

Final project

Myanmar's reform: A political suicidal move?

I. Introduction:¹

Prior to 2011, Myanmar's government is effectively a military junta, ruling the nation with an iron fist since 1988 but to much of everyone's surprise, the junta transformed itself into a democratic civilian government after a series of reforms between 2011 and 2015. In the first democratic and inclusive election of country in 2015, the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) lost the election to the opposing party National League for Democracy. This election is the fruit of the political reform initiated four years earlier.

The most intriguing thing about Myanmar's political reform in 2011-2015 was the top-down nature of the reform. That being said, it was the military junta that initiated the reform process, amidst a relatively peaceful period in Myanmar when there was no viable challenger to the regime. The main political challenger, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was crippled and unable to mount an effective protest against the government. Nevertheless, despite the skepticism from inside and outside the country, the reform took place and changed Myanmar's political landscape in a very positive direction.

This paper will argue that the Myanmar's political reform from 2011 to 2015 is a carefully calculated move by the military to stay in power, rather than a seemingly political suicidal act.²

II. Background:³

Myanmar is a South East Asian country with a population of fifty six millions (CIA factbook, 2016). Prior to 2011, the country is ruled by the military junta, which took control of the government in 1988 after a coup d'etat. In the same year, the country experienced widespread protests against Ne Win regime, who ruled Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) from 1962 to 1988. In the end, the military brutally suppressed the people's protests and set up a dictatorship which lasted for more than twenty years. The US had condemned the act and imposed many sanctions on this poverty-stricken country.

Most notably, in 2007, after almost 20 years of peaceful control since the 1988 uprisings, the Burmeses suddenly rose up against the junta and conducted a massive protest, also known as the Saffron revolution. Although the protest only lasted for three months and failed to make any structural change, the government realized that the people could conduct a nationwide protest without a prominent political faction instigating it. Although the government was able to be remained in power by brutally cracked down the revolution, its ruling legitimacy had been undermined.

¹ #organization: I presented the information in a systematic order to help the readers follow the analysis

² #thesis: Here I presented the thesis for the paper

³ #selflearning: To understand about the problem, I researched about Myanmar politics, economy and society

III. Analysis of the decision⁴

To evaluate the decision to reform Myanmar politically, we will assess the utility of staying status quo versus reforming. The agent we are considering here is the “military”, which implies the top military leaders who benefits from the authoritarian nature of the old government. The decision made the regime we are considering is to reform the political landscape of Myanmar, which allow opposing parties to be active and participate in free elections.

Scenario 1: Maintaining the status quo

In this scenario, the referencing point of the regime utility wise is the military remains in power and continues to benefit from it. However, the regime is risking being toppled by an opposing party like the NLD, or a people's revolution like the Saffron revolution. We will evaluate those risks by investigating the government's sustainability and survivability.

a) Economy:

According to UNDP, Myanmar is one of the least economically developed countries (LEDCs). The economy is largely agricultural and dependent on export of natural resource. Thus, the country has little capability to self-sustain and self-provide, despite vast amount of natural resource inside its territory.

At the time, the country also received little financial aid to develop the economy. According to OECD, Myanmar received only 5\$ per capita in financial aid, lowest in the region. The reasons that the country received so little financial aid were the sanctions imposed on the country and the bad reputation of the regime. The political instability and long-standing conflicts with the rebels also contribute. During the Saffron revolution in 2007, as a response to the death of Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai, Japan cut development aid to Myanmar.

The regime's bad reputation also hurts the country in trade. As mentioned before, the United States and EU imposed sanctions on the country in response to government's brutal crackdown in 1988. Because of this, Myanmar is dependent on China and ASEAN countries for imports and exports. As of 2008, Myanmar's largest trading partners are China and Thailand. In 2014, China claimed more than 40% of Myanmar's import shares and one-third of the total exports value (World Bank).

Overall, prior to the reform, Myanmar is one of the slowest growing economy in the region, and it was caused partially due to the longstanding sanctions imposed on the country. Therefore, a more democratic Myanmar is likely to follow with economic growth. Furthermore, many core industries in Myanmar, which are owned by many senior politicians, will be benefitted as a result of a better economy. Thus, the senior politicians and military generals will see the reform outcomes as positive economy wise.

b) Military:

About Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw), they are one of the most seasoned armed forces in the region. With arms support from China and being in a constant fighting state with the ethnic insurgents, the Tatmadaw is well-versed in low-intensity combats and unconventional warfare.

⁴ #utility: I evaluated the decision by assessing the utility of the choices

That being said, the Tatmadaw is capable of cracking down a large-scale revolution as it did in the past in 1988. Should another large-scale protest like the 8888 Uprising or the Saffron revolution happens in the future, the military are capable of suppressing them.⁵

c)Soft power:

One key aspect about the Myanmar military junta is that it does not possess a ruling legitimacy. In fact, the military conducted a military coup in 1990 when the opposing party, NLD, was democratically elected into the office. Thus, the regime did not enjoy wide support from the population. Furthermore, unlike many authoritarian regime like North Korea or Iran, the military junta does not possess an ideology that justifies its ruling legitimacy.

For these reasons, plus the bad reputation of the army, the regime does not have a soft power to control the population. On the other hand, there are many groups possess greater soft power and capable of mobilize a large number of people like religious groups and opposing parties. As a matter of fact, the events in 2007 show that Myanmar people are capable of revolting, even without a prominent political party to lead them.

Because of having little to no soft power over the population, the military junta sees the prospect of a revolution is likely in the future.

d)Foreign influence⁶

On international level, Myanmar is largely isolated from many countries in the world, after the United States and EU condemned the regime for brutally suppressed its people in 1988. As a result, the country is very in diplomatic options, and become increasingly dependent in China. If the regime decided to maintain the dictatorship, the country will continue to be dependent in China, which is considered a bad political position.

Scenario 2:Reforming

a)Economy

The sanctions imposed on Myanmar by the West are justified on the authoritarian nature of the regime. With the political environment become freer and fairer, the sanctions are likely to be partially lifted, or in best case scenario, completely lifted.

Also, as mentioned before, the bad reputation of the regime and Myanmar's instability has caused the investors, nations and international organizations to be reluctant in giving out aid or investing in the country. The reform will send a signal of goodwill and positivity that would attract investors and financial aid packages into the country.

⁵ #induction: Here I based my generalization “the military is able to suppressed every future protests” on previous accounts of the military's exercise of force

⁶ #multilevelanalysis: I analyzed the system in many levels:the state level, the residential level (covering the people of Myanmar) and international level to assess the decision.

These outcomes are likely to boost the long-stagnated economy of the country and benefit everyone in Myanmar.

b)Soft power

The reform can rectify the military's image in the past as brutal and authoritarian. This boost of trust can help them win the 2015 general election, where the elections is free for all political parties and fair. However, the likelihood of the USDP losing the election to a more popular NLD is higher than it maintains control of both houses.

c)Foreign influence

The reform can lead to diplomatic normalization with West and lessen Chinese influence. For the regime, it would be a huge political victory. However, it could come with a price if China disapprove the reform.

China, as one of Myanmar's main influencing faction on international level, at the time wanted the regime to have a more stable political environment and better socio-economic situation. On China's part, the country already had a bad reputation for being an authoritarian state and sponsoring many unpopular regime in Africa and Asia. An unstable neighbor is also likely to inspire more defiance in mainland China, like the protests in 2011. For these reasons, the reform does not completely go against China's favor.

Coincidentally, the United States under Obama's presidency is very welcomed of the reform. Under the pivots Asia vision of president Obama, the United States is likely to respond positively to the political developments in Myanmar.

IV. Conclusion of the analysis

By considering the risk and benefit of both scenarios, we can see that staying status quo will benefits the military and the ruling party USDP more than reforming, but it also has a lot of potential risk being overthrown by its own people. The scenario, on the other hand, has a reasonable amount of benefits to the regime while the risk level is lower.

In prospect theory, proposed by Kahneman, the agent has the tendency to be risk averse, unless it is the domain of loss (Kahneman, 1992). For the regime, its reference point is staying in power, which is achievable in both scenarios because the military will still have considerable influence in the government (controls 25% of the seats, no change to the constitution can be made without the approval from the military,...), thus it opts for the second option:reform.

V. Outcomes

In reality, the regime did carry out the reform. The outcomes is largely positive:

a)Economy

As predicted, Myanmar enjoys an increased amount of foreign aid.

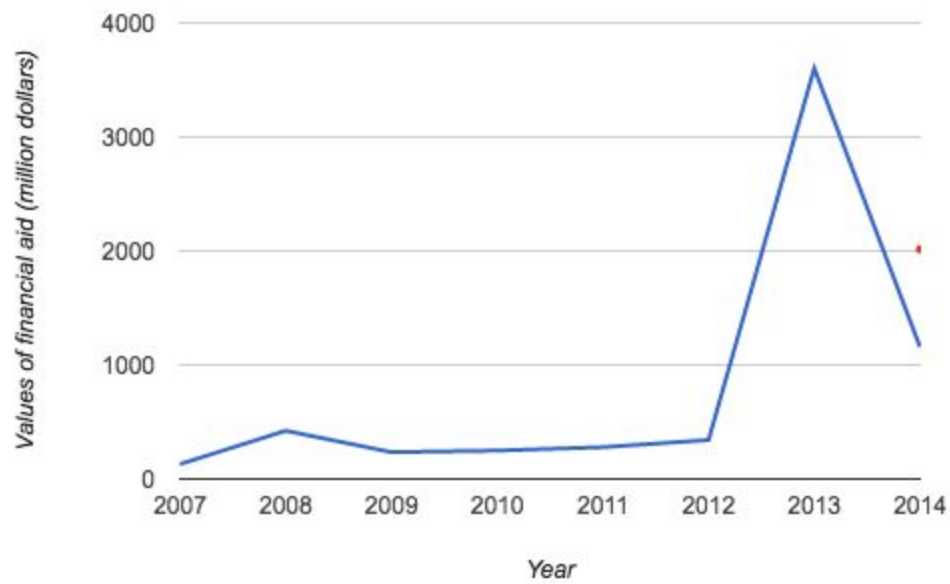
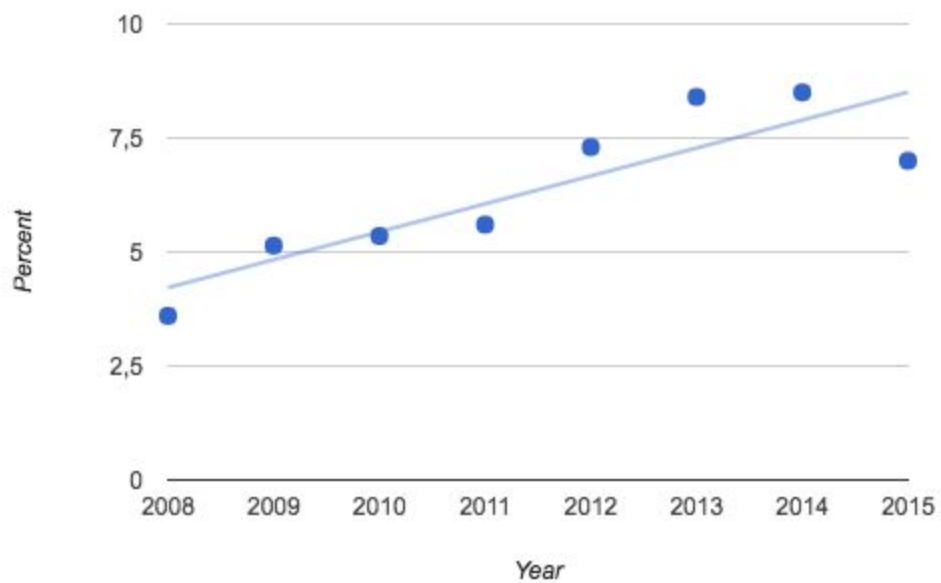


Fig. 1 Amount of financial aid received from DAC countries each year, from 2007 to 2014. Data collected from oecd.org⁷

Myanmar's economy was also improved with a higher annual GDP growth rate since 2011.



⁷ #dataviz

Fig. 2 Annual GDP growth rate of Myanmar from 2008 to 2015. Data collected from Central bank of Myanmar. The growth rate is positively correlated with the time progress of the reform (2011-2015)⁸

b) Diplomatic

In response to the political developments in Myanmar, the EU was the first to lift some of the sanctions in Myanmar (The Guardian, 2012). Although the move was criticized for exist human rights concerns, it was a huge encouragement to the regime.

Although it is anticipated that the country will enjoy an improved relationship the US, the complete removal of US sanctions on Myanmar in 2016 exceeded everyone's expectation (Al Jazeera, 2016).

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, Myanmar's political reform is proven to be a political success of the military, under the leadership of ex-president Thein Sein. The military maintains its importance in Myanmar's politics, while building a more democratic Myanmar with better socio-economic situation as a result of better diplomatic relation with the West.

Through the analysis, we discover that the government's slow reform progress was encouraged by timely US' response, accompanied with somewhat of an approval from the Chinese leaders. Had the West act otherwise, the reform efforts could have been undermined.

Lastly, the issue is yet to be completely studied. The question of why the reform progress was so slow is yet to be fully answered. One possible explanation for this was the mistrust within the USDP leaders and the retirement of hardliner Than Shwe had paved the way for the reformists to carry out the reform. If we can answer this question, we can gain insights about the dynamic of Myanmar politics prior to the reform.

VII. Source

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⁸ #descriptivestats

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