

Report 2011/2012

How long is the “Burmese Spring” going to last?



Aung San Suu Kyi stands with President Thein Sein after their first meeting in August 2011.
(At the wall: Picture of Aung San, Burmese independence hero and father of Aung San Suu Kyi)

The endless stream of visiting international politicians and the international media circus created big expectations about the thawing of Myanmar (Burma) and about a rapid move to democracy. But hold your breath, is the change Myanmar real and sustainable or is a backlash likely?

Over the last 12 months Myanmar has seen many political developments which taken most international observers and Burmese citizens by surprise: an unprecedented space for open speech and civil society, open discussions in parliament, the release of a substantial number of political prisoners, the forceful and tolerated resurgence of Aung San Suu Kyi into the political arena, and the overwhelming win of the NLD (National League for Democracy) in the by-elections on April 1, 2012.

The recent victory of Aung San Suu Kyi was widely expected but the number of seats won by the NLD surprised the Myanmar government and the military elite. The nominally civilian government carefully orchestrated the by-elections to be free and fair; it wanted to confirm the international community's believe that Myanmar is on an irreversible track to democracy. As an ethnic parliament member put it: "I think this government wanted her [Suu Kyi] to be in Parliament because they wanted to show the people of Burma and the international community that they have cooperated with her," said Aye Thar Aung, the chairman of the Arakan League for Democracy, "Moreover, the government wanted the international community to lift sanctions and allow aid from the World Bank."

Losing the contested seats in the by-elections did not affect the ruling majority. The NLD will hold less than 7% of the seats in the Parliament. In both Houses the government party USDP and the military will continue to hold on to an overwhelming majority. However, the president knew quite well that widespread condemnation would have followed if his USDP would have fixed the results and won a majority of the seats as it happened in the 2010 general elections.

So what is behind all of this and are the developments honest and sustainable? If one takes off the rose-tinted glasses and tries to evaluate reality the government's proclaimed intentions to build a free and democratic society are doubtful.

- A substantial number of political prisoners were released but for most the sentences are suspended only and the president can send them back to jail any time. And about 400 to 600 political prisoners still languish in prison.
- The gigantic Chinese hydro-electric construction project of the Myitsone Dam in the North was suspended only and not terminated. The Chinese government pushes hard to revive it as quickly as possible. Visiting the area at the end of December 2011 we wondered why so many Chinese workers are still on the construction site; in the meantime there are more signs that construction activities continue out of sight of the public.
- The security laws, the electronics transactions act and other restrictive rules are still in place: these laws and regulations are very broadly worded and are open to arbitrary interpretation and can be enforced by the authorities at will.
- The rigorous press censorship has been informally replaced by 'self-censorship' but sensitive topics such as reporting about the ongoing fighting in the ethnic areas and critical comments about the military are still prohibited and the censorship office is alive and active. And daily newspapers other than the government's mouthpiece are still prohibited.
- The government signed ceasefire agreements with the ethnic nationalities in haste. Simultaneously, the army sends troop enforcements into the ethnic areas and stocks up supplies. The president ordered a stop of fighting in December 2011 and vowed peace in the ethnic areas twice afterwards. However, the army command does not listen and the civil war between the government and the KIO (Kachin Independence Organization) in Kachin State continues unabated. 75,000 civilians, mostly women and children, sought shelter in refugee camps in Northern Myanmar and across the border in China. In June 2011 the Burmese army started the military offensive in Kachin State ending 17 years of ceasefire. The KIO did not want to transform to a Border Guard Force - a second class army - but rather wanted to be part of the Myanmar National Army. Furthermore, the KIO continues to demand an autonomous state in the Union of Myanmar as promised in 1947 before Burma declared independence.

So, can we trust the President and his government? Whatever his personal intentions may be, his position under the 2008 Constitution is rather weak compared to the powers of the Supreme Commander (Commander-in-Chief) who is in full control of the Myanmar army. The ultimate power under the constitution does not rest with the president nor with the parliament, it lies with the commander-in-chief and the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC). The commander appoints the 25% military members of the parliament (Lower and Upper House), the commander has a decisive role in the formation and the functioning of the cabinet (he appoints and can dismiss the key ministers), and while the president cannot remove the commander, the commander can trigger impeachment proceedings against the president through his control of 25% of both parliamentary houses.

The commander-in-chief and the president are both members of the 11-member National Defense and Security Council but the commander nominates 6 of its members, the nominations cannot be objected by the president. The commander is neither appointed nor accountable to the parliament, his tenure is unlimited and in the event of a broadly defined national emergency he assumes power right away. A national emergency could be fabricated quite easily, e.g. fighting in Kachin State and claims of secession, a movement against the constitution, a violation of national interests by broad-based protests against Myitsone Dam or other hydro-electric projects, a resignation of the president Thein Sein, etc.

On the occasion of the Armed Forces Day (March 17, 2012) the Commander-in-Chief reiterated the military's claim to power. In his speech he confirmed that the military will continue to play its constitutional role in politics and will use its 25% minority to block any changes of the 2008 Constitution.

After the April 1st by-elections Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD declared constitutional change as one of its core goals. The unyielding and contrarian position of the commander-in-chief might put the government's honest (?) intentions to a real test soon. Assuming that NLD's strong electoral mandate will hold until the 2015 general elections a clash of the two sides is probable and a reversal of the 'Burmese Spring' might happen. Burmese history is full of precedents of backlashes.

Since we visited the Kachin refugee camps at New Year and listened to the many stories of abuse we do not believe in the honesty of the Myanmar government. Given the superficiality of the ceasefire agreements with the ethnic nationalities and the lack of any true changes or termination of the repressive laws we believe the current changes are tactical (words) only and the hidden agenda of continued military dominance will surface soon.

As long as the broad-based military offensive against the ethnic nationalities will not stop genuine peace, sustainable economic development and democratic reform in Myanmar will continue to be an unrealistic dream. The ethnic areas account for roughly 50% of the total Myanmar territory with about 35% of the total population. About 70% to 80% of the ethnic areas are off-limits to foreigners and international NGOs including the UN. Of course, these areas are the least developed and the people living here are the poorest of the poor. Without access for UN, NGOs and foreign investment to the restricted areas the living conditions of the most in need will not improve.

Conclusions:

- Will the political opening continue? Maybe, for a limited time period.
- Will there be economic reforms? Yes, likely in the natural resources sector and in Myanmar's central area. Most Burmese and ethnic nationalities will not benefit.
- Will there be a transition to a democratic society? Unlikely, but too early to tell.

I. The new activities of People In Need (PIN) in 2011

1. Refugee crisis in Kachin State

During the second half of 2011 we focused on the growing number of refugees in Kachin State in the North of Myanmar. In June 2011, the Myanmar army attacked the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) breaking a 17 year-old ceasefire agreement. Main points of contention were the refusal of the KIO to transform to a Border Guard Force – a militia under Burmese supreme command – and the demand of the Kachins to become an autonomous state in the Union of Myanmar. The Myanmar army burned down villages, destroyed the harvest, and drove the villagers away. Up to now 75,000 Kachins, - mostly women and children - have been uprooted by the fighting. The displaced persons found refuge in church compounds, refugee camps in the mountains and jungles of Kachin State, and across the border in China. Food and water are scarce and the refugees rely mostly on the support by local NGOs and the Christian churches - the Kachin are predominantly Christians. International NGOs

are not allowed to enter the KIO-controlled territory by the Myanmar government und even the UN was only given access twice to deliver aid to the refugees in the remote areas. A return of the victims of the civil war to their home villages is highly unlikely as both parties use landmines and have laid mines in the villages and the fields.

PIN supports a local Burmese NGO in building refugee shelters, educational and health support and trauma-healing activities.



Bhamo: One shelter for 6 households



Waimaw: Church compounds are overcrowded

2. New nursery building in East Dagon Township completed

In May 2011 our reliable construction team finished the construction of the nursery and boarding house for university students in East Dagon Township of Yangon. The Sisters of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary operate the nursery and manage the building. The nursery could welcome the first children in June 2011. The student boarders will follow in 2012. In this project PIN is a junior partner to Munich Aid, a German foundation, which works in Burma since several years.



Nursery & boarding house in East Dagon



Nursery girl

3. Boarding house for girls in Mandalay extended

The Burmese education system is under-developed and in the rural areas students have difficulties to find high-schools close to their home villages. As a consequence, many students are forced to attend high-schools in the bigger cities and stay away from home in boarding houses. Of course, girls are most vulnerable and the female students find it hard to find a safe boarding house for the three years of high-school study.

In Mandalay, the second biggest city in Myanmar, the demand is exceptionally high. Here the Good Shepherd Sisters have operated a boarding house for 20 girls since 2004. As the Sisters take an active role in education, supervise learning and homework, and organize tuition classes the success rate in the final exams is high and the waiting list for new boarders is long.

In 2011, PIN agreed to finance jointly with the Thai Province of the Good Shepherd Sisters an extension of the boarding house. By building a second floor on top of the one-story boarding house the capacity of the house could be doubled from 20 girls to 40 girls. The extension was finished within the 2-months school holidays and at the start of the new school year on June 1, 2011 40 girls could move into the bigger boarding house.

PIN only shared the construction cost of the building's extension; the operating expenses are borne by the Good Shepherd Sisters.



Student boarders in Mandalay



Boarding house with new 2nd floor

II. Our continuing projects

1. Nursery for poor children in Yangon still in big demand

Since 2006 PIN runs a nursery in Downtown Yangon for 70 children with the help of the Catholic Good Shepherd Sisters. Mostly, the children come from one of the poorest Yangon neighborhoods: Dala Township across the Yangon River from Yangon Downtown. The children are between 3 and 6 years old and are taken care of by four trained and licensed nursery teachers and one cook and maid. The children are mostly from Buddhist and Hindu families, only a few children have a Christian and Muslim background. The parents mostly work as unskilled workers in the Yangon General Hospital

opposite of the nursery; they drop the children in the morning and pick them up after work. As the parents earn less than \$2 a day we offer the nursery free and we provide free breakfast, lunch and clothing for the children.

In 2011 as in prior years our friends from the Episcopal church of St. Luke in the Fields in New York made a substantial donation for the nursery.



Yangon Nursery: Teaching the children



Visit by the donor

In December 2011 we celebrated our Christmas Party for the nursery children, their brothers and sisters and their parents. All nursery children received suits, snacks, and toys as Christmas gifts. Special prizes were given to those children who attended the nursery regularly, and to those who are quite advanced in class. The children presented songs, dances and a Christmas play. The parents were very happy to see the performance of their children. Some of the parents had contributed fruits, snacks and drinks and we provided fried noodles and drinks to everybody.



Christmas Party 2011: Parents watching attentively



Christmas Play

2. The vocational training and leadership program for young women enters the sixth year

For the 6th year PIN runs a vocational training program for 15 young women from all across Myanmar. The program is managed by the Good Shepherd Sisters in Yangon and lasts twelve months. The girls attend professional training courses of nurse aid, nursery teacher or dressmaker. All receive English and Computer training lessons and participate in ethics education and leadership formation classes.

For the girls we rented a house in the Convent's compound; here the girls are responsible for all aspects of their daily life, including shopping, cooking, laundry, and cleaning. During day-time they attend professional training courses; in the evenings and on weekends the Sisters provide additional lessons on diseases, human trafficking, nutrition, and personality and leadership skills. During their free time and during holidays the girls participate in exposure and outreach programs to help the poor, sick and marginalized people in hospitals and townships around Yangon. After graduation from the one year program the girls return to their home villages and towns and engage in social work for NGOs or for the community's ministries for a minimum of one year.

In August 2011 we finished Batch #5 of the leadership program. After the graduation ceremony the girls returned to their home towns. In September 2011, 15 girls joined Batch #6 of the leadership program; the girls are from Hopin in the North of Myanmar (2), from Kentung (North-East, 2), from Loikaw (East, 2), from Mandalay (Central, 2), from Chin State (West, 2), and from the Irrawaddy Delta: Maubin (3) and Pathein (2).

Following an in-depth evaluation of the program by the girls we will put more emphasis on the internal courses, workshops, and seminars rather than on the vocational training courses. The girls felt strongly that they benefit most from the moral and social training offered by the Sisters and from sharing and living together in the small community of their own house.



Graduation ceremony Batch #5: August 2011



Christmas Party 2011 Batch #6

Alumni meeting for the past graduates of the leadership training

In May 2011 we invited all graduates of the Leadership Training Program to Yangon. 49 girls of the first 5 years attended the reunion. During the three day meeting they shared their experiences and accomplishments, learned from each other and developed new ideas. In team-building exercises and role plays the girls grew closer and laid the foundation for future sharing and cooperation. The girls were not shy to share their comments and critic about the leadership program and they gave us many constructive suggestions for the future of the program.



Alumni meeting 2011: Group discussion



Graduates of Batches #1 - #5

3. The rehabilitation program in the Golden Triangle stands on its own feet now

For six years PIN supported the rehabilitation and education project for hill-tribes in Eastern Shan State, close to the border of Myanmar and Thailand (the so-called 'Golden Triangle'). PIN's involvement with the project for the Akha hill-tribe, which had been started by Catholic nuns, dates back to 2005. At that time many of the villagers were drug-addicts, HIV-positive, and the education of the young was neglected.

Now, we witness big changes: the children grow up with nurseries and care and they attend school successfully. The parents realize the benefits of education and as the income generation programs and entrepreneurial activities take off the villagers get more prosperous. The parents have increased their contributions to the project and the education of their children significantly and PIN could end its annual financial donation by June 2011.

Today the project today covers 14 villages with 2,364 villagers of which 699 are younger than 18 years. 4 Good Shepherd Sisters, 13 project staff and 7 field workers work for the project.

The staff takes care of

- two nurseries with 100 children,
- supplemental school education for 80 boys and girls attending primary, middle, and high school,
- a boarding house with 58 girls attending primary, middle or high school,
- a twelve-month vocational training program (sewing and handicrafts) for 12 girls living in a separate boarding house at the compound,
- a sewing and handicraft workshop with commissioned work to generate income opportunities for women and girls in the surrounding villages
- an agricultural project with pig-breeding, vegetable gardening, and paddy fields.



The students in front of the boarding house



Students working the garden

We are very happy that the Rehabilitation and Development Project is self-reliant now after nurturing it for 6 years. PIN is very proud that we could help the Good Shepherd Sisters who worked tirelessly to make this project a success. The Sisters will continue to manage the project and PIN will stand by to support the community if need should arise.

4. The Buddhist Ye Lai Monastery in Yangon is back to full operation

PIN had constructed two buildings for HIV/AIDS-patients at the Buddhist Ye Lai Monastery in Yangon in 2009. Shortly after the opening of the new buildings Special Branch Intelligence and the Ministry of Health prohibited the monastery to continue its humanitarian activities because of alleged political activities and the resident HIV-patients were evicted.

During 2011, the situation improved steadily. By the end of the year about 80 HIV-patients and family members could stay at the monastery, receiving food and shelter; a government hospital and international NGOs provide the ARV-medicines.

Traditionally, the monks of the monastery collect alms in the neighborhood every morning. However, the collection is rarely enough to feed all patients and PIN regularly donates food to the monastery.



Ready for collecting alms



Ye Lai Monastery: Young monks at lunch

Vegetable garden at the monastery

To improve the short food supply PIN prepared for a garden at barren swamp land in the monastery compound. It took 45 truckloads of sand and garden soil to fill up part of the swamp and get it ready for gardening. We hope that the new garden will supplement the daily menu, will give some meaningful work for the HIV-patients, and might contribute to their mental wellbeing.



Patients and relatives at lunch in the monastery



The new garden will be green after the monsoon rains

III. Consulting, educational support, and other activities

As in previous years PIN continues to advice local organizations in formulating development plans, writing project proposals, approaching international donors and sourcing financings. Opportunistically, PIN helps with medical treatments and supports poor children with scholarships.



Donation for the girls at St. Mary Orphanage Pathein



Scholarships: Khin Saw Win (14) & Aye Myat Thanda (17)

IV. Contacts

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