



LETTER FROM RANGOON

THE BURMESE SPRING

A brutal regime's shift toward democracy surprised nearly everyone. How did it happen?

BY EVAN OSNOS

On the evening of January 12th, Chitmin Lay was in his cell, in Moulmein Prison, in the lush tropical hills of southern Burma, when guards informed him that he was a free man. He had reasons not to believe them. Burmese prisons are exceptionally isolated, and Chitmin Lay had picked up only scattered news, from a hidden radio that he shared with other inmates, about a rush of political changes that were beginning to unwind the world's longest-running military dictatorship. He

was thirty-eight, and had been arrested in 1998 for taking part in a campus demonstration at Rangoon University, where he was a literature major. Under interrogation, he was beaten and starved. Put in front of a judge in a mass trial, he was convicted of making pamphlets without approval, breaking the Emergency Provisions Act and the Unlawful Associations Act, and sentenced to thirty-one years. He had expected to resume his life in 2029.

Less than twenty-four hours later,

Chitmin Lay walked out of prison amid a clamorous crowd of fellow-inmates, released as part of the government's attempt to pull itself from the ranks of the world's most reviled regimes. There was nobody there to greet him. Chitmin Lay is not famous, and Burma had so many political prisoners that the inmate lists maintained by activists could not even agree on the English spelling of his name. He was healthy, though his left eye was failing after so many years of reading in half-

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light. He had full cheeks around a broad smile that gave him an oddly childlike aspect, as if his body had paused the year he went away. He had no money to get to his mother's house in Rangoon, a daylong trip. Finally, some local opposition activists gave him the equivalent of about twelve dollars for the bus.

On the road, Chitmin Lay noticed that the traditional thatch-roofed bamboo villages were now dotted with concrete-block houses with metal roofs. "And cell phones, those were a surprise," he told me. "And the cars. We never used to see shiny cars." He was eager to try the Internet. "I'd only heard about it, how essential the Internet was, and I decided that I must learn about it as soon I'm out." Once he had greeted his

startled mother and begun to consider the tasks before him—"marriage, family, job"—he signed up for a Gmail account.

Wedged like an arrowhead between India and China, Burma has been ruled by dictators so ineptly and for so long that it can feel, these days, as if the country itself were stepping warily out of jail. Since taking office in March, 2011, the former generals who make up Burma's first civilian government in forty-nine years have released almost seven hundred activists and monks and artists, and taken more steps in the direction of democracy than Burma has seen in four decades. They have relaxed media censorship, legalized the right to unionize, and allowed members of the main opposition party to com-

pete for office; they have also distanced themselves from Burma's longtime patron, China.

In June, Australia took the symbolic step of abandoning the name Burma, which has been the choice of exiles and of Washington, in favor of the name preferred by the government: Myanmar. The United States and other nations suspended many of the economic sanctions that, for years, had sought to cripple the regime. The sudden access to a new market on China's southern border has inspired flights of extraordinary optimism. "If I could put all my money into Myanmar, I would," Jim Rogers, the Singapore-based American investor, declared recently.

Even by the standards of authoritarian

When the regime finally released the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, in November, 2010, she began a long-awaited entry into politics. This spring, she was cheered by crowds of supporters as she campaigned for the parliamentary elections, which seem to herald a new era in Burmese history. Opposite: photographs by Chien-Chi Chang. Above: photograph by Pietro Masturzo.

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regimes, Burma lives in an epoch unto itself, a relic of the prosperous country that was once the world's largest exporter of rice. Rangoon—or Yangon, as it is now known—which was so alive with diversity and immigration that it had a Jewish mayor in the nineteen-thirties, is today a place of deprivation and haunting beauty. The banyan trees reach out from the moldering remains of villas and colonial offices. Ancient buses, cast off by Japan, and now absurdly overloaded, wheeze through canyons on the broken macadam. Outside the law courts, men in crisp white shirts and longyi, Burma's traditional ankle-length sarong, hunch over ancient typewriters, feeding the maw of the bureaucracy. Gaping sinkholes in the sidewalk reveal the sewer beneath, exhaling into the tropical air. Book vendors, not far from where Pablo Neruda lived in the nineteen-twenties, display on their blankets books with such titles as "Essentials of Selling," "Radio and Line Transmission," and the I.M.F.'s "Seventh Annual Report: Exchange Restrictions, 1956."

In the countryside, Burma lives by candlelight. Three-quarters of the population get no electricity, though the nation has abundant oil, gas, and hydropower resources. The number of cell phones per capita is the lowest in the world, behind North Korea. Less than one per cent of the population is connected to the Web. In eastern Shan state, where I chatted with a woman who had never heard the name of the sitting President, cars are vastly outnumbered by horse-drawn carts.

Burma's opening has so far defied the narrative logic we've come to associate with political transformation: there is, as yet, no crowd picking through a ruined palace, no dictator in the dock. The world has witnessed more than a hundred attempts to end authoritarianism in the past twenty-five years, but the top-down, bloodless variety is rare. More often, as Thomas Carothers, a specialist on democratization at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said of dictators, "It has to be taken away from them, usually by angry citizens."

In Burma, unlike the street revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia or the civil wars in Libya or Syria, many members of the former dictatorship have retained power. When top generals retired their commissions a year ago, they removed their uniforms, but one adviser told me that they

still salute one another in private. Many of the reforms can be reversed if the government declares a state of emergency, and hundreds of political prisoners remain behind bars. And in the countryside the regime is embroiled in a brutal war against ethnic rebels, which has gone on for decades. For all the transformations Burma is undergoing, its people still find themselves strangely captive to men who were, until recently, some of history's most dedicated enemies of democracy.

I arrived in Rangoon in March, on Armed Forces Day. Traditionally, this had been an opportunity for generals to speechify and goose-step their men through the city. (The opposition once renamed it Fascist Resistance Day.) The country was preparing for the first major test of the new era: a special election, on April 1st. Although less than seven per cent of the parliamentary seats were being contested, it was the first time that the dissident Aung San Suu Kyi had endorsed the legitimacy of an election since 1990, when her party's victory was ignored by the government, a signal event in Burma's descent into misery. In that election, Aung San Suu Kyi had already been placed under house arrest, where she remained for fifteen of the next twenty-one years, as she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (in absentia) and became one of the world's most famous political prisoners. When the regime finally released her, in November, 2010, she was met at her front gate by a frenzy of admirers, who seemed to be heralding not only her long-awaited entry into politics but also the prospect of a new era in Burmese history.

Activists abroad were dubious, but Suu Kyi declared that the country was "on the verge of a breakthrough to democracy." Suu Kyi was running for the seat in Parliament representing Kawhmu, a township with vast stretches of land that had no electricity or running water. She campaigned for weeks, waving from the open sunroof of an S.U.V., shaded from the tropical sun by a parasol, as guards kept at bay tens of thousands of her supporters who lined the roads, desperate and reaching, and shouting, "A'mae Suu"—Mother Suu.

The daughter of Aung San, the martyred national hero who negotiated independence from the British Empire, Suu Kyi left the country in 1960 as a teen-ager, graduated from Oxford, and worked at

the United Nations. Though she talked of starting public libraries in Burma, and of helping students to go abroad, in 1972 she married Michael Aris, a Tibet scholar, and settled fitfully into British suburbia with him and their two children. She didn't return to Burma until 1988, for a visit with her sick mother. Before long, she was swept up in politics, and emerged as the leader of the opposition. "It's very different from living in academia in Oxford," she once said of the turn in her fortunes. "We called someone vicious in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*. We didn't know what vicious was."

A couple of days before the election this spring, Suu Kyi invited reporters over to the back yard of her house. It was a two-story colonial villa, stately but threadbare, and in the darkest days she had roamed listlessly from room to room. In the garden, she looked pale. "I'm feeling a little delicate," she said. The campaign had been gruelling, and her doctor had urged her to rest during the final days. "Any tough questions, I shall faint straight away," she said, and smiled. Over the years, the regime had tried to kill her at least once (in 2003), labelled her a "genocidal prostitute," and denied her husband's desperate requests to visit her before his death, from prostate cancer, in 1999. But she was taking a chance on this race, because, she said, "this is what our people want."

For years, Suu Kyi had called for a "revolution of the spirit," but, over the years, the poetry had been leeches from the phrase and, as one writer put it despairingly, it began to smack of "obscurantism and sheer metaphysics." In the garden that day, she reclaimed the idea. It must be "a revolution that will help our people to overcome fear, to overcome poverty, to overcome indifference, and to take the fate of their country into their own hands," she said. "An election alone is not going to change our country. It's the people, the change in the spirit of the people, which will change our nation."

To foreign reporters, who recalled Burma as a nation of whispers—where you never uttered a name on a phone line and, in some cases, carried a wig to help shake off the intelligence officers in a crowd—even a simple open-air meeting with Suu Kyi was bewildering. "Was it really only five years ago that soldiers were shooting protesters and beating monks?" Andrew R. C. Marshall, of Reuters, wrote after watch-

ing Suu Kyi in front of a crowd. For years, the country was so inaccessible that outsiders resorted to reading the aspirations of fifty-five million people through the struggle between Suu Kyi and the generals—between “Beauty” and “the Beast,” as headline writers often described it. Suddenly, the narrative seemed to have eclipsed the fable and spilled out into a raucous ensemble. At least thirty other former prisoners were running for office as well, giving themselves a crash course in politics.

The Burmese people have been subjected to the whims of despotic leaders for so long that “government” has been included in a traditional lament about the “five evils” in life, along with fire, water, thieves, and enemies. Their history has not been without glory: the first major Burmese kingdom, which flourished at Pagan, in the eleventh century, created spectacular Buddhist temples and pagodas more than a century before comparable cathedrals appeared in Europe. The Burmese went on to conquer present-day Laos and Thailand. But in 1885 a British general arrived with enough pith-helmeted troops to force the final king out of his palace on an oxcart, and declared Burma a minor province of India.

In 1942, when Japan invaded, the Burmese, including the fiercely single-minded young revolutionary Aung San, Suu Kyi’s father, joined in the fight against the Allies. Three years later, Aung San turned his troops against the Japanese and helped liberate the country alongside the British, signing an agreement to guarantee Burma’s independence within a year. The achievement made him a secular saint—the lone Burmese leader who had gained the trust of a range of ethnic groups. His face appeared on the currency, but he never lived to see it. On July 19, 1947, when Suu Kyi was two, he was assassinated by a disaffected Burmese politician. Suu Kyi’s mother was named Ambassador to India and Nepal, and Suu Kyi joined her in Delhi, where she acquired the diction of the Indian elite and the upright posture, still visible to this day, that came from never being permitted to lean against the back of a dining chair.

For the next decade, Burma enjoyed relative peace. But in Rangoon the civilian government was failing, and, after years of invasion and war, the military stepped into the vacuum. Vowing to prevent “chaos,”

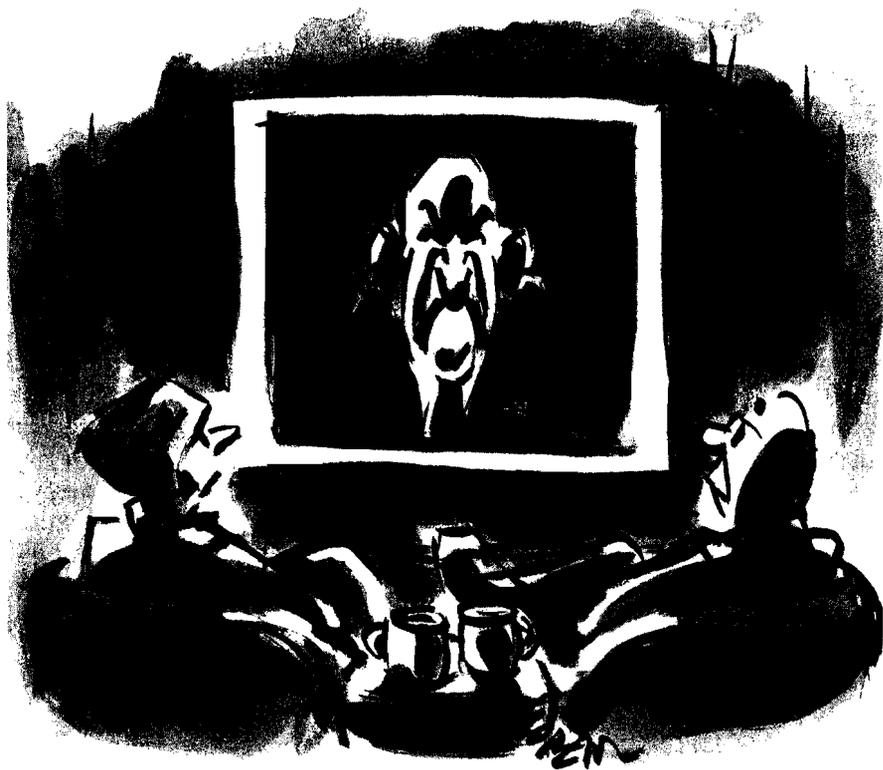
General Ne Win led a coup in 1962, evicting students and aid workers and banning the teaching of English, while nationalizing timber companies, newspapers, and the Boy Scouts. As the economy began its half-century implosion, the General consoled himself at European spas and at the races at Ascot, and with a string of wives, despite a capacity for violence that drove one of his companions away after he threw an ashtray at her throat.

By 1992, power had migrated to the man who ruled Burma until 2010: Senior General Than Shwe, a postal clerk turned psy-ops specialist, who was described by those around him, in a biography by Benedict Rogers, with telling consistency—“Our leader is a very uneducated man” and “There were many intelligent soldiers, but he was not one of them.” The poverty of his people did nothing to curb Than Shwe’s ambitions. He once considered spending a billion dollars to buy Manchester United as a gift to his grandson, a soccer fan. In 2007, Burma was tied with Somalia as the most corrupt country in the world, according to Transparency International. In July, 2010, Than Shwe had been in power for eighteen years. He had a bullfrog frown and a chest covered with medals. *Foreign Policy* named him the world’s third-worst dictator,

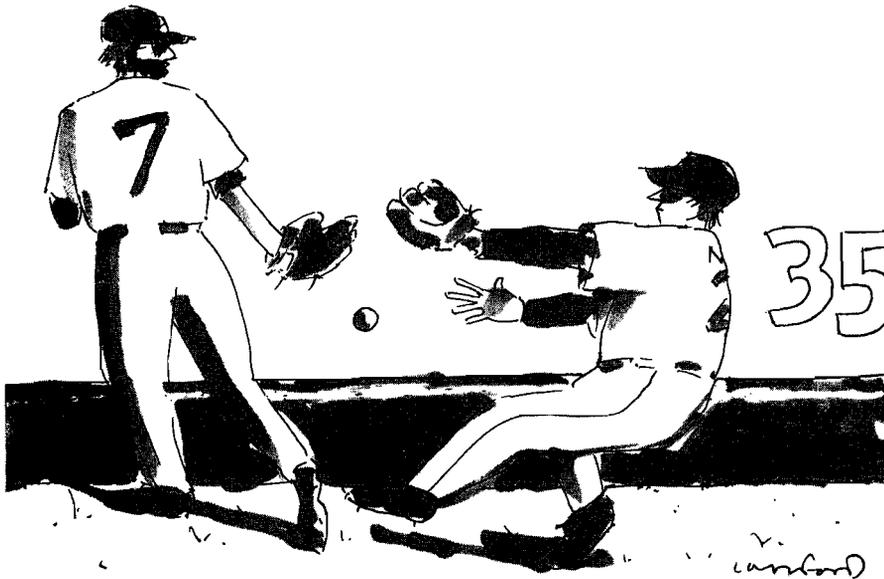
behind Kim Jong Il and Robert Mugabe.

His aides shielded him from unwanted information, and the culture of isolation permeated his government. Nay Phone Latt, a blogger who was arrested in 2008 for coordinating anti-regime protests, discovered, during his trial, that the judge and the prosecutors had a tenuous grip on twenty-first-century technology: “They knew that I was a blogger, but they thought the word was ‘blocker,’ that I was creating economic ‘blocks’ against the country or something. I could see from their faces that they weren’t joking. They had never heard the word ‘blog.’” (He was sentenced to twenty years and six months in prison, but was released in January.) Self-righteous seclusion extended to the highest ranks. Hla Maung Shwe, a businessman whose brother is commandant of the National Defense University, told me, “In the Army for twenty-nine years, my brother had one chance at exposure—a trip to Thailand for three days.” Describing the nation’s elite, Hla Maung Shwe said, “Our mind-set is in the Stone Age.”

For years, the regime was able to overlook its people’s contempt, but that became impossible in September, 2007, when tens of thousands of monks streamed into Rangoon to lead protests that became known as the Saffron Revolution. The



“And now Warren Kellogg, with the dystopian side of the news.”



"Whaddya want for nineteen mil?"

Army opened fire, killing monks and civilians and arresting thousands.

As Than Shwe aged, he and his compatriots confronted growing worries about their future. By 2010, the U.N. had escalated its accusations to the level of suspected war crimes, and Than Shwe told visitors that he had what the U.S. Embassy, in a cable released by WikiLeaks, called a "strong desire not to appear before an international tribunal." Moreover, it was beginning to seem likely that if a prosecution materialized the top man would not be the only target; the U.N. had concluded that state violence originated in the "executive, military and judiciary at all levels." If change was going to happen, time was running out.

In January, 2011, Than Shwe, who was seventy-seven, anointed a successor, General Thein Sein, who had all the makings of a Burmese Medvedev. Generally regarded as a nonentity, Thein Sein had been the acting Prime Minister when the government opened fire on the monks, in 2007. If he showed any evident virtue, it was that, in a kleptocratic regime, he was relatively uncorrupt. "He carried out the orders like everybody else," a prominent Burmese entrepreneur told me. "But every businessman in the country knows he's clean—and that's why he was never that powerful." The dictator may have had another reason for choos-

ing a cipher as his successor. When Burma's last king took the throne, he ordered his advisers to kill seventy rivals and their families in three days. Once a king lost his palace, as a Burmese saying held, "he is left with nothing but his umbrella." Than Shwe was acquainted with the tradition, because he had helped insure that his predecessor died under house arrest, with three grandsons and a son-in-law on death row. Choosing the pallid heir was "the best insurance policy," the businessman said, adding, "And, sure enough, he announced, right after his inauguration, that we are not interested in pursuing the past. Translation: amnesty."

And yet, in ways that are only now becoming clear, Thein Sein was not entirely who he appeared to be. As Prime Minister to a dictator, he had few duties, and had used his trips abroad to slip out and walk around in foreign cities. In May, 2008, as Cyclone Nargis devastated the Irrawaddy Delta, where he'd grown up, he found himself in charge of the state's breathtakingly inept response. (Among other failures, the generals initially turned down foreign aid, fearing an invasion.) More than a hundred and thirty-eight thousand people died.

Thein Sein was hardly the only one in the military who was awakening to the magnitude of the nation's failure. The ferocity of the assault on the monks—an unprecedented use of violence against the

country's most revered institution—had drawn lines within the military. A source close to the military told the U.S. Embassy that "Than Shwe and Maung Aye"—his second-in-command—"gave the orders to crack down on the monks, including shooting them if necessary," according to a November, 2007, cable. As a result, the source said, there was "growing daylight between the top two leaders and the regime's second-tier commanders." The following summer, the Embassy noted, "Some of the regional commanders are reform-minded and aware of the need for political and economic reform."

On March 31, 2011, in Thein Sein's inauguration speech, he called for workers' rights and for an end to corruption; he welcomed international expertise; and, most startling, he said that Burma's numerous ethnic groups had been subjected to a "hell of untold miseries," suggesting his intention to end the conflicts that have made Burma host to the world's longest-running civil war.

"When Burmese listened to that speech," the entrepreneur told me, "they said, 'This is so unusual, so alien to what we have been hearing for the past four decades!'" The Burmese merchant class had been pushing for political change that could boost trade, but, to many, it was impossible to imagine the old strongman allowing this. Than Shwe's imprint on government was fading faster than people had predicted, and his step back had emboldened younger generals. "They were in a position where they could start fighting for reform," Priscilla Clapp, a former Chief of Mission of the American Embassy, said. "If they had done this during the earlier years, they would have been purged." What's more, if they needed any added incentive to forge ahead on reforms, the Arab Spring was toppling dictators one after another, and as the Presidential adviser Nay Zin Latt told a reporter, "We do not want an Arab Spring here."

A group of Burmese businessmen, journalists, and academics who had developed ties to the military were eager to exploit the growing desire for a path out of Burma's isolation. They'd formed an N.G.O. called Myanmar Egress—a way out—and though it attracted considerable suspicion from activists abroad, who feared that the group was more interested in controlling reform than in unleashing it, the businessmen were pushing the younger generals to

confront how little they truly understood. To provide a glimpse of a functioning executive branch, the group gave the new President DVDs of "The West Wing." Thant Myint-U, a historian and an author who advises President Thein Sein, also urged top leaders to consider reform. "Abstract moral arguments weren't going to cut much ice," he told me. "And they were deeply cynical of Western rhetoric on human rights. The argument we made that got the most traction was: 'We're falling so far behind our neighbors economically—China and India—that, unless we change, politically as well as economically, it's going to be disastrous.'" Thomas Carothers calls it the "neighborhood effect," and explained, "When Laos overtakes you in per-capita G.D.P., it's time to rethink your basic national strategy."

One of the generals the businessmen spoke to was a former intelligence officer named Aung Min. He'd been the railway minister since 2003, and though he retains the title, he now has sweeping responsibilities for brokering peace with ethnic rebels and shaping the reform agenda. When Aung Min travelled to Bangkok to deliver a talk, Egress took the opportunity to show him around a modern city. "We took him to the food court, and on the Skytrain," one of the men on the tour told me. "On the car ride, he observed how the farms worked, how the roads worked, how the tolls worked." Routine details of government responsiveness seemed to impress him. When he flew to Europe, he commented on the fact that Westerners scheduled fewer flights at night in order to reduce the noise for people who live near the airport.

When I met Aung Min this spring in Rangoon, he had about him a Brylcreem crispness that evoked an Asian Robert McNamara. He and the President had been young officers together, and I asked him why Thein Sein was making these changes. "He understands that he can't run the government the way it used to be run by the previous government, that this government is elected by the people," he said, adding, "If you don't do what the people want, you won't survive."

Talking with Aung Min was a peculiar experience, not only because approaching a Burmese minister could have got a journalist deported a year ago but also because I couldn't figure out how much of what he said was *tabulum*, for international con-

sumption, or how a man who had spent eight years in the Cabinet of one of the world's most vicious dictators could think that his people had forgotten. "This is only the beginning," he said. "There will be many things to do in this country. But step by step, one at a time."

That tension—between vowing change and calling for patience—reflects the fact that, among former generals, the idea of reform remains so intensely polarizing that even some of its standard-bearers flinch at the term. When I met the industry minister, Soe Thane, a small, hyper-alert former Navy man, and one of the few members of the Cabinet who speak English, he was in a buoyant mood. "We feel good. We have to move," he said. I asked if he knew when the remaining political prisoners would be released, and a pained expression creased his face. "My duty is apart from that," he said. When an Australian reporter approached with a question that described the minister as part of the "reform group," Soe Thane let out a nervous bark of a laugh and said, "No, no, no, no, no." A moment later, he announced, "Time's up!" and marched off. When I encountered him again, he explained that he worries about inflaming his conservative peers. "We must be patient, and give favor to the other party," he said.

But no amount of rhetoric would earn the government credibility in Burma or abroad unless it could secure the blessing of Suu Kyi. Less obvious was just how much Suu Kyi stood to gain from an alliance. After more than two decades of dis-



sent, she was internationally renowned but not yet an active participant in the proposed reforms. In boycotting the 2010 election, her party, the National League for Democracy, had frustrated young activists, and she was at risk of becoming sainted but peripheral. For the first time in decades, all sides had a reason to find a way out of the impasse. After an exchange of secret messages, the President met Suu Kyi for dinner last August, and when she returned home she told Tin Oo, the dep-

uty leader of the N.L.D., "I have the feeling that I can work with him." Her endorsement was a turning point. The world took notice, and the President cleared the way for Suu Kyi's supporters to register as a political party and for former political prisoners to run for office.

One of the first things the new President did was hire an assortment of academics and former officers as advisers. Among those whose aid he enlisted was Nay Zin Latt, a businessman who, since retiring from the Army, had become a political commentator. "I was asked to prepare a report for the government about the next fifty years for the United States and the next fifty years for China," he told me, as he chain-smoked in his office. His conclusion? "Let's put it this way: In the long run, the United States is still strong!"

For two decades, American policy was designed to choke the regime into submission. After Burma's crackdown in 1988, the United States had reduced its presence there to a low-key embassy, with no ambassador, and in Washington, apart from a small community of activists and lawmakers, the country was ignored. Americans had been barred from investing since 1997, and, among additional measures, in 2007 and 2008 Washington moved against individuals—leaders and well-connected tycoons—by freezing assets and issuing travel bans. But by the summer of 2009 diplomats from Malaysia, Indonesia, and others in the region were funnelling signals that Burma wanted to talk.

President Obama came into office vowing to seek engagement with hostile regimes, and several people in Burma quoted to me a phrase from his Inauguration speech: "We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." The Administration saw the prospect of growing dissatisfaction within the military as powerful leverage. An Embassy source close to the military "recommended the U.S. exploit the emerging differences within the top levels of the regime by tightening our sanctions against the senior generals." Leslie Hayden, the Embassy's political officer at the time, cabled Washington that "the generals despise the sanctions and want them removed because they challenge the regime's legitimacy. If we really want to see the generals make progress, we need to show them what they will get in return." What could the United States offer? Larry

Dinger, another diplomat, signed a cable that laid out options, including “dangle World Bank and I.M.F. technical assistance” or “consider accepting the country name ‘Myanmar.’”

The Administration decided to keep sanctions in place but also to open negotiations. Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, met U Thaug, then Burma’s minister for science and technology, at the Waldorf-Astoria in Manhattan, but left largely baffled by the Burmese negotiator’s long digressions about the toll of imperialism and war. “We had to figure out, How were these people communicating?” Campbell told me. “What we would tend to think of as basically killing the clock, they would interpret as an essential expression of their historical legacy and trajectory.” At one point, Campbell flew to Burma to press for elections, the release of prisoners, and talks with ethnic groups. He met with Suu Kyi, but he made “absolutely no progress whatsoever” with the government, he said. A second trip was even less productive, and the Administration returned to a hostile posture, declaring support for establishing a U.N. commission of inquiry to investigate war crimes in Burma.

But last November, encouraged by Suu Kyi’s meeting with Thein Sein, President Obama phoned her to discuss the next steps. “If she’s supportive of this, then we’re going to go,” he told aides, and the following day he announced that Hillary Clinton would visit Burma—the first Secretary of State to do so since John Foster Dulles, in 1955. The visit was highly choreographed even by diplomatic standards: to underscore American support for the opposition, Clinton and Suu Kyi were photographed in matching white jackets. Over dinner, according to an Administration official, Suu Kyi told Clinton, “I don’t want to be an icon, I want to be a politician,” and Clinton replied, “Get ready to get attacked.” As a gift to Suu Kyi, Clinton brought books on Eisenhower and George Marshall, to help her understand the mind-set of soldiers who go into politics.

Nobody was more baffled by the turn of events in Burma than the Chinese. For years, Beijing had been Burma’s most ardent defender in the U.N. Security Council, the supplier of arms and loans, and a customer for timber, gold, and other resources. But last September Thein Sein, citing “the will of the peo-

ple,” suspended construction of the \$3.6-billion Myitsone dam, which had been financed by China to provide electricity across the border in Yunnan Province. Chinese analysts hinted at a conspiracy—they noted WikiLeaks cables that indicate that the U.S. Embassy had given grants to anti-dam groups—and debated whether the opposition would spread to North Korea or elsewhere.

In Burma, however, people talk about how their country had felt subsumed and taken for granted. The dam was designed to flood an area four times the size of Manhattan, but when Burma asked for a more thorough environmental-impact assessment “the Chinese completely shut them off, saying, We’ve already done it and see no reason to repeat the process,” Yun Sun, a China analyst based in Washington, told me. On another occasion, a delegation visited Beijing to discuss debt obligations at the Export-Import Bank of China, only to discover that the debt had been sold. The representatives were shunted aside and diverted to officials at a state-owned insurance company. Perhaps most damaging, Burmese senior military leaders concluded that Chinese military hardware wasn’t worth the billion or so dollars that had been spent. “Army officers are saying to me, The Chinese cheated us. They’ve given us all this crap and taken our resources,” Maung Zarni, a visiting Burmese academic at the London School of Economics, said.

As the parliamentary election approached, it was unclear whether the old generals could stomach an honest-to-goodness vote, and whether ordinary Burmese trusted them enough to show up at the polls.

On Election Day, I rode the ferry across the brown waters of the Irrawaddy and then took a rattletrap taxi to the river-delta township of Kawhmu, to watch Suu Kyi visit polling booths in her district. The heat shimmered above a pan-flat landscape of meandering rivers and thatch-roofed homes. Farmers drove ox-drawn plows through rice paddies. A few minutes after nine, Suu Kyi arrived at a high school in the village of Nat Sin Kong, striding gingerly across the yard, “arms swinging like a soldier,” as her biographer, Peter Popham, had put it in his recently published book “The Lady and the Peacock.”

In a tenth-grade classroom, with “Dis-

cipline, Education, Attitude” stencilled on the wall, she surveyed a lineup of plastic boxes, waved to the crowd, and was on to the next stop, trailed by a swarm of students and reporters. I stayed behind to have tea with some of the voters, and met Khin Ma Ma Chit, a farmer and a mother of two, who was still giddy with the experience of voting for the opposition. “Our parents and grandparents waited for this, but never saw it,” she said.

A former diplomat told me that, if the opposition could win half the votes, it would be “a howling success.” But it swiftly became clear that something far more decisive was under way. “We had so many feelings, so much hatred, but we kept it all inside,” another mother whom I spoke with said. “The government always oppressed us. Every rainy season, when we finally had a crop, they would take it for half the price on the market, and say, It’s for the government.”

The ruling party had held out the promise of new schools and roads to those who fell in line, and the people had smiled and handed them a humiliation. The opposition took forty-three of the forty-five contested seats, even winning neighborhoods in the capital that are home to civil servants. In Rangoon that night, thousands of supporters swarmed the ramshackle headquarters of Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, a building that is a cross between a storefront and a garage, wallpapered in yellowed news clippings and littered with the megaphones, speakers, and other flotsam of perpetual opposition. They danced and sang and mocked the generals. For years, the dilapidated office had symbolized how long Burma’s democrats toiled in vain; that night, it struck me as a symbol, as well, of how unprepared they were for the sudden arrival of success.

When I stopped by the local headquarters the next morning, Aung Thein Linn, a military man and former mayor of Rangoon with a thick black comb-over, veered between indignation and victimhood as he hailed the process that his party vowed would be fair while fulminating over the outcome. He accused his opponents of “intimidation” for sending many people to watch the counting of ballots. “There may be some kind of psychological pressure,” he said, “some mistakes as a result.” Despite the vitriol, Aung Thein Linn knew that he had lost. He

gestured toward his torso and declared, "I have so many scars on my body from fighting for the good of my country."

Three days after the election, Secretary of State Clinton announced that the United States was suspending sanctions against Burma and would be appointing an ambassador to the country for the first time in twenty-two years. Human-rights groups urged the State Department to relax restrictions sector by sector, to prevent the military from exploiting a rush into the energy business. Suu Kyi warned against the "reckless optimism" of allowing firms to deal with a state-owned energy company that lacks "transparency and accountability." But American oil companies, among others, said that they were losing business to international competitors, and in July the Obama Administration suspended sanctions across all sectors. Activists assailed the decision for going too far. Even though the Administration has expanded asset freezes and travel bans on individuals, and will require companies to report on their Burma investments, suspending sanctions, critics contend, "looks like it caved to industry pressure and undercut Aung San Suu Kyi," Arvind Ganesan, the director of the human-rights division of Human Rights Watch, told me.

Burma has added a new dimension to the debate about the handling of rogues: Did the sanctions work? Does Burma tell us anything about how we should approach Syria or Iran? Inside the country, the consensus has not changed. "It didn't hurt the ruling junta one iota," Serge Pun, a prominent Burmese businessman, told me. "It actually hurt all the normal people, the poor people. Thousands of factories had to close down, because their products could not be sold to the West. Honestly, when you have China and India on both sides, who did not participate in the sanctions, and you had nine other ASEAN countries who also didn't participate, the sanctions, in effect, couldn't work."

Curiously, that was also the consensus in Washington for many years. Tom Malinowski, a Burma expert and an advocate of sanctions who worked in the Clinton White House when the first round of sanctions were imposed, said, "They imposed sanctions not because they genuinely believed that they would work but because they wanted to do *something*." As the generals endured and enriched them-

selves, the measures were declared a failure. "They were only strong enough to weaken the country, not strong enough to remove the leaders," Nay Zin Latt, the Burmese Presidential adviser, told me.

But that verdict may have been premature. For all the suffering they produced, sanctions and scorn did narrow the junta's options. Sanctions drove the leaders deeper into China's embrace than they could tolerate and piqued their fears of falling behind their neighbors. The generals were denied access to the World Bank and other facilities that they believed had been indispensable to the rise of China and Vietnam. "They realized they had no choice but to bring Aung San Suu Kyi on board," Maung Zarni said. "That is not a values shift, where they say we need to treat our people like human beings. It's a technical, strategic move."

The struggle to bring democracy to Burma has been so tortuous that it's easy to overlook the uncomfortable fact that the greatest challenge confronting the country's future now lies hundreds of miles from Rangoon, in borderlands where eth-

nic minorities are demanding their share of power. Burma is blessed with and bedeviled by diversity—home to an estimated hundred and thirty-five ethnic groups—and, in the year since reforms began, government negotiators have succeeded in striking agreements with ten out of eleven main ethnic groups. But the conflicts that persist are bitter. In a remote expanse of emerald hills and jagged ridges in Burma's northern reaches, a seventeen-year ceasefire collapsed a year ago, pitting government forces against the Kachin Independence Army, a rebel insurgency that has demanded greater political autonomy and control over the country's natural resources. The Kachin war had proved especially difficult to resolve, because the land is rich with gold and gems and other things worth fighting about. Each side blamed the other for the resumption of hostilities. In December, the President ordered the commander-in-chief to halt attacks and fire only in self-defense, but the war raged on—suggesting that the President lacked the power or the resolve to make his commanders carry out his orders.

By spring, when I reached the site of



"I bought him some underwear that should help reduce drag."



"No, no, the way you're shifting your papers—it's all wrong."

the Kachin conflict, the fighting had uprooted seventy-five thousand people, according to a report by Human Rights Watch, which accused the Burmese military, since last June, of having "threatened and tortured civilians during interrogations for information about KIA insurgents, and raped women." The Army also, according to the report, "used antipersonnel landmines and conscripted forced labor." It accused the K.I.A. of "using child soldiers and antipersonnel landmines."

I arrived a few days ahead of the monsoon, and the fighting had intensified. The rebels, who augment their supply train with the use of pack elephants, had steadily lost ground in recent months and were regrouping in the remote town of Laiza, beside the Chinese border. The town was awash in soldiers on motorbikes and in pickup trucks, and people were arriving from villages already gripped by fighting. "This is the most intense period in our revolutionary journey," Kumhtat La Nan, the Joint General Secretary of the political wing of the rebel army, told me, when I stopped by the headquarters, a small hotel that had been fortified with gun positions and adorned with a banner that read, "God Is Our Victory." China had reportedly turned refugees away at the border, but the rebel commanders expected an exodus in the event of an attack, because people had nowhere else to go.

Recently, President Thein Sein had announced a renewed commitment to negotiations, but nobody I met in Kachin

expected a swift conclusion: not the father of seven, entrenched in an outpost of tunnels and foxholes, who was fighting because "the Burmese Army took everything (land, fields, prosperity)"; not the Baptist pastor who feared that violence was radicalizing a new generation of youths; and not the farmer who had been burned out of his house, and was now in a bamboo shelter for displaced persons, and told me, "The new government talks about peace, but if it doesn't give us our rights, then the war will take a long time."

The risk that withdrawing the military from Burma's politics could lead to flashes of unrest became vivid in June, when sectarian clashes exploded near the border with Bangladesh, between a Muslim ethnic group, the Rohingya, and local Buddhists. The President declared a state of emergency in the region—his first exercise of that power since taking office—and by the time calm had been restored more than two dozen people were dead and thirty thousand had been displaced. This did not bode well for ethnic harmony. On Burma's newly uncensored Internet forums, bloggers poured rage on the Rohingya—a stateless people who are persecuted in Asia, much like the Roma in Europe—calling them terrorists, bandits, and dogs.

Even at the epicenter of Burma's transformation—Rangoon, the city that stands to benefit most from the deluge of new ideas and investment—the changes have been so disorienting that the domi-

nant sensation in the teahouses and the moldering office blocks is not so much joy as vertigo. For Khin Maung Swe, who spent sixteen years in prison, the reforms ceased to be abstract when he looked out his front door one morning in January. "The man from military intelligence who had been waiting there every day was no longer there," he told me. "I have no idea where he went."

Things are no less unsettled for the spooks and minders who have spent their lives eavesdropping on the nation. At a campaign rally, Swe Win, a local journalist, was taking notes when a young plainclothes officer from the secret police, known as the Special Branch, mistook him for a fellow-agent and sidled up to him. "He said, 'We're like fish out of water here. Who knows what we're supposed to do?' Under the old law, he should have detained anyone holding a meeting that consisted of more than five people. I told him to go and take a seat. He obeyed my order and went and took a seat, and waited for his colleagues." Telling the story, Swe Win, who spent six years in prison, shook his head and said, "I almost felt sorry for him." Clapp, the former diplomat, compares the disorder of the security apparatus to "a creature that has lost its central nervous system. The legs are flailing, and it doesn't know which way to turn," she said.

One afternoon in May, when I met Chitmin Lay, the newly released prisoner with an interest in the Internet, he'd been out of jail for four months. By then, the thrill had ebbed to reveal an acute awareness of loss. "Fourteen years," he said, and flashed a large bitter smile. We were in a booth at a candy-colored café called J'donuts, in an air-conditioned mall; a young couple were canoodling in a corner booth. Chitmin Lay wanted to be a teacher, but he was over the age limit for entry-level positions. "Right now, I'll take anything I can find," he said. Burma's prison culture had been designed to promote maximum feelings of futility—at one jail, a new arrival was given a shard of a clay pot and ordered to "polish the mud outside until it shines like a mirror."

One afternoon, I visited leaders of the '88 Generation, the activists who have been in and out of jail since the uprising that took place that year. They now work from a two-story house previously occupied by a brothel. When I arrived, they were in the back yard, in a concrete shed, crowded around a Power-Point presentation on the environment, as

they tried to make sense of SO₂ and NO_x and heavy metals. The shack held a pantheon of Burmese heroes—the charismatic poet Min Ko Naing, the strategist Ko Ko Gyi—all comically wedged into school chairs with plastic desks on the arms. Jailed as college students, they are now pushing fifty, and they pose an uncertain new political force: not in the street, and not in Parliament.

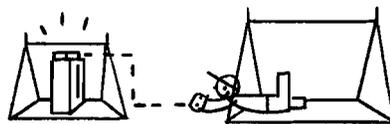
After the presentation broke up, Ko Ko Gyi said, “We’re ready to cooperate with the new government.” He thought for a moment, and revised his sentence: “cooperate and *compete*.” Former prisoners drifted back into the house to smoke and eat in a kitchen cluttered with sacks of rice and shallots. After eighteen years of being away, Ko Ko Gyi is gaunt but healthy, with a receding wave of black curls. “I don’t count the years of prison life, so I’m twenty-eight years old,” he said with a smile. When he was released, on January 13th, he was in solitary confinement, in a cell that measured seven paces across, serving a sixty-five-year sentence. He left behind everything except a few books: two volumes by Barack Obama, one by Nelson Mandela, and a textbook called “Learn French in Three Months.”

Ko Ko Gyi is considered one of the former prisoners who have the greatest potential in politics, but for him, and for many others in Burma, the path from dissident to politician is fraught; for every Nelson Mandela, there is a Lech Walesa, whose fiery persistence, the very quality that allowed him to survive, failed him in government. But Ko Ko Gyi thinks that the focus on individuals is precisely the problem: “People here don’t know they can stand up themselves. Again and again, we must say it: Politics is your job; it’s not only for the politicians.” He went on, “For such a long time under dictatorship, each and every citizen lost a role in society. Trust disappeared. They tried to escape the crisis, to find their own way. They couldn’t care who suffers or who loses. They had to focus only on themselves.” If Burma is to recover, he said, people will need to begin to trust the system again. “The most important thing is institutionalization,” he said. “We cannot depend on any one person.”

By early summer, the Burmese people were becoming acclimated to radically altered roles both at home and in the world. Suu Kyi, after winning her seat in Parliament, travelled abroad for the first

time in more than two decades, including a seventeen-day European tour fit for a head of state. On a stop in Thailand, she drew such frantic crowds that President Thein Sein cancelled his own visit there a few days later, apparently to avoid being upstaged—an episode that indicated how hard it may be for the regime to accommodate the freshman lawmaker from Kawhmu, who happens to be a Nobel laureate. She used her first short speech in Parliament to call for “equal rights” for ethnic minorities, beyond simply protecting their languages and culture. “The flames of war are not completely extinguished,” she said.

On the street, ordinary Burmese tested their new political freedoms. In May, in the airless pre-monsoon days, a wave of power outages left people stewing without fans or water pumps for their toilets, and more than a thousand protesters took to the streets of Mandalay, raging about the shortage of electricity. It was the nation’s largest demonstration in five years, and when I drove into Mandalay on the night after the protests, through a countryside as black as the sea, police officers occupied every corner downtown. It was becoming clear that the issue had far less to do with electricity than with the dawning realization that so much of the nation’s wealth had been salted away over the years by so few. A man in his twenties, showing me around a darkened neighborhood in the sidecar of his bicycle, pointed to a private clinic, whose lights had been provided by a generator, and said, bitterly, “The rich man’s hospital.” The streets were tense but, so far, peaceful. The police held their fire.



In the West, Burma’s efforts toward openness and democratization had touched off that rare thing in diplomacy: a race to declare not who had lost a country but who had won it. In the Administration, there was a sense that Burma is a risky source of pride: a successful test of President Obama’s commitment to engagement, and a vast new market for American business, but also a high-profile bet on men of immense moral flexibility. “A lot of the

stuff that Thein Sein has done is smart, wise, and bold,” an Administration official said. “The question is about the local official ten levels below—will he follow through? The local commander, will he follow through? And that’s going to need to be a systemic change over years, not months.”

For all the uncertainty about Burma’s future, the facts of the present are astounding: a nation roundly described as irredeemable has stepped back from the brink. The former generals are not without vanity, and, after decades of being mocked and scorned, they are savoring the trappings of statesmanship. Moreover, the opposition is, at last, free enough to make an impact, and it is loath to squander its freedom on infighting. But the real test of the two sides’ ability to forge an open society together may not come until Burma’s next general election, in 2015.

The Burmese people today would not tolerate a return to the eccentric seclusion of the past, and, month by month, reforms become more difficult to undo. But if it was cynical to assume that Burma could not change, it is naïve to predict a smooth and peaceful future. Forty-nine years of brutality and suspicion have distorted the body and soul of the nation, and the greatest threat may rise from within. Freedom, circumscribed, is an unstable state of nature, and the generals may not be able to control the forces they have unleashed. That fact—the volatility of rising expectations—reminded me of a story that Swe Win, the journalist, once mentioned in connection with his six years in prison. “For a long time, they didn’t let us have anything to read or write,” he said. “And then, one day, they gave us religious books. After a while, we said, ‘Since you gave us religious books, you must allow us to have non-religious books.’ And they said no. But we persisted, and eventually they said O.K. Then we said, ‘Now that we have non-religious books, you must let us read state newspapers, because you control them anyway.’ And they said no. But we persisted.” By the time he left prison, the inmates had nudged and negotiated their way to obtaining not only state newspapers but also local journals and, at last, foreign publications. “It took three years,” Swe Win said. “But we got them.” ♦