Myanmar's Political Transition and Lost Opportunities

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Myanmar's Political Transition and Lost Opportunities
(2010–2016)

YE HTUT

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Foreword

U Ye Htut has written a book of a very rare kind. Few accounts of the inside working of a government are available so soon after it has left office. Even fewer, indeed almost none, are written about the working of the government of Myanmar by an author who could be considered an "outside insider". Ye Htut was not a key figure in the military government which preceded that of President Thein Sein in 2011. Having been an army officer on the cusp of becoming a colonel, he became a civil servant somewhat earlier in his career than many others would eventually become. Within the Thein Sein government he rose quickly, ultimately, in 2013, to the position of presidential spokesperson and then, the following year, minister for information. His talents and skills were clearly needed in Myanmar's transitional regime from military authoritarian to constitutional rule.

Moreover, Ye Htut's book is not merely his personal observations on the workings of the Thein Sein government from within. He has conducted extensive interviews with others more intimately involved in certain crucial decisions and events than himself, thus adding an additional dimension to his analysis. Many both inside and outside of Myanmar will be unaware of the crucial dynamics at work within the government for which he worked as a civil servant and ultimately as a minister. He was increasingly entrusted with greater responsibilities and increased inside knowledge because of not only his administrative competence but because of the high regard he was and is held as a result of his probity and open-mindedness.

Ye Htut's background is not unusual for someone of his age and position in Myanmar. Born in Yangon in 1959, his father, U Shwe Than,

was a serving army officer and one of the earliest Myanmar graduates of the British Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Shwe Than saw military service in various parts of Myanmar before being appointed first deputy head and then head of the police by General Ne Win in the 1970s. Subsequently, Ne Win moved Shwe Than to the headship of the country's national shipping company, then known as the Burma Five Star Line. Ye Htut, growing up in a military officer's home, could not be unaware of the intrigues that existed within the army and the army-dominated Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) during his youth. Unusually, however, thanks no doubt to his father's great influence, he learned to read, write and speak English, a subject then not taught effectively as part of the national curriculum.

Accepted into the Defence Services Academy at Myamyo (now Pwin-Oo-Lwin) in 1977, after his second attempt, Ye Htut graduated in 1981 as a member of the 22nd intake. He initially served in the Kayin State and was heavily involved in major campaigns again the Kayin National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed organization of the Kayin National Union (KNU). The KNLA/KNU were deeply involved in the smuggling trade that undermined the official but increasingly failing economy of socialist Burma. Fierce fighting in that area led to a significant flow of refugees into neighbouring Thailand in the mid-1980s.

Following the normal round of promotions and reassignments typical of an army career, Ye Htut served in other parts of Myanmar, including Tanintharyi Division, Kachin State, Mandalay Division and Shan State. He was chosen to be sent to Fort Bragg in the United States for further military training, but as a consequence of the reaction of the United States government to the anti-BSPP popular uprising and subsequent coup by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, that invitation was cancelled. As his military career reached its peak, he was appointed the chief instructor at the Military Advance Training School in the Southern Shan States in 2002. There he was able to pursue his interests in teaching as well as reading and writing. He occasionally contributed at that time to the army's *Military Science Journal*.

However, his military career was soon cut short as he was reassigned as a civil servant in the Ministry of Information. It was in his role as deputy director general in the Information and Public Relations Department of the Ministry that I first met Ye Htut. After the fall from power of General Khin Nyunt, the head of Military Intelligence, and the

loss of his extensive personal network within the army and government in 2004, the information minister, General Kyaw Hsan, was apparently assigned the role of dealing with foreigners interested in Myanmar that members of Military Intelligence's former Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and selected ministers had undertaken after 1989. Prior to this, for a foreign scholar, contact with the government was extremely limited, if it occurred at all.

After a meeting with Kyaw Hsan, who was amazingly obliging, quickly gaining permission from various ministries for me and a Myanmar colleague to visit the Chin State, then a restricted area, the minister introduced me to Ye Htut. Ye Htut then took me off on his own and explained his role in the Myanmar Information Committee. Unlike my previous encounters with officials and ministers, who would be forthcoming only up to a point, for a subordinate official, Ye Htut was franker and more open than any met before. In contrast to other Myanmar government officials of his rank that I had encountered since 1989, Ye Htut was something new and perhaps a harbinger of changes yet to come. He even had an impish sense of humour and was also keen to inquire about how things were done elsewhere. Rarely had I met someone in Myanmar who, in dealing with a foreigner, was so confident of the latitude he had in providing information about the government and its plans. It was more like a meeting with my friends at Yangon University two decades before than an initial encounter in a ministry office.

During the next few years, I met with Ye Htut occasionally informally as well as formally with minister Kyaw Hsan. I often brought him English-language books from abroad to feed his incessant appetite for reading material. He in particular requested books on the political systems of Western states, particularly the United States. Amongst other books provided were William Riordan's 1905 classic *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* and Robert Dahl's *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (2002). Years later, when the United States embassy began to cultivate relations with the Myanmar government, Ye Htut was asked by an American official what he had read about US democracy. He replied his knowledge was based in part on what I had provided. The embassy official promptly told him he had been reading the wrong books. I also supplied him with books on China, ASEAN and other current political and economic topics as well as contemporary fiction.

Ye Htut, as he mentions in this volume, was involved with Paul Pasch of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), and former German diplomat P. Christian Hauswedell, in a series of track two diplomatic seminars and study trips organized by the Myanmar Institute for Strategic and International Studies (Myanmar-ISIS) in an attempt to get the member states of the European Union to understand Myanmar's planned political trajectory and related issues. If the Europeans could be persuaded to relax their economic sanctions, rather than just aping the United States, the possibility of a speedier transition would have been enhanced. I was included in these delegations of eight to ten Europeans and therefore travelled with Ye Htut and Myanmar-ISIS leaders up to the Myanmar border with China, the Shan, Kachin, and Kayin States and elsewhere meeting with ceasefire groups and visiting development projects as well as exchanging views in seminars with informed persons inside and outside the government. On our journeys and in our seminars, Ye Htut was a fount of useful information and, unlike some of his less forthcoming colleagues formerly in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was willing to share his views freely with the European delegates.

Separately I would occasionally visit Naypyitaw after the capital was moved there in 2005 to meet with Minister Kyaw Hsan and would then invariably meet Ye Htut. However, following the election of President Thein Sein's government, ministers and officials like Ye Htut became increasingly busy and opportunities to meet itinerant retired academics became fewer and briefer. Therefore the revelations in Ye Htut's book are as revealing to me as to other readers.

As the process of media reform developed, Ye Htut's central role grew until he seemed indispensable to the government. Having been promoted to director general of the Department of Information and Public Relations in 2009, he became deputy minister at the time that Kyaw Hsan was replaced as minister by U Aung Kyi in August 2012. Upon Aung Kyi's resignation, under conditions described in Ye Htut's text, he became minister of information on 1 August 2014, having been appointed presidential spokesperson in February 2013.

Whatever the degree to which readers of this volume followed the course of the politics of Myanmar since 1988, if not before, they will find aspects of events unknown to them up to now. Even seasoned observers will be unfamiliar with much Ye Htut tells us about the governments in which he served. The protracted process of shaping the eventual 2008

Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar is laid out in his first chapter, along with the unusual constraints placed on the president by three clauses of that constitution in chapter 2. Though attention is often drawn to the continuing role of the Myanmar army as set out in the constitution, less attention is given to the limitations on the president's authority vis-à-vis both the party structure and legislature (Hluttaw). As we shall see, these became as crucial to Myanmar's initial constitutional evolution as the remaining power of the army in and on the civilian government of Thein Sein.

Prior to this volume, little has been written on the army-created and backed political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the successor to the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). The victory of the USPD in the 2010 elections which created the legislature that made Thein Sein's government possible, owed far more to the decision of the major opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), whose leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was barred from standing for election, than any action on the part of the USDP. The USDP was and apparently remains, as witnessed by the 2015 elections, highly dysfunctional. The product of military thinking and Myanmar's traditions of mixing business with politics, with no clear ideological perspective, created rivalries and schisms which could only be exacerbated by the ban on the nominal head of the party, President Thein Sein, from the typical majority party leadership role in republican constitutions, thus opening a door for others who felt his place should be theirs.

Enter the Machiavellian presence of Thura Shwe Mann, the third most powerful man in the ruling military council. He was widely expected to be chosen as the first president of the re-established constitutional order by the newly elected Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union assembly). When the then State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the rebranded military junta that had ruled Myanmar since September 1988, dissolved itself, and the institutions of the 2008 constitution came into effect, most observers were highly sceptical that anything had really changed. Jaded from observing armies promulgating constitutions and returning former military leaders into elected politicians in other countries in Southeast Asia and beyond, both domestic and foreign analysts overwhelmingly discounted the significance of the inauguration of a new constitutional order under the leadership of the second tier of the old military order.

Events would prove them wrong on more than one account. Though many of the personnel in the new regime were former army officers, their new roles forced them to assume to the extent possible new modes of behaviour. Moreover, while formally the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw elected the president, in reality the choice it was given was predetermined by one of the last acts of the architecture of the new order, SPDC chairman Senior General Than Shwe. He surprised many, including the principals involved, in choosing not Shwe Mann as president but the number four officer in the old order, shy and retiring former prime minister Thein Sein. As Ye Htut details, in what is effectively a prologue to the ensuing drama, a scene was set for conflicts totally unexpected but with consequences still emerging.

Like all great dramas, while there were hints in the first act of what was to come, only a most acute inside observer could have known what they meant. All seemed to be set fair for the smooth functioning of the new order. The formal election of the president went to script and his inaugural address and first speech to his cabinet, while sounding fresh and novel, promising reform and perhaps even radical change, was dismissed by many as merely icing on an already old and stale cake. The shadow of the past hung heavily on the future. However, when President Thein Sein met with Aung San Suu Kyi five months after taking power and she eventually agreed to lead her party in joining in 2012 by-elections and entering the political process by being elected to the Pyithu Hluttaw (people's assembly), the realization became widespread that the Thein Sein administration was not just for show, but that the president meant what he had said about reform and change in his inaugural remarks. Ye Htut explains the inwardness of that process and its consequences in what he describes as Myanmar's Spring, in contrast to the so-called Arab Spring that was grabbing headlines at the same time. What he and no one else can explain except Aung San Suu Kyi herself is why she decided to lead her party into the political process under a constitution she had denounced as totally unacceptable just two years before.

Still, like a good dramatist, Ye Htut suspends the most gripping scenes to describe how, despite the legacy of its largely military inheritance, President Thein Sein and his ministers and other leading officials attempted to make the complicated institutions of Myanmar's new constitutional government work. These workings were made more complex as practices of the past proved more difficult to slough off

than the many well intended and well remunerated foreigners who carried their bags of lessons learned elsewhere to Naypyitaw to lecture the executive on how to run an open, transparent, efficient, effective, gender regarding, and responsive administration. All easier said than done. What Ye Htut makes clear is that internal rivalries and conflicting interests within the Thein Sein administration posed problems that only the president could resolve. Thein Sein was not a dictator, but a listener and brooder, faced with many unenviable choices. Those with little or no experience of the complexities of governing a country as diverse and fractious as Myanmar often offered facile advice, which Thein Sein, with his decade of experience before assuming the presidency, knew better than most was largely irrelevant.

Having set the scene and introduced the principle characters and roles, the drama of Myanmar's transition from rule by the army under Senior General Than Shwe to the National League for Democracy under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi gets under way in earnest. However, neither of the key figures played a leading role, but their looming presence was always felt. The leaders of the action were President Thein Sein and Thura Shwe Mann in his role as the *primus inter pares*, initially in the Pyithu Hluttaw and then in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, as well as the nominally ruling party as acting chairman until his ouster in 2015. Shwe Mann's emerging alliance with, if not co-option of, Aung San Suu Kyi provides an unseen subtext of Ye Htut's detailed account of the increasing tension between the former number three and the former number four in the abandoned military order.

Given the central roles of President Thein Sein and Thura Shwe Mann in Ye Htut's account, it is important to note his relations with both men over the years. Ye Htut first met Shwe Mann in 1988 when he was a staff officer in the 44th Light Infantry Division and Shwe Mann was deputy commander of the No. 6 Light Infantry Regiment. They met again in 1992 in the Northern Command. Ye Htut admits Shwe Mann was something of a role model for him. As he notes in the text, it was Shwe Mann who nominated him to enter the Ministry of Information from the army. On the other hand, Ye Htut had never met Thein Sein until the new government was formed. After he became presidential spokesman in 2013, he travelled with the president on almost all of his foreign and domestic trips and sat in all important meetings with foreigners, ethnic armed group leaders, and others until the end of the presidency. Having observed at close hand the

pressures on the president and the consequences of Shwe Mann's duplicity, he lost faith in his former military role model.

In what Ye Htut describes as "Shwe Mann's Checkmates", we see the attacking insurgent Hluttaw leader tie down the manoeuvrability of the president. The president, distracted from his reform plans by first sniping, and then artillery barrage, organized and led by Shwe Mann, becomes increasingly frustrated by the limitations on his authority and the conflicting advice offered by his cabinet and other advisers. In circumstances in which the past, both in terms of inherited traditions from the military experiences of most of the key actors, particularly hierarchical deference, made free and frank exchanges of views difficult when seen as between persons of unequal rank and stature, the robust arguments but common purpose which is normally expected within governments and ruling parties was difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Shwe Mann's lack of consistency in his views on the government's development priorities from his pre- to his post-military roles as revealed in the debates over the 2012–13 budget was just the beginning of the onslaught on the president. Others followed of which the issues of the appropriateness of a system of proportional representation to make Myanmar's electoral outcomes a better reflection of the majority views of the public, as opposed to results from the inherited first-past-the-post system, and the legal authority of the constitutionally mandated Constitutional Tribunal were perhaps the most crucial. The president's obvious worry about the implications of possible impeachment moves against him undermined his confidence in pushing his reforms.

The battle between Shwe Mann and Thein Sein was initially misunderstood by many observers, both Myanmar and foreigners, who, not studying the details, tended to see the initial conflict in either one of two ways. One, oft taken by those with a legalistic view of politics, was that the system of checks and balances that the previous government had heralded as a key feature of the new constitutional order was indeed working as intended. The other, more cynical, view was that the apparent conflicts between Shwe Mann and Thein Sein were merely for show. As two generals from the old order who had worked together for years in the SPDC government of the senior general could not really be at odds. They were play-acting in order to bamboozle the naïve into believing things had changed in Naypyitaw. The new order was merely mutton dressed as lamb. Even some former members of the army and civil servants far

from the centres of conflict took this view. As Ye Htut documents, the conflicts were not only real but had consequences, largely negative, for Myanmar's political transition.

In addition to the president's stifled reform agenda and the instability created by the Shwe Mann orchestrated legislative attacks on the executive, events relating to pressing issues which invoked strong public opinion also drew the attention of the president and his far-from-united team. As a former British prime minister once allegedly remarked, what shaped what his government could do was "events, my dear boy, events". So President Thein Sein understood and, as Ye Htut explains, the issues of the Myitsone Dam conflict, the highly politicized drafting of the National Education Law, and the ethno-religious discord all posed challenges to the government. The outcome of decisions made by the government on these and other issues, as is often the case, had consequences unseen and unwanted at the time of action. Ye Htut takes his readers through these contortions also, drawing the drama away from just the battles in Naypyitaw to the wider context of Myanmar and continuing issues in its politics.

By way of a more personal reiteration, in his final substantive chapter Ye Htut's readers are told the story of his own part in one of the fundamental issues in Myanmar's transition. Stifling free debate and discussion in the media was one of the first consequences of the military coup of 1962, though the press in Myanmar after independence could also be said not to have been completely unfettered though relatively freer than what followed. The closing down of the independent media was one of the eventual causes of the collapse of the old order, for it had cut off the flow of ideas and criticism which is essential for any functioning state, economy or society to thrive and develop. Even Senior General Than Shwe understood this. As he explained in an unreported speech for newly inducted ambassadors in 2005, the necessity of a free press was obvious, but it had to be a press that would do more than just attack whoever was in power. As part of the transition following the adoption of the 2008 constitution, censorship would have to be terminated.

That, however, was easier said than done. Though the SLORC and the SPDC had allowed in various ways the emergence of private, non-government, media, this was kept under close supervision and control into the transition. The agency that imposed fetters on the private media was the Ministry of Information, having been assigned those duties after

the fall of General Khin Nyunt and the transfer of censorship from the Home Ministry to the Information Ministry. That ministry, under the same minister who had been the media's bête noire, was now to become its liberator. Given the complete lack of trust that existed between the journalistic profession and the ministry, the deliberate and systematic liberation of the media was perhaps inevitably to have led to not merely doubts about but outright rejection of the ministry's plans.

The same distrust surrounded the Ministry of Information's intention to turn the state-owned newspapers and radio and television into public service media of the kind that existed in Western countries. Nothing like the BBC, Deutsche Welle or PBS had ever existed in Myanmar. The concept of public service broadcasting at arm's length from the government was totally foreign. Moreover, as too often forgotten in discussions about the private media, they must be run as businesses with the intention of making a profit for their owners. Public service broadcasters are seen as subsidized competitors for the private media's readers and advertisers, distorting the media market unfairly. Thus commercial interest, professional presumption and a severe lack of trust in the promises of the government meant that media reform would prove to be difficult.

Though Ye Htut does not raise his own role in the production of mass media during his years in government, his undoubted popularity with the public via his Facebook account perhaps raised the ire of journalists who were less well known and acclaimed. Known as the "Facebook minister", his public following reached a quarter of a million when he left office, having since then more than doubled to over half a million. His views, sometimes controversial, provoke the kind of public debate that a lively media should encourage, rather than pandering to received opinions and prejudices.

As Ye Htut explains, media reform was not only difficult but, in the end, incomplete. Before President Thein Sein stepped down from office, the possibility of fundamental reform to the media had become so politicized that it was not possible to continue to pursue. Opportunities were lost and chances to renew the drive for media reform by the successive government have been ignored. Now the old state media is extolled by the current minister for information, one of the vocal opponents of Kyaw Hsan's and his successors' gradual reform endeavours. Like so much else of the reform agenda of President Thein Sein, the past, in the form of vested interests, closed minds and the comfort of outmoded "standard operating

procedures" hindered, and in crucial areas halted, the change that so many had hoped for in the preceding decades.

The failure of a thorough reform of the media is matched by the other failures of the Thein Sein administration to complete the president's reform agenda. In the epilogue, Ye Htut weighs up the major factors he sees as the cause of this. One is the legacy of the State Peace and Development Council government and its master for two decades, Senior General Than Shwe. Than Shwe had a vision of the kind of Myanmar he wanted to create, but not only did he not share this vision with others, the tools he used to craft his vision were those of the army, and were therefore incapable of building sustainable civilian institutions. The flawed 2008 constitution was just one of several inadequate tools he bequeathed his chosen successor, President Thein Sein.

As others besides Ye Htut have noted, Thein Sein was too nice to be president. He brought to the tasks he was assigned in the army and in government honesty and tenacity, but he did not possess within himself the ruthlessness and guile that most ambitious leaders wield in their climb to greater and greater power. Thein Sein, because of his competency, had power thrust upon him when he sought to avoid it. Noted as a good listener, he was also a deep, and doubtless lonely, thinker, displaying none of the garrulousness of many around him. Given a flawed and imperfect legacy from which to build, he tried his best. And, as Ye Htut notes in his concluding remarks, despite the lost opportunities of the Thein Sein presidency, there were great achievements. Thein Sein set a new standard for Myanmar's leaders.

Myanmar's Democratic Transition and Lost Opportunities (2011–2016) now joins the small corpus of important texts on Myanmar's modern political history. A few books by authors with unique access define their eras. *Guardian* Sein Win's *The Split Story: An Account of Recent Political Upheaval in Burma* (1959) does that for Myanmar's first effort to establish a civilian constitutional order. Ye Htut's does that for the second attempt. Whether there will have to be a third attempt remains in the balance. If there is, do not blame Thein Sein. The Thein Sein government attempted to establish a benchmark for open, listening and responsive government. Its achievements were not insignificant, and Thein Sein would probably be the first to say those achievements, as well as lost opportunities, were not the result of one person, though ultimately the president bears the greatest burden of office.

Dr Maung Maung, in the midst of his one-month presidency that led to the imposition of military government in 1988, reminded his listeners of Lord Acton's oft quoted aphorism "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." Ye Htut has demonstrated that Acton's qualification on his words were well taken. Some great men are neither corrupt nor bad. They remain the exception to the rule, however.

Robert H. Taylor
11 January 2019

Acknowledgements

This book is based on my experiences during Myanmar's transition to democracy under President Thein Sein. I began as director general of the Information and Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Information under the president in 2011 and ended as minister for information and spokesperson for the president in 2016.

After I became presidential spokesperson in February 2013, I accompanied U Thein Sein on nearly all of the president's foreign and domestic trips, attending his meetings with foreign leaders, scholars, ambassadors, local people, leaders of ethnic armed organizations, and politicians, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. I observed how he tried to implement reforms and how much he suffered under the pressures created by his opponents over three years. I thank the president for selecting me to serve under him during a very critical time in Myanmar's political history.

My reflections in this book are not about the success of President Thein Sein's reform programme; it is about how and why the government lost opportunities to improve the governance of Myanmar through the reform process. I have tried to describe what went on behind the scenes of the Thein Sein government, and about the president, his policies, character, his rivals and the constraints with which he had to struggle.

Writing about your superior and your colleagues is not easy, since I have a personal attachment to many members of the cabinet, Hluttaw, Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) and USDP. Some of the individuals I discuss are my mentors, some are brother officers and some are classmates from the military academy. But thanks to Professor Taylor, who has always challenged my assumptions about Myanmar's politics, I have been able to reach reasoned conclusions supported by evidence.

I could not have written this book without the kind support from Director Choi Shing Kwok and Senior Advisor Tan Chin Tiong of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Being at ISEAS enabled me to reflect objectively on the events I describe, away from peer pressure. I also learnt from my colleagues at ISEAS who have vast experience in research by reading their papers and listening to their presentations. Thanks to ISEAS, I hope my book will contribute to a greater understanding of Myanmar's transition to democracy.

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Last but not least, my thanks go to my dad, mom and my family for their love, support and tolerance of my long absences from home.

Finally, all errors of fact, omission and interpretation are mine and I alone take all responsibility for that.

Ye Htut
30 January 2019
Singapore

Introduction: Myanmar's Political Reforms

The "Myanmar Spring" or Myanmar's road to democracy commenced on 30 March 2011. That morning, newly elected President Thein Sein delivered his inaugural address to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union assembly). This was the first speech of the first competitively elected head of state by the parliament and, indirectly, the citizens of Myanmar since the 1962 military coup.

Although it was broadcast live, except for a few scholars and journalists, the majority of the people of Myanmar as well as the international community gave very little attention to the speech. As the ruling party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), was backed by the military, and the elected president was a former general and the prime minister of the previous military government, they saw the new government as a quasi-military regime—the same old wine in a new bottle.

Myanmar had held a general election on 7 November 2010 under a new constitution. The constitution had been formally adopted following a referendum in 2008. The previous military government stated that this election was the starting point for a democratization process,[1] but given the contentious nature of the election process, the international community rejected the election result. For example, the International Crisis Group took the following view of the elections and the subsequent government under President Thein Sein:

> [the] Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won a landslide victory leaving the military elite still in control. Together with the quarter of legislative seats reserved for soldiers, this means there will be little

> political space for opposition members in parliament. The new government that has been formed, and which will assume power in the coming weeks, also reflects the continued dominance of the old order with the president and one of the two vice presidents drawn from its ranks and a number of cabinet ministers recycled.[2]

The United States government, the leading power critical of the military government, stated that the elections "were neither free nor fair and failed to meet any internationally accepted standards" and that "Myanmar missed an opportunity to begin genuine transition toward democratic governance and national reconciliation."[3]

President Thein Sein was aware of this mistrust and was eager to send a strong positive message to both the public and the international community. In this regard, the salient points of his speech included the following:

1. Moreover, it is still necessary to show our genuine goodwill towards those who have not accepted the constitution because of being sceptical about the seven-step road map in order that they can discard their suspicions and play a part in the nation-building tasks. Likewise, we need to convince some nations with negative attitude towards our democratization process that Myanmar has been committed to implement a democratic system correctly and effectively.
2. In transition to democracy, it is obligatory to promote democratic practices not only among the Hluttaw representatives but also among the people. To do so, I promise that our government will cooperate with the political parties in the Hluttaws, good-hearted political forces outside the Hluttaws and all social organizations.
3. Democracy will develop only hand in hand with good governance. This is why our government responsible for Myanmar's transition to democracy will try hard to shape good administrative machinery.
4. To safeguard the fundamental rights of citizens in line with the provisions of the constitution in the new democratic nation is high on our government's list of priorities. We guarantee that all citizens will enjoy equal rights in terms of law, and we will reinforce the judicial pillar. We will fight corruption in cooperation with the people as it harms the image of not only the offenders but also the nation and the people.

5. So, we will amend and revoke the existing laws and adopt new laws as necessary to implement the provisions on fundamental rights of citizens or human rights.
6. Particularly, I would like to exhort all to work together in the national interests, ignoring any negative attitude such as from the government and the opposition, which was conventional in Myanmar politics.[4]

The president's future reform agenda, including reconciliation with opposition groups, especially with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, rapprochement with the West, good governance, promotion of human rights and the abolition of repressive laws, was based on this speech. However, at that time Thein Sein could not openly say these things. He had to pass his message indirectly to the citizens of Myanmar and the international community.

These were strong and sincere words, words that before 2011 no high official would have dared to speak. The president's words were completely different from the utterances of the previous military government. Even though critics of the government said that these were all just sweet words and that the president would not implement them, for the people of Myanmar such words would have been unthinkable only a few months earlier, and many came to sense that a wind of change was blowing.

President Thein Sein's reforms were very different from "Colour Revolutions" or the so-called Arab Spring. This was not a popular uprising causing the fall of a repressive government. These reforms were implemented by the military that had seized power in 1988. Senior General Than Shwe, who led the country from 1992 until President Thein Sein assumed office, established the political mechanism that enabled the bloodless reform, and General Thein Sein, another military leader, launched the reform process based on this mechanism. It was a unique transition to democracy that led to the peaceful transfer of power to Aung San Suu Kyi as leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government in 2016.

In retrospect, President Thein Sein's five-year term of reform was a struggle to implement a new political landscape in Myanmar after twenty years of military government and isolation from the Western international community. However, though there have been many achievements, there remain many challenges. Also, there were many lost opportunities and setbacks, which future governments might learn to avoid. This is the story that I wish to tell.

Notes

1. Information Minister Kyaw Hsan relayed this message to the UN special representative to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, many times, but Gambari thought this was just the junta's propaganda.
2. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's Post-Election Landscape", 7 March 2011, p. 1.
3. The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "President Obama on Burma's November 7 Elections", press statement and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement on 7 November 2010.
4. The entire speech is printed as Appendix A along with President Thein Sein's remarks to the cabinet and other officials as Appendix B.