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A First Step Toward Democracy?

By Stanley A. Weiss

YANGON — When British forces first floated up the Irrawaddy River in 1885 to depose King Thibaw of Burma, locals were startled to see a Burmese prince, in full regalia, sitting on the deck of one of the steamers. His presence reassured locals that the British planned to seat a new king, not overthrow the kingdom. As Thant Myint-U recalls in his book, “The River of Lost Footsteps,” it was only when a young student talked his way onto the ship and came face-to-face with the royal prince that the truth was discovered: The “prince” was an imposter, a former classmate of the student’s. By then, it was too late — the telegraph line to the palace in Mandalay had been cut.

The question, 125 years later, is whether the Burmese military junta — which has ruled this country, now known as Myanmar, since 1962 — is about to pull its own version of bait-and-switch.

For the first time since 1990 — when officials arrested 2,000 people, including the opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, after the last general election — the ruling generals have announced that parliamentary elections will take place this year. Reportedly, the generals are preparing to switch their uniforms for longyis and run for office — the equivalent of Fidel Castro swapping his army greens for guayaberas and hitting the campaign trail.

Many in the West are disposed to see the election as a fraud, since the junta’s Constitution reserves 25 percent of the seats for the military and bars Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi — imprisoned for 14 of the past 20 years — from running.

Still, the question remains: Even if the election is stage-managed by the military; even if Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy chooses not to participate; and even if Senior General Than Shwe selects the next president; if the election occurs without violence or repression, will it represent a step forward?

The answer seems to be: Yes.

“I don’t know if the elections will have legitimacy in the eyes of the West,” said the Myanmar scholar Robert Taylor. “But they will have legitimacy in Asia, and that is all the regime is worried about.”

I asked an official of the junta how the West should regard this election. “This is a first step toward democracy,” he

tells me. “After ruling the country for 48 years, the military needs some mechanism to safeguard the interests and safety of persons. This is also an exit strategy for older leaders, because in five years, the new generation will take over, not only the military but civilian politics. They will work to change the military role in politics.”

The Burmese writer Ma Thanegi, who spent three years in prison after working as Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi’s assistant, was blunt. “Yes, elections would represent a step forward — what other choice is there?” she asked. “If the West really wants to help the people, they should accept the new government as no longer the military rule, and give it a chance.”

“What America should do,” a prominent businessman told me, “is shift the conversation from sanctions to engagement, from scolding to giving, and find soft steps to help bring about outcomes that will be beneficial to both Myanmar and the U.S.”

The Obama administration so far has sought to engage the junta, urging a dialogue between the regime, the National League for Democracy and other opposition parties, while calling for Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi’s release. In November, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell led a U.S. team to Yangon for the highest level talks in 14 years.

Where should the U.S. focus its efforts? Here are three ways:

It should provide opportunities for students to attend U.S. universities, to build ties to the next generation.

It should start a program of cultural, educational, and sporting exchanges, including a new program to send teachers to Myanmar.

It should review its current sanctions policy.

No nation in Asia — from South Korea to Taiwan to Indonesia — has made an easy transition from dictatorship to democracy. But change needs to start somewhere. As the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, recently said, “2010 will be a very critical year for Myanmar.” There may yet be light at the end of the Irrawaddy.