken after a completed referendum in May, it is critically important, however, that key stakeholders move well beyond the bland tokenism witnessed in the past. Now is not the time for business as usual. Furthermore, in the early phases when confidence is still being built on all sides, it will be necessary to recognize that any leverage gained over the SPDC is unlikely to be political. The junta will always see the reform process as its reserved domain, and will guard it jealously. On the perimeter of that domain, however, economic and so-

cial measures can be promoted to prepare the ground for significant political reform in the longer term.

One sphere in desperate need of attention is the economy, which has been systematically mismanaged for more than 45 years, and is now riddled with corruption and inefficiency. In a country where employment is at a premium and decent jobs are extremely scarce, finding ways to entice major corporations to invest in Burma would represent an important step forward in creating a context for sustainable reform. Here it would be best if the lead could be taken by Asian businesses, so that cultural sensitivities could be properly addressed.

Another significant field, tied closely to the first, is tourism, which for many years was discouraged by xenophobic military rulers, and which more recently has been frowned upon by opposition leaders and exile activists. A strategy of engagement at the level of individual citizens would promote among Burmese people a sense of reintegration with the wider world, and enable issues facing the country to be more fully understood by outsiders. While ethical tourism is most desirable, even mass tourism could play a constructive role.

Also important is education, which has been systematically neglected for close to half a century. Creating opportunities for individuals to learn locally, rather than overseas or not at all, would be a major advance in itself, and a considerable boost for civil society. Although the junta is cautious and defensive about external involvement in teaching and learning, this issue could certainly be put on the table during a process of sustained and constructive engagement. Again, this is a domain in which Asian nations, with their nuanced awareness of the Burmese context, could play a leading role.

A final area in obvious need of outside help is the broad civil sphere, where poverty and discrimination have long been pervasive, and capacity for engaging with deep-seated social problems remains limited. It is vital that Burma be opened up to greater NGO presence, both local and international, so that pressing development issues can be addressed.

In adopting an engagement agenda of this kind, it will be important to accept that initially it will entail considerable hard work for no more than limited benefit. It will not deliver the instant democracy sought by many political activists and some external powers. Indeed, by playing along with the SPDC's roadmap, it will substitute for the NLD's overwhelming electoral victory in 1990 an outcome in 2010 that provides constitutional cover for ongoing military rule. Moreover, it will not promote the full national reconciliation so clearly needed in a country still subject to widespread human-rights abuse and riven with ethnic division and mistrust. None of this will be entirely desirable.

However, if the SPDC proves smart enough to pull off a referendum victory in May, engagement with the generals who have done so much to damage Burma will be, paradoxically, the best way to deliver tangible benefits to its citizens. The country cannot for ever remain stuck in a late 20th century time warp. Rather, the world needs to find ways to move on and engage with its domineering military rulers. By looking beyond headline political issues in the first instance, and focusing on underpinning economic and social change, committed stakeholders can open up options for incremental political reform in the long run.