



Asian Conflicts Reports

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Burma and the Arab Spring

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The Arab Spring has inspired many Burmese activists, but the impact will be too little to cause Burma's non-violent political conflict to degenerate into greater instability or violent extremism, although armed ethnic conflicts are likely to continue. This is because moderates in the new government appear to be engaging with the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, to institute gradual reforms in order to avoid an Arab-style revolution. Importantly, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has a huge influence over the general population, is committed to non-violence, and prefers negotiations rather than an overthrow of the government or an armed struggle. However, if the new government cannot institutionalize broader political participation and improve the economic prospects of the majority of the population, Burma will face continued political and armed conflict, which can lead to more instability.

Although few expected the new military-backed government to act much differently from the former military regime, as of October 2011, relations between the government and the political opposition had improved to a certain degree. This is because the new President, Thein Sein, who has met with Aung San Suu Kyi, has not cracked down on the small protests that have taken place, and has responded to public demands to suspend the construction of a controversial hydropower dam which would supply electricity to China. In response, Aung San Suu Kyi stated that Thein Sein has a genuine will to deliver positive changes. This was a significant shift for her as she had said in a videotaped speech in June that many Burmese were excited by the Arab Spring. Many people in Burma are likely to wait rather than act as long as the dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi continues to offer the hope of gradual improvement.

While representatives of the former regime held occasional discussions with Aung San Suu Kyi, these did not lead anywhere. Following recent talks, both sides acknowledged publicly that the talks were positive and focused on cooperation, while leaving aside differences. The talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and the labor minister, Aung Kyi, also became more regular, averaging once a month between July and September, 2011; although there has been no institutionalized mechanism for future talks yet. In late August 2011, the President himself met Aung San Suu Kyi when she agreed to attend a national-level poverty-reduction conference at the government's invitation. She also met some moderate ministers and top businessmen at the conference, allowing her to expand her negotiation space.

In addition, the new government has cooperated with Aung San Suu Kyi on certain issues, apparently to pre-empt potential Arab-style demonstrations by her supporters. When Aung San Suu Kyi decided to make a trip outside of Rangoon five months after being released from house arrest, the new government appeared to be worried that this would result in large crowds on the streets, as seen in 2003. When she made a private visit to the ancient Burmese city of Pagan in early July, thousands of supporters came out to greet her. The new government started a dialogue with her to jointly make arrangements for future trips. Consequently, Aung San Suu Kyi's one day trip to Pegu was peaceful, with thousands of supporters showing up but government security forces providing for her security.

The Thein Sein government appears to see value in easing political conflict with the main opposition party by tolerating their activities. Despite the government's initial warning to the National League for Democracy (NLD) to not engage in political activities since the party lost legal status after the 2010 elections (because it had not re-registered), the NLD's continued activities have not been suppressed. Similarly, the government initially reacted negatively to a letter campaign by civil society groups against the controversial Myitsone hydropower dam. In mid-September 2011, the energy minister asserted that the government would go ahead with the \$3.6 billion (U.S.) project financed by China. However, the government tolerated the anti-dam movement, including a protest where no one was arrested, and an exhibition attended by Aung San Suu Kyi. Finally, in late September, the President gave in to growing public demands and announced the suspension of the dam construction during his term in office. This was highly welcomed by many opponents, including Aung San Suu Kyi. However, the fact that government warnings have not been followed by government suppression has been viewed by many young activists as providing a political opportunity for more activism.

1 Since October the new government has cooperated with Aung San Suu Kyi, apparently to pre-empt potential Arab-style demonstrations by her supporters

2 If the new government cannot institutionalize broader political participation and improve economic prospects, Burma will face continued political and armed conflict

3 In June and September, 2011, fighting between the Burma Army and the main Kachin ceasefire group broke out, leading to the flight of more than 20,000 refugees



Nevertheless, it appears that in order to improve its image the new government is prepared to tolerate opposition activities as long as they are not directly threatening its power. The new government is eager to be allowed to take the ASEAN chairmanship in 2014, to have some Western sanctions revoked, and also to obtain international assistance to improve its economy, since economic instability has been the main trigger for political unrest in modern Burma. The first action that the new president took was to write to ASEAN requesting that Burma be given the chairmanship in 2014 instead of Laos, since it had lost the opportunity in 2006 because of international pressure. Although Burma will automatically be the ASEAN chair in 2016 according to alphabetical order, it appears that Thein Sein's administration is keen to have the chance before the next elections in 2015. The Indonesian Foreign Minister and current ASEAN chair, who will visit Burma in late October to assess the possibility of Burma's chairmanship, stated that he would also take into account the views of the political opposition and civil society.

While the new government has managed to reduce non-violent political conflict, it has not put the same priority and effort into reducing armed ethnic conflict, leaving ethnic tensions as a potential source for instability in the ethnic states which ring central Burma. Previous ceasefire agreements between the government and many ethnic armies were already broken before the 2010 elections, because several ceasefire groups refused the previous government's demand to transform into Border Guard Forces under the Burma Army's control. Consequently, a few days after the elections, fighting between the government troops and a faction of a Karen ceasefire group, known as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), broke out and thousands of new refugees fled to Thailand, creating instability in Karen State and along the Thai-Burma border. In March 2011, fighting between the Burma Army and the main faction of a Shan ceasefire group, known as the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), resumed.

In June 2011, more serious fighting between the Burma Army and the main Kachin ceasefire group, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), broke out and almost 20,000 refugees fled, with hundreds reaching China. Following the Burma Army attacks on the KIO, which has more manpower and resources than the DKBA or SSA-N, a series of bomb explosions occurred inside Burma, destroying many bridges in Kachin State. Despite ongoing talks between the government and the KIO, the fighting intensified in late September, sending more refugees to the China border and leading to more instability there.

In mid-August, President Thein Sein offered new talks to the armed ethnic groups, but he told them to contact regional authorities, rather than central authorities, suggesting he didn't give priority to dealing with the ethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, ceasefire talks between the government and the United Wa State Army, the biggest ethnic army, with over 20,000 troops, started in late September and they came to an agreement to maintain a ceasefire once the government agreed to drop its Border Guard Force proposal for the time being. However, many armed ethnic groups do not have faith in the new government's offer and the new ceasefires are fragile, since no lasting political solution has been offered. They believe that the government wants to establish temporary ceasefires with the Wa army so they can intensify their fighting against the KIO and others.

Meanwhile, unlike the previous military government, the Thein Sein government has recognized economic problems, including poverty and corruption, as an important priority that must be tackled, but economic instability remains a source for potential unrest. Thein Sein has broken with the past by appointing civilian economists as advisors, and the chief economic advisor is very close to Aung San Suu Kyi. Taking advice from these economic advisors, the new government has reduced taxes and trade restrictions, and made plans to overhaul the exchange rates, revise investment laws and improve banking systems to improve the economy. However, the government has encountered huge budget problems including a large deficit, inherited from the previous government which had left little money for the new government. Due to budget shortages, many government projects are on hold, causing economic stagnation, although there is a possibility of reviving the car import market after import restrictions were significantly reduced. Despite its professed interest in bringing about economic reform, no major changes have been made yet that would help alleviate widespread poverty. Thus, if the economy was to worsen, and talks with Aung San Suu Kyi to stall, political unrest, such as that seen in 1988 and 2007, could break out once more. •

Political Change in Burma and US Sanctions

David I. Steinberg



1

The ferment that is currently taking place is the most significant change since 1962, and has the fragile possibility of improving the lives of the Burmese

2

There are concerns in the U.S. that the efforts of the plans for reform by the new Burmese government might further legitimate and ensure its continuing control of power

3

Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has greater influence over U.S. foreign policy towards a single state than any other foreigner

For more than a generation, the Burmese military have had no intention of giving up essential state power. They have ruled directly (1962-1974, 1988-2011) and indirectly in ‘civilianized’ form (1974-1988, 2011-?). They plan, as stipulated in the new constitution of 2008 that came into effect in the Spring of 2011, to do so for the foreseeable future. The ferment that is taking place in Myanmar today under a new government, but one essentially composed of the former military ‘in mufti’, is not about the transfer of power to opposition forces. Yet it is the most significant change in that society since 1962, and has the fragile possibility of positively affecting the lives of its peoples. There is intense disagreement in foreign circles as to the potential of such change and even its reality. This creates dilemmas for the United States and other critics of the former military junta.

The United States is in the midst of a seemingly interminable debate on policy toward Burma/Myanmar. The temperature on the issue has risen in the recent past even as a new, but militarily reminiscent, government has taken over in the spring of 2011. Rather, the issue has likely risen because of the concerns in some circles that the efforts of the still fragile plans for reform by the new Burmese government might further legitimate and ensure its continuing control of power. The issue is important for three reasons: the credibility of U.S. policy toward Myanmar before the 2012 elections in the United States, the controversial plan for Myanmar to host ASEAN and its summit in 2014, and the very future of many programs of civil society devoted to regime change in Myanmar. Although U.S. foreign policy is normally composed of diverse strands reflecting disparate national interests – including political, economic, trade, investment, security, strategic, etc. – this has not been true of policy toward Myanmar. Its focus has only been on human rights and democracy issues. Myanmar has been a ‘boutique’ issue in U.S. foreign policy; that is, it is salient to a small, but influential, group.

Sanctions are simply tactics to attain compliance to some U.S. goal. Although the functions of sanctions may vary – from opposition to apartheid or against the development, transfer or use of certain weaponry, or trade issues – the purpose in imposing them on Myanmar, until the Obama administration came into play, was regime change. Sanctions are easy to pass because their passage reflects moral indignation over some seemingly outrageous action, with which no one wants to be associated. They are also difficult to rescind because various interest groups will lobby for their retention under some rubric, for instance inadequate labor, religious or gender rights. Although in theory the severity of U.S. imposed sanctions should relate to the degree of U.S. national security interests, the comprehensive sanctions against Myanmar, in which the U.S. has peripheral publicly articulated security interests, are far greater than those against North Korea, where U.S. security is a far higher, even a major, concern. There is also no correlation between type of regime and sanctions. Sanctions against Myanmar are strict, and yet sanctions are absent in China, Vietnam, and Laos, in East Asia alone. All three states have a single, authoritarian political party, while in Myanmar there are now legal, if modest, opposition parties. This U.S. discrepancy in foreign policy does not go unnoticed in Myanmar.

Economic sanctions are a cornerstone of U.S. policy toward Burma, and this policy has become embedded in internal American politics. This seems incongruous given the paucity of publicly articulated U.S. national interests at stake in that country, but it is a product of a singular concentration of emotional interest and respect for one Nobel laureate – Aung San Suu Kyi – who has become for the West an avatar of democracy. Her views strongly influence U.S. policy toward Myanmar; until January 2010, she has been mentioned 1,598 times in the *Congressional Record* in a bipartisan display of respect. Today, no other single foreigner influences U.S. policy toward a country to the same degree.

This official sanctions regimen began in 1997. Prior to that, and since the coup of 1988, restrictions were placed on U.S. support to the military Junta. The 1997 sanctions were a response to the Junta’s ignoring the results of the May 1990 elections, which were swept by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). At this time Aung San Suu Kyi had been under house arrest since July 1989 and could not participate with her party. The sanctions of 2003 were a result of the ugly incident in Depayin, central Myanmar, in which government-authorized thugs killed a disputed number of Aung San Suu Kyi’s entourage and roughed her up.



The 2008 sanctions, the 'Jade Act', were a result of the Saffron Revolution – neither saffron nor a revolution – but demonstrations by Buddhist monks brutally broken up by the Burmese military. The sanctions, inter alia, restrict new investments after 1997, travel to the U.S. by senior administration and economic allies and their families, all imports except educational materials, arts, and handicrafts, restrictions on jade and ruby imports, and the use of any U.S. banking facility. Special warrants from the U.S. Treasury Department, usually for non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance in country, are required for banking exemptions. Some in the Congress wanted to impose Cuba-like sanctions, restricting all travel by U.S. citizens, eliminating the 'grandfather' clause that allowed continuation of U.S. businesses established before 1997, and even the sanctioning of China if it continued military support to the Junta, and Thailand if it did not treat Burmese refugees better. None of these amendments or suggestions passed.

In response to the trauma of the Saffron Revolution, the government speeded up its interminable process of writing a new constitution that had been in desultory process since 1993 (and in turn was the Junta's response to their 1990 election loss and debacle). It was completed and subjected to a Stalinistic vote in a referendum (92.4 percent approval) in May 2008 that was interrupted by Cyclone Nargis that killed some 138,000 people. The West questioned the excruciatingly slow response of the government to the foreign provision of humanitarian assistance, which further delegitimized the Junta in Western eyes. The slow response was in part the fear of a U.S. invasion, which was palpable in some high military circles, and the nationalistic claim that the Burmese could deal with their own problems.

Both the Democratic Clinton and Republican Bush administration's purpose of sanctions was regime change; that is, honoring the results of the 1990 elections, and giving power to the NLD; only then would the U.S. talk to the government. This was obviously a non sequitur. It established in the Junta's view the U.S. as a potential enemy of the regime and created fears (unfounded from a U.S. perspective) of a U.S. invasion.

Since 1990, the positions of the various actors froze. The NLD felt they had won and deserved power. The U.S. backed the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi when she was under house arrest and after her releases. The Junta, fearing retribution, tenaciously held onto power and ignored the results of the election under various subterfuges, and began planning for their new incarnation (delayed as long as possible) under their heavily scripted new constitution. •

US Pragmatic Engagement with the 'New' Burma

David I. Steinberg



The Obama administration in early 2009 reviewed U.S. policies toward Burma/Myanmar. It was obvious that both the U.S. administration and the Burmese Junta wanted to alleviate the long-standing tensions between the two. Both sent signals; the U.S. signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which it had not done because of Myanmar's entry in 1997, to which the U.S. strongly objected, and high Myanmar official met with mid-level U.S. officials. These were insufficient. The Burmese wanted some alleviation of the sanctions regimen, and the U.S. wanted Aung San Suu Kyi freed and all political prisoners released. Neither side was prepared to act first. But Senior General Than Shwe, Head of State, was said to have personal animosity toward Aung San Suu Kyi, and the U.S. could not act because of internal U.S. political ramifications.

The Obama administration quietly and wisely dropped the call for regime change, and adopted a policy that was an internal political compromise. The extensive expatriate Burmese organizations and a wide range of human rights NGOs assiduously lobbied to maintain the sanctions. Simply because Myanmar was not a core national issue, the Obama administration was not prepared to expend significant political capital in attempting to convince both the Republicans and Democrats in the Congress that the policy ought to be substantively changed.

The result, 'pragmatic engagement' – announced in September 2009, was a compromise. This meant that the U.S. would keep the sanctions policy in place but would have high level dialogue with the Burmese. The Obama administration recognized that the road to normalization of relations would be long and arduous, but that it should begin. This was politically all that the Obama administration could do given congressional attitudes and the effective lobbying of many powerful and well-placed civil society organizations.

Since the new U.S. policy was instituted, Myanmar has continued down its set path to what it describes as 'discipline-flourishing democracy'. This included preparations for the elections and the formation of a 'civilianized' government. Adjectivally modified democracy has often diminished that concept, and the case of Myanmar was no exception. The National League for Democracy (NLD) decided not to contest the elections because, among other reasons including expelling those arrested for political activities, it would obliterate their claim to the legality of the May 1990 elections they had won; they were legally deregistered in May 2010. But other, smaller opposition groups and individuals did run in the elections, held on November 10, 2010. The results gave the government about 80 percent of the seats in a variety of legislatures at the national and local levels. Some Western governments and media, as well as the civil society groups, generally claimed that they were a sham. This was in error. Flawed as they so obviously were, with the government packing the ballot boxes with absentee ballots, they have resulted in the first elected legislature since the elections of 1960 under a civilian government with opposition voices, though muted, in place. Provincial legislatures, including those in minority areas, have been formed for the first time in Burmese history.

Since the formation of the new government on March 30, 2011 under President Thein Sein, former Prime Minister under the Junta, the new Burmese government has made various overtures for economic and social change, calling for real economic reforms, better health and education funding, the elimination of corruption, and better treatment of the minorities, the representatives of some of which have called for an end to sanctions. A poverty alleviation seminar has been held, with the President in attendance, serious discussions on a unified exchange rate are underway, and Aung San Suu Kyi has met with the leadership and has made a public statement indicating she believe the government is interested in real reform. All these developments are tentative, but progressive. She has, however, backed an ill-conceived, and erroneous, NLD statement that since sanctions did not hurt the people, they should be continued. This is disputed by a U.S. Rangoon embassy cable. In addition, the U.S. sanctions regimen has effectively blocked multinational assistance that would have benefited the Burmese peoples; Myanmar receives far less such assistance than any country in the region. The sanctions also affect UN Development programs and open the state to Chinese and other Asian investment monopolies. Earlier, she had argued that since she did not institute sanctions, she could not eliminate them, thus sidestepping her critical role in their continuation. Until 2002, the NLD had called for sanctions. Aung San Suu Kyi had earlier even been against humanitarian aid, as it would strengthen the military, but she changed her policy on this and on tourism, now advocating appropriate tourism (not the previous total ban) that does not benefit the military.

1 Since the Obama administration quietly dropped the call for regime change in Burma the country has continued down its set path of 'discipline-flourishing democracy'

2 There are many high level military opposed to any diminution of state and military power, and they will use any new U.S. sanctions as justification of their continued hard line

3 Over the next five years the international community can hope for the erosion of military power, the development of pluralism, and instigation of economic rationality



But many of the overseas civil society groups and Burmese, as well as bipartisan influential members of the U.S. Congress, have vigorously said that these changes are not sufficient, and have petitioned the administration that the U.S. should further tighten sanctions against the regime, and invoke a UN Commission of Inquiry to look into human rights abuses, of which there have been many. Aung San Suu Kyi has backed that plan but did not endorse any subsequent trials that might be held in its wake. The U.S. has acquiesced to the UN Commission plan.

Aung San Suu Kyi still holds the key to U.S. sanctions policy. The Obama administration, severely weakened after the 2010 U.S. elections, is not in any position to use up its limited political capital on Myanmar. Other states are not supportive of those in the U.S. who want stricter sanctions. Japan is anxious to resume its development assistance, partly to offset Chinese influence, and India will not take action against its perceived interests in countering China and in assisting the development of its volatile, rebellious Northeast Region through a planned transport corridor through Myanmar. ASEAN will not condone sanctions, and the Chinese interests are so varied and profound that they will not listen to U.S. arguments that they should change. The U.S., in any case, has far more important items than Myanmar on its Chinese agenda.

The release of Aung San Suu Kyi, the civilianized government, the prospect of economic reforms, and the possibility of a major release of political prisoners who are said to number some 2,100 has already produced a gradual modification of the sanctions policies in the EU. There are many in the Burmese exile community and among human rights NGOs that will fight such changes, as some still regard the central, previously acceptable, U.S. policy of regime change as the basis for action. Any placation of the Burmese regime, they might argue, would simply prolong the life of a government that came to power through a coup and was elected through illegitimate means; such leniency would deny justice to those who have suffered under many acts of violence. Such organizations have stepped up their pressures on high governmental officials and those in the Congress.

At the same time, the proposed reforms in Myanmar are fragile, and there are many high level military who are opposed to any diminution of state and military power, and will use any new sanctions and a UN Commission as justification of their continued hard line, claiming that no matter what the Burmese government does, and whatever positive changes that may be made, these will not satisfy the West, especially the U.S. In a sense, the very amelioration of political and economic oppression in Myanmar that these reforms hope to achieve are potentially undercut by some civil society actors who also want to improve the lives of the Burmese people.

The very positive visit to Myanmar by ambassadorial coordinator Derek Mitchell in September 2011, the encouraging statement by Aung San Suu Kyi after meeting President Thein Sein, and a variety of expressed good intentions and beginning reforms have significantly improved the prospects for heightened dialogue and better relations, although some important actions need to take place by the new Myanmar government to give the U.S. administration sufficient political space for changing policies.

So the debate in the U.S. has intensified, as the potential reforms are considered by those opposed to the new Myanmar government as mere window dressing to convince ASEAN and the world that it should host that group in 2014. But one of the rationales for outsiders advocating that Myanmar join ASEAN in 1997 was that membership could encourage reforms. It has taken a long time, but there are intriguing prospects.

Realistically, at best, over the next five years we can hope for the erosion of military power and the development of pluralism, one element of the democratic process, and economic rationality. Yet the U.S. will have to make some important decisions. If a number of highly significant political prisoners are released and economic reforms commence, how will the U.S. respond given the internal U.S. attitude against that government? If no positive U.S. response is forthcoming, this will deter improvement in relations. In 2014, it is highly likely that Myanmar will chair the ASEAN group and summit meeting for the first time (they backed down in 2006 when it was their turn in alphabetical order). Perhaps present reforms are in part motivated by that plan. But how will the U.S. respond, and will the U.S. participate in a summit meeting on Myanmar soil?

Myanmar will play no essential role in the U.S. election campaign, but the human rights groups can mobilize a wide swath of support or condemnation of the administration's stance on human rights and democracy. They could accuse the President of duplicity if he does not strongly advocate more sanctions, but if he were to do so, he would undercut the delicate position of the reformers in Myanmar. At the same time, Chinese influence expands, minority groups are marginalized, the people are continuously pauperized, and the potential for continuing struggles remain.



Political Instability in Nepal

Nishchal N. Pandey

In 2006, the Maoist party which had been waging a bloody armed conflict against the state agreed to end its insurgency and participate in competitive multi-party elections. After the loss of 13,000 lives and billions of rupees, both the people and the international community were hopeful for a better future and, although mindful of the Maoist's past atrocities, unanimously agreed to support the home-grown peace process. It was a unique case in which a former terrorist organization decided to lock its 3,000 weapons and 19,000 combatants inside UN monitored cantonments. In the Constituent Assembly elections held on April 10, 2008, the 240 year old monarchy was abolished and, to great surprise, the Maoists emerged as the single largest party in Nepal's Parliament.

However, subsequent events have pushed the country towards increased political uncertainty. Bickering parties have turned the first ever Constituent Assembly into a hung parliament. Five Prime Ministers have come and gone in the last five years, and the peace process hasn't achieved its expected outcomes. The transition has been going on for so long that numerous groups have taken advantage of the fluid situation and begun demanding a ridiculous set of demands. The southern plains of Nepal (the Terai) that border the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have seen a dramatic rise in killings, abduction, rape and bombings. Other areas of the country have also witnessed a spur of linguistic and ethnic assertions and, with the major political parties vowing to opt for a secular constitution, religious violence against Muslim and Christian minorities has become the hallmark of post-2006 Nepal.

Why has Nepal not been able to settle down despite the Maoists, who were the main perpetrators of violence and brutality, having most of their demands met? What are the critical issues that impede political consensus among the main political parties? And what is a prognosis for the future of a country sandwiched between the two rising Asian giants, India and China?

The foremost problem for this prolonged transition has been political one-upmanship and disagreement over key features of the new constitution. Nepal has declared itself a federal democratic republic. But in order to strengthen the republican order on a federal basis, a new constitution needs to be promulgated. Unfortunately, the Assembly has already missed three deadlines. There is little possibility that the draft constitution will be ready even by the latest deadline of November 30, 2011. The Maoists want to adopt an American model with a powerful Presidency and federal units created on the basis of ethnicity. While other parties are fiercely opposed to this idea, and sense a dictatorial odor emanating from a party that still espouses Mao and Kim-ul Sung's outmoded ideology. They feel that an ethnicity-based federalism in a country with 102 ethnic groups is a recipe for disaster.

The second point of disagreement has been the issue of the integration of former Maoist combatants into the Nepalese Army. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed under U.N. supervision in November 2006 between the State and the Maoists stated that the former guerrillas would be inducted into the 'security forces'. But the vague wording of the CPA has led to misinterpretations and a war of words. The Nepali Congress and other centrist and rightist parties feel that mass induction of the former insurgents, most of whom do not meet the minimum qualification criteria, will quickly destroy the national army and further Maoist intentions of total control over the country. Maoist insistence on filling star positions in the military and *en block* entry are likely to further widen the gap of mistrust between the Maoists and others, including the 90,000 strong army.

Hence, without a broad political agreement on the issues of political organization, federalism and integration there is little likelihood that the new constitution will be enacted. If this occurs, Nepal will merely drift along a path of political vacuum with economic downturn as a result. Although tourist arrivals have risen since the end of the insurgency, exports have not. Labor unrest, power shortages, and violence in the main industrial and agricultural area of the Terai have exasperated the country's problems. State security has completely failed to curb the power of nefarious groups. Currently, the following criminal groups, factions and gangs operate in the Terai in the guise of one or the other political ideology: the Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha, led by Jaya Krishna Goit and later by the Rajan Mukti group; the Nagendra Kumar Paswan, a.k.a. Jwala Singh; the JTMM – Bisfot Singh faction; the Madheshi Rashtriya Mukti Morcha (Madheshi National Liberation Front); the Madheshi Mukti (Liberation) Tigers; The Terai Cobra; The Terai Baagi; The Terai Army; The Madheshi Virus Killers Party; The Joint Democratic Liberation Front; and The Royal Defense Army.

1 Nepal is in a state of political deadlock with parties unable to create a stable coalition or agree on a new constitution

2 Violent criminal groups and political factions have emerged along the Indo/Nepal border as labor unrest and civilian killings rise

3 Cross-border linkages with criminal elements in North India have led to Indian accusations that the Nepali Maoists have links with Naxalites



The outcome of the burgeoning of these armed groups has been a steep resurgence of violence along the Indo-Nepal border, with a sudden increase in the number of civilian killings, a deterioration of law and order, and prevalence of small arms. It now seems that the institution of monarchy functioned to unify many desperate ethnic groups and its abolishment has led to a general social disintegration. In this context, questions relating to ethnicity, language and religion, problems pertaining to the social exclusion of certain caste groups, the devolution of power to local bodies, and armed violence spearheaded by sections of the society who have had strong resentment towards the Kathmandu-centric elite has become the order of the day. Cross-border linkages with criminal elements in North India, and the Indian accusation that the Nepali Maoists have links with Naxalites, do not augur well either.

In the midst of this confusion and turmoil the role of India and China in Nepalese domestic politics is increasingly becoming a concern. India does enjoy religious, cultural, linguistic and matrimonial linkages with the Nepalese people and looms large in the country's politics and economy. Indo-Nepal relations are unique because of an open border system, although this is being regularly misused by criminal elements. The Government of India also played a decisive role in bringing the Maoists in from the jungle to the negotiating table. However, at the same time India is currently perceived as taking sides among the numerous political parties, factions and actors within the complex Nepali polity. The formal relations between the two countries oscillate like, with groups within Nepal often accusing New Delhi of adopting a big brotherly or paternalistic role.

The Chinese have their own set of priorities which largely center on the fact that Nepal borders their sensitive Tibetan region. Nepal is the refuge of over 25,000 Tibetan refugees, most of whom crossed from Tibet over some the most inhospitable conditions on earth. Lately, the Chinese have become increasingly forceful in demanding that the Nepali authorities curb the activities of Tibetan refugees. On the other hand, unlike India, the Chinese government does not suffer an image problem in the eyes of the common man on the street of Kathmandu. However, strategic competition between India and China within small South Asian countries is nothing new. Whether India/China rivalry will affect their bilateral relations with Nepal, which now have a hefty trade component worth nearly 100 billion dollars (U.S.) per annum, remains to be seen.

In order to ensure that hope does not turn into despair, Nepalese political parties must come together and draft an inclusive, forward-looking constitution. Moreover, this new constitution needs to be democratic. With the Maoists as the largest party in Parliament, there is skepticism as to whether they have actually relinquished the idea of establishing a totalitarian, communist state. However it is their obligation to the people of Nepal and to the international community to assuage these fears; it is also in their own long-term political interests. Other parties, such as the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN- UML), need to realize that if Nepal is bereft of a healthy political culture then no constitution, no matter how well written, can ensure political stability and economic development.

It should be remembered that it was these two parties that ruled with equal incompetence from 1990-2002, and that this led to widespread dissatisfaction in the rural hinterlands. It was this that first created the comfortable space within which the Maoists operated. The international community, for its part, needs to remind all parties that further missed deadlines and gross opportunism will make this Constituent Assembly redundant, thereby necessitating elections for a new Assembly. •

Social Networking and Bersih 2.0 Rally in Malaysia

Surin Kaur, Wendy Yee Mei Tien & Lean Mei Li



1 In July, 50,000 Malaysians of diverse religion, ethnicity and age gathered together to demonstrate and voice their desire for political change

2 Facebook and Twitter promoted the cause of Bersih and allowed the transnational mobilization of co-ordinated protests across the world

3 In a country dominated by communal politics and fixed racial categories of identity, social networking sites are helping create group identity

The Bersih 2.0 rally, held on 9 July 2011, was a demonstration to urge for free and fair elections in Malaysia. Organized by the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih), and promoted as the Walk for Democracy, this rally echoed the concerns of its predecessor, the Bersih 2007 rally, calling for a reform of the Malaysia electoral process. However, the rally was deemed illegal by the Malaysian government and police force, and the members of the walk were subjected to forceful police responses, before, during and after the rally.

While both rallies had a similar purpose and had a good turnout of supporters, the main difference was that the 2011 rally made use of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The question that is uppermost in most people's minds is the extent to which these social networking sites played a collaborative role in making Bersih 2.0 an active co-ordinated political movement.

We argue that the Bersih 2.0 rally was and remains an active movement which is heavily influenced by social networking. Furthermore, we argue that the social media sites of Facebook and Twitter were instrumental as collaborative online activism networks which helped not only to promote the cause of Bersih, but also the transnational mobilization of co-ordinated protests both in Malaysia and across the world. The Internet, specifically the social networking sites of Facebook and Twitter (alongside various other image sharing sites), were utilized as tools of activism for the Bersih 2.0 rally in Malaysia. These social media sites allowed spaces for both online and offline political expression and action.

The massive turnout for the Bersih 2.0 rally in Kuala Lumpur, despite the heavy lockdown and the global participation of Malaysian diasporas in Global Bersih 2.0, is a testimony to how technologies such as social networks are empowering civil society. Most strikingly, the very name 'Bersih 2.0' is indicative of the influence and power that social media is perceived to carry. For the first time in Malaysian history, some 50,000 Malaysians gathered together in an organized manner, without distinction between ethnic or religious origin, or class and age stratification, in order to demonstrate and voice their concern for their country in a peaceful manner.

Thanks to the new communication technologies such as the social media sites Facebook and Twitter, a large number of the civil society and non-governmental organizations were able to organize themselves to exercise their rights to protest over misgovernance. Facebook affords its users with a functionality that allows them to keep in contact with others, share links and photos, stream videos as well as provide updates. Twitter, on the other hand, is perceived as an incredibly popular micro-blogging platform which allows for synchronous news updates. We argue that it is these affordances of Facebook and Twitter that have proved to be most useful in promoting and mobilizing the Bersih rally, and subsequently, giving it legitimacy as an active social movement. Social media, was instrumental as a tool of collaborative online activist network which in turn, helped not only to promote the cause of Bersih, but also the transnational mobilization of co-ordinated protests both in Malaysia and across the world.

In order to examine the relationship between the Bersih 2.0 rally and social networking, we combined collective behavior theory with a critical approach to discourse analysis. The study is essentially qualitative in nature and utilizes categories of analysis from the combined perspectives of collective behavior theory and critical discourse analysis.

Collective behavior is characterized formally as 'an uninstitutionalized mobilization for action in order to modify one or more kinds of strain on the basis of a generalized reconstitution of a component of action'. In order for collective behavior to occur, six conditions must be met, each of which is necessary but insufficient without the others. The first determinant is structural conduciveness, meaning that the social structure is organized in a way that makes the particular pattern of action feasible. The second determinant is structural strain, consisting of ambiguities, deprivations, conflicts, and discrepancies experienced by particular population segments. Third, is the growth and spread of a generalized belief that identifies and characterizes the supposed source of strain and specifies appropriate responses. Fourth are precipitating factors, a dramatic event or series of events that give the generalized belief concrete and immediate substance and provide a concrete setting toward which collective action can be directed. The fifth determinant is mobilization of participants for action, in which leadership behavior is critical. The final determinant is the operation of social control.



Controls may serve to minimize conduciveness and strain, thus preventing the occurrence of an episode of collective behavior, or they may come into action only after collective behavior has begun to materialize, either dampening or intensifying the action by the way controls are applied.

In the case of Bersih 2.0, all six determinants were present and with the use of social networking sites as a tool, it managed to converge a critical mass of people experiencing similar frustrations to demonstrate and call for free and fair elections in Malaysia. These social networking sites became very important tools because in order for behavior to become collective, some mode of communicating similar frustrations and belief and some mode of bringing people to action must be available. As in the case of the physical and temporal setting, the form of communication and interaction is very important in determining the timing, content, and extent of an episode of collective behavior. Therefore, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter were instrumental as collaborative online activism networks which helped to promote the cause of Bersih.

The importance of social media during the rally cannot be over emphasized. Throughout the rally, participants had access to tools of technology such as smart phones and other IT devices which allowed them access to social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and other file sharing sites where photos of the rally were uploaded. A statistical analysis of *The Archivist* reveals that 55.07 per cent of the tweets generated on Bersih were actually re-tweets. Information was re-circulated over and over to other members of the movement as well as readers of Twitter. The analysis also showed that the top 20 URLs posted on Twitter updates were actually file sharing sites such as image and video sharing sites (YouTube etc.). Significantly, the updates from Twitter that were collected from *The Archivist* came from various sources – a large volume of the Twitter updates were posted from smartphones applications such as Twitter and Ubersocial for Blackberry and Twitter for iPhone.

Interestingly, the participants themselves showed a great awareness of the influence of social media in mobilizing their activities and disseminating the effects to others. Several tweets and updates made reference to the power of social media to ‘transform and facilitate social change’. There was a strong reflexive awareness of the use of social media as a powerful tool for change and action. Strikingly, a writer for MalaysiaKini acknowledged that social media such as Twitter and Facebook which were not used for the 2007 march played an important role in garnering support and creating icons out of marchers.

Reflecting on the demands made by Bersih 2007 four years ago, it is clear that the Malaysian government, for whatever reasons, did not undertake the task of improving the electoral system at that time. The government’s failure to address the demands of Bersih 2007 became the precipitating factor to Bersih 2.0. The growing frustration among a more knowledgeable common mass who have a clear understanding about their constitutional rights, set the stage for the shared generalized beliefs necessary for collective behavior.

This led to the overt voicing of the demands for fair and clean elections through social networking sites. Through these sites, the structural strain became more apparent and more people were able to find their common voices, including the Malaysian diasporas, creating global support through Global Bersih 2.0. In summary, the easy accessibility of social networking sites (especially via mobile devices), in many ways, increased the structural conduciveness that led to Bersih 2.0.

Social networking sites are very important tools precisely because of their online affordances. In a country dominated by communal politics and fixed racial categories of identity, social networking sites are able to bring people together regardless of race and ethnicity; in the process, helping to create group identity, coordination and mobilization. By utilizing social media, the issue of limited access to the state controlled mass media is overcome. Social media, and in particular, social networking sites, allow people to remain constantly connected and to be able to voice their thoughts, beliefs, opinions and demands. Through social media, the voiceless citizen is afforded a space to find a voice. Social media is indeed a form of cultural capital for the ‘weak.’

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