

Will Myanmar's Military Reform?

By Stanley A. Weiss

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YANGON--It was, in a sense, a reverse Pearl Harbor on the Irrawaddy River. After welcoming the Japanese army into Burma in 1942, a young Burmese general named Aung San and his ragtag national army had become disillusioned with Japanese promises to support Burma in throwing off nearly 125 years of British imperial control.

And so on March 27, 1945--70 years ago today--the khaki-clad troops departed the city of Rangoon. Telling their Japanese commanders they were mustering out to fight the British, they paraded through the city--and then turned around and attacked the Japanese all throughout Burma. With Burmese help, the British retook the country in just a few short months.

Every year since, Burma--now known as Myanmar--has celebrated March 27 as Resistance Day, now known as Armed Forces Day. Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, marched in 1947, the year Aung San was assassinated by rivals--and they marched the following year, when Myanmar finally gained its hard-fought independence. They marched in 1962, when one of Aung San's fellow freedom fighters, Ne Win, took power in a military coup that would rule for decades. They marched in 1990, after student uprisings forced the military junta to call elections, only to nullify the results and place the winner--democratic icon and daughter of Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi--under house arrest for the better part of two decades. And they marched in 2011, when the ruling regime held elections and declared that one of the most isolated countries on earth would finally liberalize.

With Suu Kyi herself--now a powerful member of parliament and potential presidential candidate--joining her former captors at the most recent Armed Forces Day celebration, people here are wondering: On a day that commemorates the military's shift from cooperation to resistance, can the military finally move from resistance to cooperation? After decades of abuses and a brutal civil war against Myanmar's ethnic minorities, can the military overcome its reactionary past and champion democratic reforms?

For those well acquainted with Myanmar's recent history, such a move seems virtually impossible. After all, this is a regime that Freedom House called "the worst of the worst" only a decade ago--an authoritarian dictatorship notorious

for using child soldiers, engaging in human trafficking, producing the world's largest supply of heroin, and perpetrating ongoing violence against ethnic minorities. Several weeks ago, air strikes allegedly conducted by Myanmar against ethnic Kokang rebels killed at least four Chinese farmers in a sugarcane field across the border, and a friend who works closely with Myanmar's ethnics sees "no indications of Burman generals' intent to relinquish military holds on ethnic lands." Last week, the military arrested 65 student activists for protesting education reforms.

To these skeptics, even the current president, Thein Sein--called "the Mikhail Gorbachev of Myanmar" by The New York Times, and "nice but weak" by a UN official I met--is a mere puppet for more reactionary elements in the military. Instead, they attribute the direction of the country to the leader of Myanmar's old regime, the aging strongman Than Shwe, a figure so mysterious that locals debate whether he is, in fact, still alive. "He might not be giving orders, but he's still there, and people try to do what he wants," a European diplomat tells me.

What they do seem certain about is that the military lacks the ability or the leadership to truly reform. "Our leaders are limited in their capacity, and not savvy, either as politicians or as leaders," a prominent Myanmar businessman says. "They can be top-notch professionals if fighting something up in the hills, maybe, but put them in an office and they don't have the capacity to think." A British diplomat confides to me, "At the moment, the military is not ready to put a time limit to their presence in parliament."

Yet despite these doubts, many of the people I met on my recent trip here speak enthusiastically about the progress Myanmar's military has made.

"I genuinely think the military has aspirations and wants the opportunity," a Yangon-based financier tells me. "There's openness for engagement." Those encouraged by the military's transformation point to the Tatmadaw's willingness, after waging what is the world's longest-running civil war, to engage in ceasefire talks with Myanmar's ethnic population--though bloody skirmishes remain common, and a lasting peace agreement has proved elusive. They also cite the relaxation of restrictions

on many freedoms, from attending foreign rock concerts to browsing the Internet. In Yangon, tech startups are sprouting alongside beautiful ancient pagodas.

Even the military itself has seemingly embraced these newfound freedoms. As a European ambassador informs me, “We have a military course in NPT that focuses on human rights and the role of the military in a democracy.... They appreciate it, and there are good debates in the classes.... The views at the colonel level are very diverse. These are the people who will be in charge 10 years from now.”

One such person--the chief of Myanmar’s military, General Min Aung Hlaing--may already be in charge. Though Hlaing’s path to becoming Myanmar’s most senior general has its troubling aspects, an ambassador here tells me, “He sees himself as the keeper of democracy.... He told me, ‘The military used to be above the government, and now we’re at same level, and we [the military] have to teach them [the government] to be above us.’” Contrary to the stern and aloof image cultivated by many officers, Hlaing boasts a Facebook page with over 150,000 “likes”--and photos of himself smiling, greeting his countrymen, and even parasailing.

With Hlaing declaring that “the military wants free and fair elections” and “will cooperate in accordance with the law no matter whoever governs ... after 2015,” he appears intent not just on improving the military but on gently returning them to the barracks where they belong. A UN official tells me that Hlaing replaced a number of officers in the 25 percent of parliament still reserved for members of the military, believing that “the previous officers he placed there were not capable of voting on their own, so he decided to replace them with thinkers instead.”

“In his eyes he could be a presidential candidate,” says another ambassador. “He is very powerful and could be.” Hlaing has remained coy, saying only, “It’s still early.... I can surely say that I have the desire to work for the benefit of the country.” Yet Foreign Policy was right to note last year that Hlaing remains “The Man to Watch” in Burma.

So will Myanmar’s military reform or retrench? Does the country’s future lie with Min Aung Hlaing or with Than Shwe? It’s a question Myanmar will have to sort out for itself--but, in the meantime, the U.S. could be doing much more to tip the scales towards reform.

First, the West must stop viewing the military in black-or-white terms and engage with them directly.

Second, the U.S. should welcome Myanmar back into the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. While we once brought 167 Burmese soldiers to study and train in America, since the 1988 coup Congress has repeatedly blocked further IMET assistance to the country. Ostensibly intended to punish Myanmar for human rights abuses and prevent further atrocities, by limiting the military’s exposure to ideals like the rule of law and civilian authority, these restrictions actually further stunt the country’s democratic development.

Third, we should use the prospect of U.S. military assistance to strengthen the hand of potential reformers like Hlaing. Myanmar is “desperate to have relations with the U.S. military,” a friend tells me. “That is the biggest driver with working with the military is to get recognition from the U.S. that they are a professional military.... This is a huge lever.”

If the U.S. is willing to use that lever--and if Myanmar’s military continues to embrace reform--maybe some day soon the celebration once known as Resistance Day, now called Armed Forces Day, can finally be called Democracy Day.

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