

The Quest for Democratization in Myanmar

By

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Myanmar passed a new constitution in 2008 under the guidance of the military and subsequently the elections were held in 2010. The opposition groups then led by NLD, boycotted participation in the election. They had a grievance that their opinion was not taken while adopting a new constitution and also that the various provisions of the new constitution protects monopoly of the military in governance matters. Despite opposition boycott, the elections were held and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) got thumping majority. Accordingly a new government was formed. General Than Shwe was replaced by Than Sein as President in March 2011, whose views on reforms are quite well known. He began to contact the opposition leaders for reconciliation, and release of political prisoners, freedom of the press and peace talks with ethnic leaders were given utmost attention. His actions proved his sincerity and commitment for reforms, and thus the opposition groups led by NLD began to cooperate. Thus when the government decided to hold by-election for 45 seats of parliament in April 2012, NLD agreed to participate.

In April 2012 the elections were held in which 17 political parties contested. There were 157 contenders in all and the campaign for canvassing support was allowed. NLD fielded candidates for 44 seats out of 45 parliamentary seats. Myanmar's state media confirmed on 4 April 2012 that NLD was victorious in 43 constituencies. Suu Kyi had contested from Kawhmu and she got a massive support. The NLD volunteers were always carrying NLD flags, displayed Suu Kyi on their logos and sang nationalist songs everywhere in the country. Suu Kyi, while canvassing talked about alleviating poverty and price rise. She also touched upon addressing the issues of trust deficit between civilians and the military. She talked about bringing good governance implying that the process and institutions produce results that meet the need of the society by making the best use of the resources available. It needs to insure a balance in utilization of resources and creating an environment conducive for sustainable development of the society. She has been talking about political and judicial reforms at the constitutional level. The legislature in Myanmar with 659 parliamentary seats, have 25 percent reserved posts. The

President of the country is entitled to nominate members for Parliament on the recommendation of the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces. There is no need for such a large number of reserved posts. There are several other anomalies in the Constitution. There is no provision for fundamental rights and the rights of civilian authorities are limited. The Central government is very powerful as the powers of the government are centralized. The military is a dominant factor in the Civil Service and values of Tatmadaw are disliked by the civil society. There have been demands for autonomy or the federal system to bring ethnic minorities in the mainstream to promote nation building activities, but they have been suppressed so far. The NLD has been articulating the demands for a genuine federal union by reorganization of states, whereby the states could be organized on the basis of ethnicity, rather than geographical basis. According to NLD sources, at least eight states should be created on the basis of ethnicity, namely, Bamars, Chins, Kachins, Karens, Kaya, Mons, Rohingyas and Shans. There are several such issues of reconciliation, development and peace that NLD has to argue through parliamentary forums and their success in this parliament will pave the path for their success in 2015 general elections.

Introduction

Myanmar is strategically located between South Asia and Southeast Asia and shares contiguous land frontiers with five countries, namely India, China, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos. It has a land area of more than 676,000 sq kms and a coastline stretching over 2,200 kms. Its frontiers have prominent natural frontiers in the form of mountain ranges in the northwest, north and east and rivers in the west and south-East. There are eight major ethnic groups in the country namely; Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kaya, Mon, Rakhine and Shans. According to 1983 census, Bamar constituted 69 percent of the population followed by Shan 8.5 percent, Karens 6.2 percent and Rakhine 4.5 percent. Buddhists comprise 89.4 percent of the total population, Christians 4.9 percent and Muslims 3.9 percent. The country is endowed with rich natural resources where the soil is fertile and oil and natural gas are in abundance. It has hydrocarbon reserves of 2.512 trillion cubic meters (TMC) of natural gas and 3.2 billion barrels of crude oil. The hydro-power potential is put at 37000 megawatts. Besides it has potentials to produce

hydro-power to fulfill the needs of the countries in the neighborhood. Myanmar is also a part of golden triangle, where opium is produced for the global market.

However the aim of this paper is to examine recent developments in the politics of Myanmar, which needs to be understood in its proper perspective. There are observers who find it against the Chinese interests. There are others who find it pro-western and pro-Indian. To me the developments in Myanmar are neither pro-western, pro-Indian nor anti-Chinese whatever has happened since the release of Suu Kyi from her house arrest in 2010, are the steps towards democratization. The restoration of democracy has been the demands of the people of Myanmar, which were strongly supported by the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose policy of "Constructive Engagement" with Myanmar had been mooted to detract Myanmar's total dependence on China. The ASEAN leaders at the same time thought that greater interaction with ASEAN will tempt Myanmar for democratization in tune with the rest of the ASEAN countries. Myanmar was offered the membership of ASEAN in 1997 but nothing was done against the omission and commission of the military. Though General Khin Nyunt came out with a roadmap for restoring democracy in Myanmar, but he was ousted from power. General Than Shwe did not like to hear the name of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Many intellectuals in ASEAN felt frustrated that the policy of constructive engagement could not yield the desired results. The constitution of Myanmar which was announced in 2008 was opposed by the activists of the democracy movement. When general elections were announced in November 2010 for the formation of a popular government, structural changes were not envisaged, but it was to legitimate the position of the ruling establishment. However when the elections were held, the changes in the political order started, which is momentous. General Than Shwe paved the path for the emergence of General Thein Sein, who has a vision and agenda to transform Myanmar from authoritarian to democratic system. He has displayed overtures to establish rapprochement with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other civilian leaders. He has taken steps for reconciliation with the opposition groups and taken steps for reconstruction and nation building. Unlike General Than Shwe, he is trying to gain the trust of the masses and end isolation and trust deficit between government and people. President Thein Sein has already taken steps to introduce changes in the domestic and foreign policy of Myanmar which is highly appreciated by the ASEAN and the free world. The changes in the politics of Myanmar suits geostrategic interests of India, which treats Myanmar as a gateway to Asia-Pacific. Any connectivity through land and sea routes to the ASEAN region cannot avoid Myanmar, whose

support and access is important for the success of Look East policy, Mekong-Ganga cooperation, BIMSTEC and ASEAN.

Changes in the Domestic Policy

Now let us examine the changes in domestic policy of Myanmar that has been adopted in the post 2010 era. First of all, Thein Sein became the new president, who had his road map to cooperate with the civilians and resolve the shortage of rice, milk and fruits in the country. He thought that the cooperation of the civilian leaders, especially Suu Kyi is important and in that endeavor, he sought the cooperation of U Aung Kyi, the Minister of labor and social welfare. U Aung Kyi was one of those leaders of the government who had some rapport with Suu Kyi, who took up this task very seriously. He succeeded in arranging a meeting between Suu Kyi and Than Sein on 21 Aug 2011, which paved the path for reconciliation and cooperation with civilian leaders.

The meeting between Than Sein and Suu Kyi was held at Naypyitaw with the photograph of Bogyoke Aung San in the background. This was different experience from the past as the photographs of military leaders were missing from the venue. The contents of the talks included the matters pertaining to the release of political prisoners, end of ethnic conflict and the political role of Suu Kyi in future¹. The agenda of the meeting which had been included in the four points agreed by Suu Kyi and Aung Kyi were the following:

- a) To join hand in hand to carry out tasks for the government's stability, peace and development;
- b) To cooperate constructively for the country's economic and social development, and for the democratic system;
- c) To shelve disputed views and to carry out cooperative tasks on reciprocal basis and
- d) To continue dialogue

This meeting was extremely successful as both sides were satisfied with the outcome. Now the photographs of Suu Kyi and Thein Sein together, were displayed and sincere efforts were made on both sides for reconciliation and cooperation. Neither Suu Kyi nor Thein Sein allowed their prejudices to be discussed. Suu Kyi must have had the grievances that she had been

persecuted ever since 1989. She had been jailed or kept under house arrest on flimsy grounds and her party NLD had been banned. In fact when general elections on 27 May 1990 had been held, NLD had got 80% of seats and 60% of votes. In ordinary situation, she was to be handed over power of the government. But the military leaders decided otherwise. They pleaded that the elections were simply to form constituent assembly to formulate new constitution. SLORC Declaration no 1/90 spelled out steps towards civilian rule that precluded transfer of power to the NLD². There were reign of terror against all those who talked about Suu Kyi and when she was about to be released before 2010 elections, fresh charges of allowing trespassing were slapped to keep her continued in house arrest till the elections were over³. Suu Kyi did not allow all those issues to come in the way of dialogues. On the other hand, Thein Sein also did not display prejudices of the military that Suu Kyi had proximity with ethnic leaders and also that she was a threat to the unity of nation. Thein Sein sought cooperation with Suu Kyi in this meeting and it was warmly reciprocated.

Suu Kyi wanted cooperation with the military for national solidarity and communal harmony. After her release from house arrest on 13 Nov 2010, she had expressed her eagerness to have a dialogue with the military leaders. The continued dialogue was projected as a key to bring about national reconciliation and harmonious social conditions. As the trust deficit prevailed and general public and the military Generals both felt insecure, we have to work hand in hand to feel safe and secure⁴. While addressing the crowds gathered to welcome her release, Suu Kyi had stated, "I am glad to see so many people here and so happy to be free. This is a time to be quiet and a time to talk. People must work in unison. Only then we can achieve our goal⁵". However no initiative for dialogues was visible for nine months following her release, but when the meeting was arranged in August 2011, roadmap for restoration of democracy became clear.

Now the first thing that needed attention was the release of 200 political prisoners who were languishing in the jails. A student leader named Min Ko Naing had been arrested in 1989 and was awarded 65 years of jail sentence for supporting the democracy movement. Another leader, U Gambira of All Burma Monks Alliance, was in jail for supporting anti-military demonstrations. Comedian Zargnar who had mobilized funds for relief work in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis had been convicted as an external agent fomenting trouble in Myanmar⁶. Tint Swe, a powerful leader of NLD and foreign minister in the national coalition government of the union of Burma (NCGUB), formed in exile at a rebel camp on Thai-Myanmar border in 1990 was

persecuted to go out of the country and remain in exile. There were several such cases which needed attention so that their viewpoints could be taken for reconciliation and to assure welfare of the masses in Myanmar. Thus the parleys with the government officials started and positive results were witnessed. The Parliament passed a bill, entitled "Peaceful Assembly and Procession Bill", allowing citizens to stage peaceful protests. Although there is a provision that advanced permission should be taken for demonstrations, yet it is regarded as a major step towards political liberalization⁷. Most of the political prisoners have been released and the press is allowed to report about politics and crime⁸. In October 2011, a new labor law has been passed under which Myanmar's workers are entitled to stage protests and set up labor unions which were banned in the past⁹. While commenting about it India's former foreign secretary, Shyam Saran has remarked that "the government has recognized the right to public protests, and made labor unions and strikes a legitimate right of workers. Restrictions on access to the internet have been relaxed and there is greater media freedom. The pace with which these changes have been coming has led even liberal elements to express the fear that there may be a backlash. It appears that Thein Sein has the support of younger military leaders who wish to see a steady economic and political transformation of their country¹⁰".

Another landmark initiative is to assuage the bitter feelings of ethnic minorities. In 1962, Ne Win had staged a military coup d'état to prevent the legislation aimed at granting autonomy to frontier provinces i.e. Shans, Karens, Kachins, Chins, Rohingyas. He was of the firm view that if the frontier provinces of Myanmar will get autonomy, the union of Burma will disintegrate. His strong views against ethnic minorities in the frontier areas never changed. His successors, General Saw Maung and General Than Shwe, also treated ethnic minorities as anti-nationals and did everything to alienate them from decision making and nation building. It is only after the advent of Thein Sein that dialogues have started for ending their alienation from the national mainstream. The NLD had a meeting with all the ethnic leaders at Kale on 22 October 2010, which called for a federal system based on equity and democracy to be established through a second Panglong conference. In fact, the first Panglong agreement had been signed on the eve of independence of Myanmar whereby all the leaders had agreed to concede autonomy to ethnic areas and there was also a provision that if the autonomous areas were not satisfied with a Central Rule, they were entitled to secede. However, the main architect of the agreement, Aung San, who had signed the first Panglong agreement, was assassinated subsequently and the agreement was kept under the carpet by his successors. However, when

six decades later, the meeting of ethnic leaders was held at Kale and Kale Declaration was announced, they once again reiterated their support for the provisions of Panglong Agreement. It emphasized that dialogues with ethnic leaders are important and the ways to resolve the problems of the Kachins, Karens, Shans, Chins or Rohingyas can be found with continued dialogues and understanding.

Suu Kyi has refused the ideas of separatism and violence and argue that the desired objectives can be achieved through peaceful and nonviolent means. She had stated that she agrees with the broad objectives of Panglong Agreement but she will never support secession of any part of the country. The issue of autonomy can be discussed under the rubric of federal structure and her opinion is supported by majority of ethnic leaders. Khuensai Jai-Yen, a Shan intellectual is quoted as saying that, "Of course the decisive authority is in junta's hands, but we have only Suu Kyi who holds Bogyoke Aung Sang's legacy to bring it from the military to us¹¹".

The government has already lifted the ban against NLD and supported the candidature of Suu Kyi to stand in the elections. She is going to contest for membership of National Assembly on 1 April 2012. The public meetings and canvassing has been allowed and the reports are that wherever Suu Kyi is going for canvassing, large number of people is gathering to listen to her. Being charismatic, her wisdom and appeal proves her iconic. She talks about solving the problem of food, clothing and shelter and the people in Myanmar has lot of expectations from her. Being a Nobel laureate, she has been awarded Sakharin and Nehru award for her precious views about democracy, human rights and federalism. She has attracted the attention of the western world and she can use her vision, charisma and wisdom for development of Myanmar. Thein Sein administration is aware of the realities and therefore trying to bring Suu Kyi in the fore front to address socio-economic problems as well as change the overall image of the country from a client state of China to self reliant and vibrant nation.

Changes in the Foreign Policy

President Thein Sein has taken some decisions to bring Myanmar on non-aligned path. From 1988 to 2010, Myanmar was considered a client state of Peoples Republic of China. It was a reality that China was the most important factor in the security and economic affairs of Myanmar. It was with the support of Myanmar that China became a factor in the politics of

Indian ocean region. Myanmar and China had been historically linked through land routes known as Burma Road, but in the post 1988 era, connectivity for business and trade between the two increased. Several roads have been constructed and the Chinese goods are coming to Myanmar and from there to South Asian countries. The business and trade however was not objectionable for the countries in the region but it was the role of the Chinese in the security matters of Myanmar that aroused apprehensions. China established Signals Intelligence Facility (SIGINT) at Coco Islands located in the Indian Ocean which is merely 30 nautical miles away from the Andamans. Besides that, China developed Hanggyi in the Indian Ocean as an important port for naval activities. Again Irravaddi and Bassein River have been developed to cater to the strategic interests of the Chinese. It is understood that the Chinese presence at Coco and Hanggyi can jeopardize security interests of India as well as the ASEAN states. It can paralyze shipping in the Bay of Bengal and create problems in the movement of ships in the Malacca straits. While commenting about the Chinese installations in the region, Sanjoy Hazarika has stated that the Chinese presence at Coco Island in Myanmar may enable China to monitor activities on the missile testing ranges of Balasore and Chandipur in Orissa¹². The strategic build-up of the Chinese in Myanmar had security implications on India but its concerns were not addressed by the Myanmar leaders. Although ASEAN felt concern at the Chinese build up in Myanmar and South China Sea and mooted constructive engagement policy so that Myanmar is enabled to evolve a balanced view of the regional realities, but Than Shwe was opposed to any change as far as deeper strategic ties with China was concerned. However when Thein Sein came into power, transformation from absolute dependence to self-reliance was given importance and review of China policy hitherto pursued became apparent.

In September 2011, Thein Sein took a bold step to cancel the \$3.6 billion Chinese hydro-electric dam project, even at the cost of a hefty cancellation fee of \$42.5 million¹³. Although there were opposition to the project, known as Myitsone project at the local level, but its cancellation was not expected. China had planned to construct a series of dams on the northern tributaries of the Irrawady in the upper reaches of the main river, and preparatory work on the project had started. Ethnic Kachins were opposing the construction of the dam because thousands had been displaced and many more were to be displaced and evicted from the area. Although ethnic Kachins were the admirers of the Chinese in the past but Myitsone dam project offended them and they turned strong critics of the Chinese later. It was due to opposition of the dam that Kachins had boycotted participation in 2010 elections. They were furious that despite their

historic support to the Chinese interests in the past, the latter has come with a project that would dilute their existence and identity. Moreover, it was understood that after the completion of the dam, most of the power were to be supplied to the Chinese, but the anger of the displaced Kachins will be left on the government to resolve. Hence Thein Sein decided to cancel the project, but this decision annoyed the Chinese who were dictating so far the government of the Myanmar and using their natural resources for their own purposes.

Various opinions and comments have come ever since the cancellation of the deal. The Time weekly newspaper reported that "although this incident will not cause long – term damage to overall relations between China and Myanmar, the relations can no longer stay in their traditional form¹⁴". Some Chinese enterprises have been secretive about all kinds of events that have happened while investing in Myanmar so as to obtain profits. This has resulted in Chinese policy makers not understanding or even misjudging the actual situation in Myanmar. If serious political changes occur in Myanmar, it is very likely to jeopardize China's investment interests. The losses will not only be the recent hydroelectric station project, but may also include already operational China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and even the China-Myanmar highway, high speed railway and other planned projects will not be able to proceed¹⁵.

Again Taipei Times reported that "what worries China most about the suspension of the Myitsone project is not the economic loss, but the apparent change in Myanmar's political orientation. The Burmese, for their part, want to move out of China's orbit. They don't want to be a Chinese province anymore. This trend is as hard to stop as an arrow in flight. As Myanmar escapes from its isolation, China will find itself even more isolated, and that is a prospect that the authorities in Beijing find very worrying"¹⁶. In retrospect, we find that the Thein Sein administration has taken a popular decision to cancel Myitsone deal. This has pleased the people in the area and the step is regarded as a landmark for reconciliation with ethnic minorities. This decision has pleased not only the countries in the neighborhood but the entire world. The United Nations, the United States, the European Union and the ASEAN have welcomed the positive decisions of Myanmar as it has displayed its determination to take reformative measures in the realm of Foreign Policy also.

In September 2011, Thein Sein took another decision to invite the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to visit Myanmar which coincided with the release of 200 political prisoners. The invitation was sent as a part of initiative to opening up the country to the world. The US

responded warmly to the invitation and thus the interaction with US officials started. There was a high level meeting between state department officials and Myanmar's defence chief on 3 November 2011 which was followed by President Barack Obama's conversation with Suu Kyi on telephone and subsequent announcement that Hillary Clinton will visit Myanmar soon. Hillary Clinton came to Myanmar on December 1 and 2, 2011. This was a visit by the US Secretary of State after 50 years, which signified the beginning of new era of relations. On this occasion a letter from the US President Barack Obama was delivered to Suu Kyi, promising eternal support for her role in the politics of the country. At the same time, the US President sent a message to President Thein Sein and offered to begin a new phase in ties. Obama said that "Washington wanted to explore how it can support and advance your efforts to transition to democracy and promote human rights" and Thein Sein reciprocated by saying that there will be more reforms in Myanmar¹⁷.

Hillary Clinton met Suu Kyi on a private dinner and talked about the politics of the country. She indicated plans for lifting of decades old sanctions against Myanmar. In short, Clinton's visit has proved a landmark in inspiring the reformist leaders in Myanmar and it is bound to open new vistas of co-operation with the United States and the Western world. On the other hand, this visit has indicated some new trends in the politics of the region. Nayan Chanda, a renowned expert, has remarked that "Clinton's arrival is marking the beginning of a new Great Game in Myanmar to block, or even roll back, Chinese advances to the South¹⁸."

Japan is satisfied with the ongoing pace of reforms and it has resumed its aids to Myanmar which had been stopped years ago. The ASEAN is also satisfied with the process of reforms as Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak said that "Southeast Asian leaders were satisfied with the momentum of reforms in Myanmar" on the eve of ASEAN summit in Bali in 2011¹⁹. Myanmar thus won ASEAN approval to chair the ASEAN in 2014 as a reward for hints of reforms after decades of military rule. Marty Natalegawa, Foreign Minister of Indonesia said that "All leaders are in agreement that significant changes, significant developments have taken place in Myanmar and those changes have made it more conducive to carry out this responsibility²⁰". In retrospect, we find that Myanmar was forced to renounce the ASEAN rotating presidency in 2006 in the face of criticism over its human rights record and the ruling junta's failure to shift to democracy. However, there was no resistance to the proposal this time and it is certain that Myanmar will also host the East Asia Summit in 2014.

Indo-Myanmar Relations

India and Myanmar, sharing 1600 Km long border, are slowly and steadily coming closer to each other. Though the relations were cool for decades due to ideological differences but the situation started improving under the paradigm of Look East Policy. However, the experiences were not encouraging in certain areas. Two Indian owned state companies – ONGC Videsh and GAIL – alongwith South Korean Daewoo had made investments in Rakhine offshore area to explore and extract oil and gas and when it was found and negotiations were underway for better pricing and building a pipeline through Bangladesh to India, Myanmar ignored India and signed a MoU with China, committing all gas from Block A-I and A-III to China. This was to be wheeled through a 2,380 km pipeline connecting Myanmar's Kyakphyu in the Bay of Bengal to Rili in Yunnan²¹. This was indeed disappointing but Indian government did not lose its patience. India's the then Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee visited Myanmar in January and May 2007 and discussed the issues of energy supplies with General Maung Aye and Brigadier General Thura Myint Maung and the response of Myanmar government was quite assuring about the concerns of the government of India. Myanmar side showed that the losses could be addressed through cooperation in defence and economic relations²². India always wanted cooperation of Myanmar to address the threat of insurgency in the Northeast. India had felt great relief when the armies of the two countries had participated in operation Golden Bird in 1995 to flush out Indian insurgents from Myanmar. After General Malik's meeting with his Myanmarese counterpart General Maung Aye in 2000, deeper level of cooperation to address the problem of cross border terrorism and drug trafficking had been agreed. In November 2001, Myanmar Army had arrested about 40 Manipuri insurgents after raiding their camps at Tamu, Namphalong and Khunjao. All those captured belonged to United National Liberation Front, People's liberation Army and People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak. However such activities were considered a partial success only because there were several such camps in Myanmar which needed to be destroyed. Myanmar agreed to India's proposal to institutionalize cooperation between the armies of the two countries for operations against ULFA and other insurgent outfits. Pranab Mukherjee, who visited Myanmar in May 2007, was assured to take a stock in A-III block and at the same time extend security cooperation. Myanmar was pleading that lack of infrastructure in Myanmar was hindering the troops from extending full cooperation

to India and the chief of Myanmar Army had already stated in New Delhi in December 2006 that 35 millimeter field guns, helicopters, mortars, submarine detecting sonars, islanders aircraft and spares for MiG fighters will enhance their infrastructure to nab the Indian terrorist outfits in Myanmar.

India agreed to the proposal of Myanmar and at the same time transferred two BN-2 Defender Islander maritime surveillance aircraft to Myanmar to promote relations between the navies of the two countries. The two nations also agreed for joint exercises and exchange of intelligence to prevent sea piracy and smuggling of narcotics. It also gave deck-based air defence guns and varied surveillance equipments²³.

When Thein Sein came into power, he extended sincere support to nab the Indian insurgents in Myanmar. On 7 September 2011, Myanmar army attacked the so called head quarters of the Northeast rebels at Saigaing and destroyed several ULFA camps. The ULFA cadres were intermittently attacking Indian security forces and seeking shelter in Myanmar. They have been spreading hatred against Indians and keep themselves busy in kidnapping the people for ransom in the Northeast. They mingle with the people in Myanmar on the basis of their ethnicity and remain engaged in perpetual campaign of violence and hatred. This has disturbed the quest for connectivity between the two countries. The construction of roadways, railways and industrial infrastructure are delayed because of disturbances in the area. The investors are thinking twice before committing their resources in the region. It is also because of disturbances in the northeast that the proposal of Chennai-Dewei transport corridor is attracting the attention of the experts in the region. However the development of the Northeast and its uninterrupted connectivity with countries in the neighborhood are essential for economic prosperity of South and Southeast Asia.

While writing about India-Myanmar relations, Rajiv Bhatia, former Indian ambassador to Myanmar has stated "Cooperation in security management, regular intelligence-sharing, defence cooperation, maritime security and long-term energy and connectivity cooperation are the central challenges²⁴". All these endeavors can be achieved if we have understanding of each other. When the President of Myanmar, Thein Sein visited New Delhi in October 2011, a joint statement was issued through which all necessary assistance was assured by India in Myanmar's political, economic and social reforms. Both reiterated their shared commitment to strengthening and broadening the multi-faceted relationship based on shared history,

civilization ties and close religious, linguistic and cultural affinities and take it to a new level²⁵. On the other hand, Myanmar also extended support and said that it would not allow sanctuaries to secessionist elements from Northeast of India.

In fact, the upgradation of economic relationship with Myanmar would give a tremendous boost to the development of northeast region. The planned infrastructure development of road, rail and waterways are important steps in that direction. This includes Kaladan multi-nodal transport project in the Rakhine state and road project to improve access to a border trade crossing in Chin state²⁶. Ranjit Gupta has further explained that "India is upgrading the Sittwe port and making 225 kilometer of the Kaladan river from Sittwe to Setpyitpyin navigable. It is to be connected to Mizoram by a 62 km road. Presently Kolkata – Sittwe sea route is 539 kms. These projects are designed to provide connectivity between mainland India and its Northeastern states. But we should think about setting up of multi-purpose special economic zones around Sittwe. It should be considered on a priority basis. The SEZ would provide an avenue for utilization of the gas from the exploration blocks currently with ONGC Videsh and Essar. Power for downstream industries in the SEZ could be supplied from the two hydropower projects that India is involved in Tamanthi and Shwezaye. RITES is involved in the development of rail transportation. The SEZ would synergise the objectives of these projects and become the symbol of India's presence and commitment to Myanmar's economic development in non-exploitative fashion, in strong contrast to what other major investors are doing²⁷.

The Indo-Burmese relations are expanding in other areas also, such as health and farming sectors. India has agreed to modernize the children's hospital in Yangon by supplying the latest modern equipments. Talks are also on building a state of the art general hospital in Sittwe²⁸. India has extended its support to work for in cyclone-prone areas. It has handed over 10 modern and disaster-proof rice silos (warehouses) built at a cost of two million dollars to preserve grains during natural calamities. External affairs minister, S M Krishna who visited Myanmar in June 2011, inaugurated the silos. Each silos, having a combined capacity of 5000 tonne storage is handy. A team led by agriculture scientist, M S Swaminathan has been authorized to understand the country's needs in the agricultural sector and the possible help that India can extend. India has already agreed to provide a grant of 10 million US dollars for procurement of agricultural tools, besides 100 computers to the central land records, as

requested by Myanmar. India is also willing to setup agricultural research center in Yezin, near the capital²⁹.

India has agreed to send a team from the Archaeological Survey of India to render its services in restoration of eleventh century Ananda temple in Pagan at Mandalaya. On the economic side, both countries are satisfied at the rapid growth of trade and target for bilateral trade has been fixed at 3 billion by 2015³⁰. The Ministry of Commerce figures for import and export in 2010 had estimated that the total trade between the two countries was of US \$1497.77 million in which exports amounted to US \$207.97 million and imports are US \$1289.80 million. However, the figure mentioned does not show the actual figure because India and Myanmar has had the history of clandestine trade, whose figures are difficult to account. There are immense potentials of natural gas, petroleum, teak, pearls, gems, rubber, timber, sugar and rice in Myanmar and similarly immense areas of cooperation between the two, which can be explored for mutual benefits.

To conclude, it can be stated that Myanmar is undergoing changes and they are aimed at reforms. In the realm of domestic politics, they have eased the system and allowed NLD to play their political role. Suu Kyi is going to fight in the elections and has assured support to President Thein Sein for cooperation in nation building. She was disliked by the military in the past and all those who tried to isolate her in the past, are not expressing their opinion at present. This is a cause of worry as their agenda is not known. Thein Sein is enthusiastic to take the cooperation of Suu Kyi, which will help the nation in establishing reconciliation with dissidents and also pave the path for lifting of economic sanctions. In the realm of foreign policy, the aim of Thein Sein government is to diversify relations from total dependence on China to equidistance in relations with its neighbors. It has attached importance to India and other ASEAN countries in solving its socio-economic problems. It has also given importance to the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other countries and has decided to destroy the bases of ULFA, Nagas and Manipuri insurgents which existed in Myanmar for decades. The country has taken positive steps towards democratization and the overall trends are in tune with the political realities in ASEAN countries.

Endnotes

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3. In May 2010, an American known as John Yettow swam to the lakeside home of Suu Kyi without taking permission from the military. The military regarded this event unlawful. They were angry that even Suu Kyi did not inform the military about the event immediately and therefore they projected Suu Kyi as a culprit that she allowed the event of trespass a secret. Thus the military court slapped 18 months of house arrest to Suu Kyi. The military action was so arbitrary that it invited world-wide condemnation. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and the US President Barack Obama condemned it along with other great leaders. For details see Ganganath Jha, "Politics of military in Myanmar", Area Studies, a journal of International Studies and Analysis, Tirupati, January-June 2011, Vol 5, No 1, pp. 121-123
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