



## CIVIL WAR IN BURMA (MYANMAR)

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**Abstract:** *Since achieving independence in 1988, Burma has known neither peace nor national unity. This paper traces the development of the resultant civil war and rebellion in Burma and brings the discussion up to date with an examination of the circumstances for, and effects of, the revolution for democracy that erupted.*

**Key words:** *Determined, diplomatic community, personification, political situation, reconfigured.*

### Introduction

1988 was unlike any other year in Burma's short history as an independent nation. It began quietly, but erupted into a revolution for democracy and change which failed when the army violently restored its dictatorship; it ended quietly, but with the people living in fear under a military determined not to be challenged openly again. During this same period, while the world focused on Rangoon, the minorities continued to pursue a civil war which some have been fighting for the past forty years, hopeful that the changing situation in Burma's heartland would effect their struggles because both they, and the Burmans who rose in revolt, have the same enemy and seek the same ends - a peaceful and democratic Burma. Both looked to and sought help from the free nations of the world who spoke out vigorously when the rebellion began but whose voices either have been lowered or even stilled since the military made clear that it would decide the time and degree of change; only the U.S. continued to hold the high moral ground in support of the rebellion but its actions hardly matched its rhetoric.

Since achieving independence in 1948, Burma has known neither peace nor national unity. The nation recovered its sovereignty and joined the family of nations before it solved its internal problems. Neither the constitutional democratic leaders nor the authoritarian military rulers who replaced them, found solutions to the problems existing before independence and continue to the present.

Today, many of the original parties in the civil war are still in revolt with their numbers increasing over the years, as other minority groups took up arms when no other solution seemed viable. So long as the fighting was kept out of the Irrawaddy valley - the heartland of Burma - and most of the ethnic Burmans supported the government in Rangoon, the situation was tolerated, even though it prevented complete administration of the land and economic and social development.

The political sphere has thus been entirely reconfigured since 2011. While Western governments urgently review their policy of sanctions against the country, the international diplomatic community has reopened its doors to a state long treated as a pariah on the Asian scene. As for the major international financial institutions, they are gradually attempting to reintegrate the Burmese economy - so underdeveloped and with such inadequate structures and institutions - into world trade. In June 2013, Naypyitaw welcomed with great fanfare a thousand international delegates who were there for the



World Economic Forum. In 2014, Myanmar will preside over the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), after forgoing its turn in 2006, and in 2015 will join a (still very hypothetical) South East Asian free trade zone. The country seems to be regaining a key position on the regional and world stage. The desire to distance itself from China's strategic influence-omnipresent in the country since the early 1990s - has certainly been a determining factor in this redefinition of Myanmar's relations with the outside world. During the 2000s, a large segment of the Burmese elite, driven by widespread Sinophobia in the society, began to show openly their increasing hostility toward.

*Chinese domination.* Nevertheless, a shift in Burmese foreign policy alone cannot explain the success of this attempt at «post-junta» liberalization. It was the internal dynamics within the country's dominant institution, the army, which proved to be truly decisive. How and why was such a transformation triggered in 2011, when a similar attempt at opening up and economic liberalization 20 years earlier, from 1988 to 1990, was clearly a failure? How should this sudden development in the domestic political situation be interpreted? Why has the army begun this transformation now and why is it gradually withdrawing from the forefront? What are the prospects for evolution for this «transitional» quasi-civilian regime succeeding the SPDC? What kind of civil-military relations does the future hold? Finally, what role and what strategies should the historic democratic opposition adopt in order to adapt to the new institutional order nonetheless shaped by and for the army.

Inevitable structural resistance to change will nevertheless emerge in the months and years to come. It will not necessarily come from active military personnel, even though some fear they might organize another coup d'état to better protect their preserves. The deep generational transformation the Tatmadaw is currently undergoing seems to be neutralizing this threat in the mean term. The new generation of officers represented by General Min Aung Hlaing, now 65, indeed seems determined to give a free hand to veteran officers who have now become civilian leaders, having decided to maintain their trust in them. Resistance thus threatens to come instead from the huge state bureaucracy and certain intellectual and political elites in a society that has been at war with itself for so many years. The reform of the powerful bureaucracy, infiltrated by the military and plagued by immobilism and burdensome patronage practices, will be crucial. The administration will inevitably be reluctant to break free of the clientelist straightjacket that holds it together.

### Conclusion

Far from being egalitarian and meritocratic, Burmese society, like many others, is structured into patronage relations. At all levels, including within local administrations, power is based on strong personification and extensive networks of loyalty and the granting of privileges. This routine clientelism, visible even at the bottom of the social ladder, is reinforced by what the Western world would describe as relations of «corruption», both socially and financially speaking. It will be extremely difficult to break with such a system, which offers privileges as well as political opportunities and prospects for social mobility-both to ordinary civil servants and local political officials - especially if



new ideological rifts appear within society once the civilianization of the Burmese state is completed.

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