

# Protocols and Politics

## Protocols

After Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nationwide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the "Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma", back to the "Union of Burma", which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948. In July 1989, the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the "Union of Myanmar", which had long been the vernacular version (in the literary register, at least). In the formal declaration of the country's independence, for example, it was called the Union of Burma in the English version and the Union of Myanmar (or "Myanma") in the Burmese version. In 2011, after formal promulgation of the 2008 national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the "Republic of the Union of Myanmar".

Also, in July 1989 a number of other place names were changed by the military government to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. For example, Arakan State became Rakhine State and Tenasserim Division became Tanintharyi Division (later Tanintharyi Region). The Mergui Archipelago became the Myeik Archipelago, the Irrawaddy River became the Ayeyarwady River and the Salween River became the Thanlwin River. The city of Rangoon became Yangon, Moulmein

became Mawlamyine, Akyab became Sittwe and Maymyo became Pyin Oo Lwin. The ethnolinguistic groups formerly known as the Burmans and the Karen are now called the Bamar and the Kayin.<sup>1</sup> The people of Kayah State are widely known as Karenni, the state's name until it was changed by the Burmese government in 1952.<sup>2</sup>

The new names were accepted by most countries, the United Nations and other major international organizations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets, however, still clung to "Burma" as the name of the country, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's refusal to put the question of a change to the people of Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> The old name was also believed to be the preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was held under house arrest by the military regime for periods totalling almost fifteen years.<sup>4</sup> Questioned about the official name of the country soon after her party took office in 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi stated her continuing preference for the colonial-era term "Burma" but said that both names were now acceptable.<sup>5</sup>

After the United Kingdom dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then called) in December 1885, Yangon (then known as Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in November 2005 the ruling military council formally designated the newly built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 327 kilometres (203 miles) north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government.<sup>6</sup> The terms "Rangoon regime", "Yangon regime", or in some cases simply "Rangoon" or "Yangon", have often been used by authors and commentators as shorthand terms for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The government after 2005 is sometimes referred to as the "Naypyidaw regime", or "Naypyidaw", to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another common term is *Tatmadaw*. It is usually translated as "royal force", but the honorific "daw" no longer refers to the monarchy. Since 1948, the name has been the vernacular term for Myanmar's tri-service (army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, it has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Myanmar. Sometimes, the Tatmadaw is referred to simply as "the army", reflecting that service arm's overwhelming size and influence compared with the other two. While the term "Defence Services" usually refers only to the armed forces, it

is sometimes used in a wider context to refer collectively to the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force, the “people’s militia” and sundry other state-endorsed paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category. As the 2008 constitution decrees that “all the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services”, the formal title of the Tatmadaw’s most senior officer is Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years, some components of Myanmar’s intelligence apparatus have changed their formal titles several times. The military intelligence organization, for example, has periodically been renamed, usually to coincide with structural changes in the armed forces. These adjustments have not always been known to, or recognized by, foreign observers. Also, Burmese language titles have been translated into English in different ways. The use of popular names has added another complication. For example, ever since 1948 the Tatmadaw’s intelligence arm has been widely known as the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), or simply the “MI” (“em-eye”). Similarly, the Police Force’s Special Intelligence Department (or, strictly translated, the “Information Police”), has long been known as Special Branch, or “SB”. All this has meant that in the literature some agencies have been called by several different names, and not always accurately.<sup>8</sup>

All Burmese personal names are particular. Most people do not have surnames or forenames.<sup>9</sup> Names may be one to four syllables long, and are usually chosen depending on the day of the week that a child is born (which is why many people in Myanmar share the same names). Also, among the majority Bamar ethnic group, names are usually preceded by an honorific, such as “U”, meaning “uncle”, or “Daw”, meaning “aunt”. “U” can also form a part of a man’s name, as in U Tin U. The titles “Maung”, “Ko” (“brother”) and “Ma” (“sister”), usually given to young men and women, are also found in personal names, as in Maung Maung Aye, Ko Ko Gyi and Ma Ma Lay. To all such rules, however, there are exceptions. Some of Myanmar’s ethnic minorities, like the Kachin, have family or clan names, which are placed before their given names, as in cases like Maran Brang Seng, where “Maran” is the name of a clan.<sup>10</sup> Other ethnic minorities, like the Shan, Kachin, Karen and Chin, have their own systems of honorifics.

In Myanmar, names can be changed relatively easily, often without seeking official permission or registration. This situation

is further complicated by the frequent use of nicknames and other sobriquets as identifiers, such as “Myanaung” (the town) U Tin, “Tekkatho” (university) Phone Naing, or “Guardian” (the magazine) Sein Win. Pen-names, *noms-de guerre* and pseudonyms also have a long history in Myanmar.<sup>11</sup> For example, the birth name of General Ne Win, who effectively ruled the country from 1962 to 1988, was Shu Maung. “Ne Win”, which means “bright sun” in Burmese, was a *nom de guerre* he adopted in 1941, and retained after the war. Some Myanmar citizens were given or have adopted Western names, including those who attended Christian missionary schools in their youth. Others use only one part of their name for convenience, for example when travelling abroad or dealing with foreigners. It is not uncommon for an obituary to list more than one name by which the deceased was known.

## Politics

At the risk of some repetition, it may also be helpful to sketch out recent political developments, and to note the changes in the names of some key institutions and positions.

The armed forces effectively ruled Myanmar for half a century, since Ne Win’s coup in March 1962, when they formed a Revolutionary Council. From 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected “civilian” parliament (called the Pyitthu Hluttaw), dominated by the Burma Socialist Programme Party, the country’s only legal political organization. On taking back direct control in September 1988, the armed forces created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of an American public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but continued to rule through executive fiat.<sup>12</sup> In May 2008, the SPDC held a constitutional referendum, with predictable results.<sup>13</sup> This was followed by carefully managed elections on 7 November 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of 75 per cent elected officials and 25 per cent non-elected military officers, first met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein in March that year.

Continuing this process, by-elections were staged on 1 April 2012 to fill 48 seats left vacant after recently elected Members of Parliament had resigned to take up ministerial appointments or had

died. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), which was re-registered for the elections in December 2011, claimed that fraud and rules violations were widespread, but the party still won 43 of the 45 seats available on the day. One successful candidate was the party's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

On 8 November 2015, a new general election was held that, by most accounts, was reasonably free and fair.<sup>14</sup> The NLD received about 65.6 per cent of all votes cast, while the pro-military Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) received 27.5 per cent. Under Myanmar's "first past the post" electoral system, this gave the NLD 79.4 per cent of all the available seats.<sup>15</sup> It secured 255 in the 440-seat lower house (Pyithu Hluttaw, or House of Representatives) and 135 in the 224-seat upper house (Amyotha Hluttaw, or House of Nationalities)—a total of 390 of the 491 seats contested at the Union level.<sup>16</sup> The armed forces are allocated 25 per cent of the seats in both houses, but this gave the NLD a clear majority in the combined Union Assembly (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw). As a result, it was able to elect a new president in 2016 and pass a law creating the position of State Counsellor for Aung San Suu Kyi (who under the 2008 constitution is unable to become president, as her two children are the citizens of foreign countries).<sup>17</sup>

The national charter clearly stated that the president "takes precedence over all other persons" in Myanmar. However, even before the elections, Aung San Suu Kyi had made it clear that she intended to be "above the president" and act as the country's *de facto* leader.<sup>18</sup> Under the NLD, the president acted essentially as a ceremonial head of state. For practical purposes, Aung San Suu Kyi acted as head of the government, within the limits of the constitution, which ensures that considerable power is retained by the armed forces. This position was accepted by most other world leaders, as evidenced by her attendance at various ASEAN meetings and at the enthronement of the new Japanese emperor in October 2019. Aung San Suu Kyi was also Myanmar's Minister for Foreign Affairs and, formally at least, attended some international meetings in this capacity.<sup>19</sup>

Another general election was held in November 2020, with an estimated voter turnout of more than 70 per cent. Despite "serious deficiencies in the legal framework" noted by neutral observers, voters were able "freely to express their wills".<sup>20</sup> The result was an even more emphatic victory for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. The party won 258 seats (58.6 per cent) in the Pyithu Hluttaw and

136 seats (61.6 per cent) in the Amyotha Hluttaw, or 83 per cent of the total.<sup>21</sup> Having secured more than 322 of the 476 elected seats, the NLD was able to form a government and choose a new president. The USDP suffered dramatic losses all around the country, garnering only 33 seats in both houses. The NLD also dominated the elections for the state and region assemblies, which were held at the same time. These results promised that, barring unforeseen eventualities, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD would remain in office for another five years.<sup>22</sup> Once again, they would govern in partnership with the armed forces, which, under the 2008 constitution, were allocated three ministries in addition to 25 per cent of all seats in both national and provincial assemblies.

On 1 February 2021, however, almost exactly a decade after the SPDC permitted the transition to a “disciplined democracy”, those expectations were rudely dashed. Before the new parliament could meet that day, the armed forces unexpectedly declared a one-year state of emergency. They detained Aung San Suu Kyi and more than fifty other officials and activists. A military spokesman stated that the Tatmadaw had been forced to seize power because of the NLD’s failure to acknowledge massive fraud in the November 2020 elections.<sup>23</sup> Few foreign observers believed that was the real reason, but, despite widespread speculation in the news media and online, the reasons for the takeover remained unknown.<sup>24</sup> To the people of Myanmar, however, one thing was clear. Once again, the country had an unelected military government, and faced an uncertain future.

## Notes

1. “Writing Systems: Romanization, Government of the Union of Myanmar Notification 5/89”, Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Berlin, 27 August 2002, Doc. E/CONF.94/INF75, [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/unegen/docs/8th-uncsgn-docs/inf/8th\\_UNCSGN\\_econf.94\\_INF.75.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/unegen/docs/8th-uncsgn-docs/inf/8th_UNCSGN_econf.94_INF.75.pdf).
2. See “Karenni and Kayah: The Nature of Burma’s Ethnic Problem over Two Names and the Path to Resolution”, *Asia Peacebuilding Initiatives*, 5 February 2014, <http://peacebuilding.asia/burmas-ethnic-problem-over-two-names-and-the-path-to-resolution/>.
3. Andrew Selth and Adam Gallagher, “What’s in a Name: Burma or Myanmar?”, *The Olive Branch*, 21 June 2018, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2018/06/whats-name-burma-or-myanmar>.

4. Aung San Suu Kyi's incarceration occurred, with a number of breaks, between July 1989 and November 2010. She was detained once again in February 2021.
5. Andrew Selth, "More Name Games in Burma/Myanmar", *The Interpreter*, 10 August 2016, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/more-name-games-burmamyanmar>.
6. Occasionally, it is stated that Naypyidaw is 367 kilometres north of Yangon, but that calculation is based on the distance by road between the two cities.
7. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* (Naypyidaw: Ministry of Information, 2008), chapter 7, clause 338.
8. This issue is discussed in Andrew Selth, *Secrets and Power in Myanmar: Intelligence and the Fall of General Khin Nyunt* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).
9. D.I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. xix–xx.
10. "A Note on Burmese Names", in Thant Myint U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020), p. xii.
11. See Andrew Selth, "Burma and the Politics of Names", *The Interpreter*, 12 July 2010, <https://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-politics-names>.
12. D.S. Mathieson, "The Burma Road to Nowhere: The Failure of the Developmental State in Myanmar", *Policy, Organisation and Society* 17, no. 7 (1999), p. 108. See also "A SLORC by Any Other Name", *Washington Post*, 6 March 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1998/03/06/a-slorc-by-any-other-name/84bdf222-1eb8-417c-97ee-032cd9535e91/>.
13. The SPDC claimed that 92.48 per cent of eligible voters endorsed the new constitution. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)*, p. iv.
14. The Carter Centre, *Observing Myanmar's 2015 General Elections: Final Report* (Atlanta: Carter Centre, 2016), [https://www.uec.gov.mm/show\\_data\\_content.php?name=209pdf&type=law&code=x&sno=8455&token=9ce69a1b8f9f0effbf662cab5728f5fbc183e9b61b04b06fc97ff71e62c7fc70510d5cc03e2cd38726c2d47dab9e8471cc95b3907580555bf40fa6f6be6e0cd](https://www.uec.gov.mm/show_data_content.php?name=209pdf&type=law&code=x&sno=8455&token=9ce69a1b8f9f0effbf662cab5728f5fbc183e9b61b04b06fc97ff71e62c7fc70510d5cc03e2cd38726c2d47dab9e8471cc95b3907580555bf40fa6f6be6e0cd).
15. Kyaw Kyaw, "Analysis of Myanmar's NLD Landslide", *New Mandala*, 1 May 2012, <https://www.newmandala.org/analysis-of-myanmars-nld-landslide/>.
16. *The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*, Asia Briefing no. 147 (Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 9 December 2015).
17. "Myanmar's 2015 Landmark Elections Explained", BBC News, 3 December 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33547036>.

18. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)*, chapter 3, clause 58. See also “Myanmar Election: Aung San Suu Kyi Will Be ‘Above President’”, BBC News, 5 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-34729691/myanmar-election-aung-san-suu-kyi-will-be-above-president>.
19. When Aung San Suu Kyi represented Myanmar at the International Court of Justice in December 2019, to defend her country against charges of genocide, she did so in “a private capacity” as Myanmar’s official agent, not as the de facto head of government or foreign minister. This posed a protocol and security dilemma for the Dutch authorities. Larry Jagan, “Suu Kyi Gears Up for Genocide Hearing”, *Bangkok Post*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1806409/suu-kyi-gears-up-for-genocide-hearing>.
20. “Carter Centre Preliminary Statement on the 2020 Myanmar General Elections”, The Carter Centre, 10 November 2020, <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2020/myanmar-111020.html>.
21. “Myanmar’s 2020 General Election Results in Numbers”, *The Irrawaddy*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/myanmars-2020-general-election-results-numbers.html>.
22. Tamas Wells, “Reading Myanmar’s 2020 Elections”, Election Watch, University of Melbourne, 28 October 2020, <https://electionwatch.unimelb.edu.au/articles/reading-myanmars-2020-elections>.
23. Sebastian Strangio, “Myanmar’s Military Seizes Power in Early Morning Coup”, *The Diplomat*, 1 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/myanmars-military-seizes-power-in-early-morning-coup/>.
24. See, for example, Hannah Beech, “Democracy Hero? Military Foil? Myanmar’s Leader Ends Up as Neither”, *New York Times*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/01/world/asia/myanmar-coup-aung-san-suu-kyi.html>; and Andrew Selth, “The Coup in Myanmar: What Do We Know?”, *The Interpreter*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/coup-myanmar-what-do-we-know>.



