

## Valedictory - Archiving of the Network Myanmar Website

Derek Tonkin - 7 April 2016

As foreshadowed in [my article of 8 September 2015](#), the Network Myanmar website has now been archived. The website will however remain accessible in its present form until further notice as an information resource and record of events of Myanmar's first five-year parliamentary term under the 2008 Constitution which lasted from 30 March 2011 to 30 March 2016.

As the FCO Minister of State Hugo Swire acknowledged during yet another debate on Burma in the House of Commons on 23 March 2016: "Credit is also due to the outgoing Administration, who planned and initiated the reforms. Although there is clearly still a very long way to go, their efforts deserve to be recognised, particularly the peaceful and orderly conduct of the elections last November". More particularly it is also the consent and support of the Armed Forces for the controlled evolution of the political situation in Myanmar which needs to be understood and respected. [I am not alone in this view](#), which is shared by many.

Our website was set up by the Network Myanmar association to support and promote both the welfare and aspirations of the Burmese people as well as British and Western interests. After the nation-wide disturbances of August and September 1988 which were ruthlessly suppressed, these interests were poorly served by sterile and unimaginative policies of boycott, isolation, and sanctions against a military regime well protected by China, Russia and, eventually, India as well as by its fellow members in the Association of South East Asian Nations and most developing countries. Western policies only strengthened the regime in power, led to the loss of Western influence, and allowed China and other countries in the region to gain unfettered access to Myanmar's natural and human resources. The West has since the by-elections of 2012 been working hard to catch up lost ground. But not surprisingly China, Myanmar's largest trading partner and a, if not the major investor, has led the field by immediately sending her Foreign Minister to offer congratulations to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who well understands the importance of the relationship with China.

The United States conducted for at least two decades virtual economic warfare against the country, though unable despite strenuous efforts to stem the bonanza of export earnings from sales of natural gas to Thailand and of other resources like timber, precious metals and jadeite to China and other countries which account for over 80% of Myanmar's export earnings. These earnings, whose interdiction would have had a profound effect on the regime, went straight into the coffers of the generals, to the extent that when Western policies eventually changed, international financial institutions found to their satisfaction that several billions of US dollars had been prudently preserved by the State and became available for national development, however many billions might also have been siphoned off for other purposes.

It was all along the Burmese people who suffered the pain as jobs wilted, investment in labour-intensive manufacturing dried up and the economy generally stagnated. If Western sanctions were supposed to be "smart", these were the dumbest targeted sanctions ever

imposed. In the UK and the EU, from the imposition of sanctions in 1997 to their suspension in 2012, on no occasion was any public accounting of their effectiveness attempted or even permitted. When in 2007 [the prestigious Select Committee on Economic Affairs of the House of Lords](#) recommended that there should be such an appraisal, the Labour Government's dismissive response was that "the EU's policy is already subject to internal review and the Government does not see the merit in holding a separate enquiry". Similar requests by the European Parliament for a public accounting were ignored by the European Council. This was not Western democratic transparency's finest hour.

Some continue to delude themselves that their negative policies brought about change in Myanmar. Such political posturing is perhaps inevitable in this day and age which has seen so many Western foreign policy misfortunes and miscalculations, notably in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. Myanmar has all along been treated by US and UK politicians primarily as a domestic political issue. In the United States, Burma has been and still is a niche interest. In the UK, the country has been used as a political football, with the Conservatives critical of Labour when Labour were in power for not being tough enough on sanctions, and Labour returning the compliment when they were no longer in office.

When I suggested in [a commentary on 4 November 2010](#), three days before the elections on 7 November 2010, that, flawed as they were, the elections "could provide a catalyst" for change, I was universally derided. The received wisdom was that the military could never be trusted to cede even a modicum of power. The new administration under the National League for Democracy now taking shape will be a civilian-military diarchy. The European Union has understood that events in Myanmar are a top-down revolution executed with military precision, but to which the Burmese people have responded with enthusiasm. The people have achieved a "freedom from fear" which must delight Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Though the British Prime Minister David Cameron expressed the view, [in Suu Kyi's presence in London on 23 October 2013](#), that her exclusion from the presidency "would be no elections at all, in my view" and that "we will do everything we can to build the international pressure to send the clearest possible message to the Burmese Government that these changes must be made", Suu Kyi has understood that compromise and political astuteness can produce results.

Many tens of thousands of Burmese fled the country in the wake of the events of August and September 1988. Those who managed to reach Europe, Australia, Japan and North America embarked on a determined campaign of political opposition. Apart from a few hard-liners, most have now made their peace with the civilianized regime and many have returned home to a country where their skills and higher education are much in demand. They have however left behind overseas a plethora of activist human rights organisations, some of commendable principle but others whose protagonists I would describe as little more than professional agitators.

The next event infiltrated by the protagonists could be at Wolfson College Oxford on 11 May 2016 [when a cabal of genocide ideologues](#) will seek to heighten tensions in Rakhine State. This "research conference" is being held under the auspices of Wolfson College South Asia Research Cluster, but the college has so far made no formal announcement about this event whose organisation seems to be out of their control. At least one of the speakers has

publicly assailed **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as racist towards Muslims**. The Chancellor, Lord Patten, is likely to be appalled. Many will recall the very warm welcome given to Suu Kyi in Oxford when receiving her **honorary doctorate** in June 2012.

Since the Network Myanmar website was set up in June 2007, **I have recorded some 14 political myths** held fervently in some quarters about the current reality in Myanmar. As the years roll by, these myths are being increasingly debunked elsewhere, but it is historically still too close to the actual events for many to acknowledge the extent of their self-deception.

It is now up to the new administration in Myanmar to decide whether they wish their country to be known as “Myanmar” in the English language or to revert to “Burma”. It is hard to imagine that a national referendum will be held on such an esoteric matter as very few Burmese are sufficiently fluent in English to form a considered opinion. I notice that the US, UK and France have with enthusiasm renewed their designation of the country as “Burma”. I should myself be surprised if, in the longer term, the Burmese people generally will consent to a return to the former colonial designation. The non-Burman nationalities in particular will not wish to see “Bamar” supremacy encouraged.

It would be comforting to believe that a new era in Burmese politics is about to dawn. There are thankfully these days so many international boots on the ground, social media in operation and new sources of information available in the country that, whatever happens, the world will surely know.

Suu Kyi might well now reflect on what her father, General Aung San, told the British Governor at the time, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, on the evening of 3 June 1946 and recorded in an unsent telegram - that: “In his view, a man who has achieved popularity in Burma remains popular for [a] three-year period and no more.” [Document 553 “The Struggle for Independence” edited by Hugh Tinker, Volume 1, Pages 837-9].

For his daughter, the clock is now ticking. Expectations are impossibly high. She has made a pugnacious start, but then who can blame her as her bid for the Presidency was thwarted by the military? Her chosen President’s three-minute **inaugural speech** was however inconsequential and disappointing even for a figurehead. She has triumphed in an early row with the military over her appointment as “State Counsellor”, but this could prove to be costly in the longer term. The military will grit their teeth. Their Commander-in-Chief **has already assured his troops** that during the next Five Year parliamentary term there will be no changes to the course set following the 2008 Constitution. The coveted “State Counsellor” appointment has probably closed the door on constitutional change for the foreseeable future.

As The Lady ventures into uncharted waters, I predict **as do others** that the passage ahead is likely to be as rough and troubled as it will be uncertain and perplexing.

**Derek Tonkin**

Editor - Network Myanmar