



Burma's New Day

by Jonathan Aitken

WHAT IS GOING ON IN BURMA? Some observers see the recent political changes in the country as so miraculous that they speak in lyrical terms of its resurrection or at least reformation.

Be a little careful. As with the first Resurrection, there are doubts, fears, and terrible persecutions surrounding the seismic events that have been taking place. Yet there is no doubt that extraordinary transformations, both spiritual and political, are happening in this mysterious but still repressed country. There is a long way to go. Reform is in the air rather than in the pipeline. Nevertheless, with a saintly lady at the center of the action, the story so far is unfolding in a direction that is far more encouraging and peaceful than the upheavals in Arab Spring nations like Libya and Egypt.

This time last year, Burma was in the grip of a long-entrenched military dictatorship led by the hard-line General Than Shwe. Opponents of the regime were jailed. The army crushed various movements for ethnic and religious freedom with violence. The predominantly Christian states of Kachin, Karen, Shan, and Chin bore the brunt of this repression, along with the Muslim Rohingyas.

The only beacon of hope in this toxic mixture of ethnic, religious, and political conflict among the nation's 55 million population was the charismatic opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of a revered patriarch who led the independence movement in the 1940s. However, Ms. Suu Kyi, after many years in jail, was silenced by what seemed to be permanent house arrest. The media were not even allowed to mention her name.

But the times they are a-changing with extraordinary speed. Since May of last year, Burma has had a new leader, Thein Sein. Although he is a retired general, he has distanced himself from his predecessor and is introducing reforms. Some 600 political

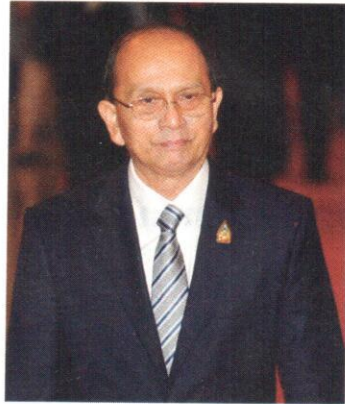


prisoners have now been released. Aung San Suu Kyi has been freed from house arrest, her opposition party the National League for Democracy has been unbanned, and she is leading it on the campaign trail with extensive domestic and international media coverage. This month, she and a slate of NLD candidates are standing in what amounts to a mini-election in 48 parliamentary seats that are vacant. If these by-elections are seen to be free and fair (as the present signs suggest), this might go a long way toward persuading Congress to start lifting the sanctions that were imposed on Burma in the 1990s.

President Thein Sein is starting to look like an F. W. de Klerk figure of reconciliation. He met Aung San Suu Kyi last August and agreed to a program of reforms with her. She now testifies to his sincerity and believes the process of change that they have jointly initiated is irreversible. But there are doubts and areas of darkness that cloud the picture.

However encouraging the first moves toward liberalization may look, the overall political situation in the country is fragile. The Burma Army continues to attack ethnic civilians in Kachin, Shan, and Karen. Although Thein Sein has ordered a cease-fire in these states, it has not yet been implemented by the troops on the ground. This may be caused by the defiance of regional commanders, or it could be due to a disagreement between the president and his army chief, General Min Aung Hlaing. Either way, it highlights the vulnerability of the reform process.

Constitutionally, the army has an armlock on the politics of the country. It has the right to occupy 25 percent of the seats in Parliament, an institution that did not even exist until last year. But along with the by-elections and the calls for ceasefires in the areas of conflict, the new partnership between President Thein Sein and Ms. Suu Kyi seems determined to implement constitutional reform as well.



WHY IS ALL THIS HAPPENING? There are pragmatic, political, diplomatic, and spiritual explanations for the gentle revolution that may be getting under way.

On the pragmatic front, Burma's socialist economy as run by the military has long been a basket case. This is one of the poorest countries in Asia, with a per capita income of \$1,400. The government wants to reconnect with international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. It also wants to attract international investment to develop its huge natural resources. Only if sanctions are lifted will this be possible.

Politically, the events of the Arab Spring gave the military leadership in Rangoon a bad scare. The generals feared it was only a matter of time before protesters took to the streets. Once Thein Sein was out of uniform, he became accommodating to the opposition.

Diplomatically, the protection of China proved counterproductive. Chinese aid was a mirage, as it is also proving to be in parts of Africa. Instead of getting a helping hand from Chinese companies operating in the north of the country, the local people were so bullied and exploited that even the generals became affronted. Meanwhile, visiting Western leaders including U.S. Secretary of State

Hillary Clinton were quietly championing the corner of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Yet none of these winds of change quite explain the gale-force transformation of attitudes that is sweeping through Rangoon and the artificial new capital of Naypyidaw. Is this transformation for real? Are there spiritual as well as political forces at work?

ONE OF THE AUTHORITATIVE voices with a cautious answer to this question is my favorite Burma expert, Benedict Rogers. He is a 37-year-old Asia specialist working for Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a leading faith-based human

rights organization of which I am honorary president. CSW has been monitoring and praying for Burma for 20 years. Ben Rogers has recently returned from a two-week visit, the first time in a decade that he was able to move around freely and interview anyone he wanted, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

Although a man of deep prayerfulness and faith himself, Rogers is not a starry-eyed optimist about the situation. He gathered firsthand evidence of what he calls "the worst stories of human rights violations I have ever heard." The Burma Army is still being barbaric in its attacks on civilians, particularly in the predominantly Christian areas. Until ethnic violence ceases, there will be no real progress toward domestic or international acceptance of the present government. Political reform, which must include dialogue with and participation of ethnic minorities in a democratic process, is essential.

But the good news is that Thein Sein is tentatively encouraging reform of the democratic process and allowing media freedom to accompany it. So Ben Rogers is right to say that the progress is "an answer to prayer" even if the result so far is only what he calls "the best of times and the worst of times." Cautious optimism perhaps, but still optimism. Those who care about human rights in Burma should fight and pray on. ❧

Jonathan Aitken, *The American Spectator's High Spirits columnist*, is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway Books). His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday) and *Nixon: A Life*, now available in a paperback edition (Regnery).