

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Myanmar (Burma)

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>-6</td> <td>-6</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>6</td> <td>6</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td colspan="3">47</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td colspan="3">Yes</td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	-6	-6	0	Democ:	0	0	0	Autoc:	6	6	0	Durable:	47			Tentative:	Yes			
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SCODE	MYA	CCODE	775	Date of Report	1 June 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
2	0	0	2	4	1																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date			Begin Date																						
2 March 1962			1 July 1963																						
Polity Fragmentation: Yes, northern and eastern peripheral regions (10-20%)																									
Constitution	2008																								
Executive(s)	President Thein Sein; elected by the parliament 4 February 2011																								
Legislature	Bicameral: House of Nationalities (224 seats; 168 directly elected and 56 appointed by the military; most recent elections, 7 November 2010): Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP): 129 Other Parties: 39 House of Representatives (440 seats; 330 directly elected and 110 appointed by the military; last elections 7 November 2010) USDP: 259 Others: 66																								
Judiciary	Chief Judge																								

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Executive-Guided Transition (5)

In 1962 the Burmese armed forces, under the leadership of Ne Win, carried out a coup d'état. In an effort to legitimize military rule, Ne Win's Revolutionary Council established a one-party state, led by the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). Ne Win and the BSPP controlled politics in Burma (now Myanmar) until 1988 when serious student-led disturbances led to the resignation of Ne Win from his position as party chairman (and San Yu from his position as head of government). After the brief and unstable tenure of Usein Lwin, in 1988 General Saw Maung and Brigadier General Khin Nyunt placed the country under direct military rule. Far from being constructed as a typical military coup, the creation of the State Law and

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was seen, at least initially, as an attempt by Ne Win and his supporters to retain their political power through military control. The military had stepped in, not to overthrow the BSPP, but to shore up a regime overwhelmed by popular protests.

In response to international pressure, the SLORC allowed a national election in May 1990. Faced with the prospects of a humiliating defeat at the polls to the National League for Democracy (NLD), the SLORC prevented the NLD-dominated legislature from forming a civilian government. In April 1992 General Than Shwe replaced General Saw Maung as Chairman of SLORC. The goal of SLORC during the 1990s was to pave the way for a future constitutional military dictatorship, thinly disguised in democratic dress. In 1993 the government-controlled National Convention granted the military twenty-five percent of seats in future parliaments and formalized its leading role in politics. Thus, while the SLORC (now called the State Peace and Development Council, SPDC) replaced the BSPP in 1988, this change in leadership did not fundamentally transform the nature of executive recruitment.

While executive recruitment remained a “designative” act within the military apparatus, since 2008 Myanmar has been engaged in a gradual return to civilian rule. A new constitution was promulgated under the direct authority of the military government (SPDC), approved by referendum, and enacted on 10 May 2008. The constitution represented a conclusion to the “roadmap to democracy” first proposed in 2003. Under the new constitution, parliament would be vested with the duty of electing a president. The constitution also stipulates that 25% of the seats in both houses of the National Assembly must be reserved for members of the military. This quota gives the military veto power over any potential constitutional changes since a 75% approval is required to alter the constitution. Under the new constitution, the military will continue to exert considerable control over the political scene and the executive recruitment process even though official power will be transferred to civilian rule. Legislative elections took place on 7 November 2010 and resulted in the expected landslide victory for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) established for the transition to civilian rule by the military junta.

Executive Constraints: Slight Limitations (2)

There are few institutional constraints on the executive, particularly as the unicameral legislature has never convened, despite holding elections in 1990. Power rests almost entirely within the military dictatorship. While Ne Win was able to dominate Burmese politics up until the late 1980s, during the 1990s this personalist leadership style was replaced by a more collective style under the hegemonic direction of the ruling junta. The junta, comprised of senior military officers who rule by decree without a constitution or legislature, has controlled the political order since 1988. While General Than Shwe, head of state and paramount leader of the SPDC, has been widely regarded as the dominant figure in Burmese politics since the early 1990s, his power has traditionally been constrained by other members of the ruling SLORC/SPDC: General Maung Aye (army chief) and Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt (chief of military intelligence). Given the intense factionalism within the ruling SPDC, Than Shwe has been constrained by the actions of his rivals within the ruling junta.

In 2001-02 there emerged signs of a power struggle between Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt. This power struggle manifested itself in a major reshuffle of both the army and the military government. In addition to the sacking of several government ministers on alleged grounds of corruption, the powerful regional commanders were replaced by younger officers who were more open to the reform efforts being pushed by Khin Nyunt. However, the events of 2003, in which General Khin Nyunt was moved from First Secretary of the ruling State Peace and Development Council to the post of Prime Minister, foretold a general retrenchment of the reform effort led by Nyunt. Moreover, in October 2004 Khin Nyunt was replaced by Soe Win as prime minister, further isolating him from the center of political power in the ruling junta.

The demotion of Khin Nyunt had been seen as a blow to the liberalization process in Myanmar. Khin Nyunt, widely viewed as the primary force for political reform within the ruling junta, had increasingly come into conflict with Burma’s paramount leader, Than Shwe. While continuing to maintain widespread support from the armed forces, nevertheless, Than Shwe’s power has begun to dwindle with age. In an effort to secure his power base, Than Shwe systematically purged those officers who posed a threat to both SPDC hegemony and his political preeminence. Officers within Nyunt’s Military Intelligence Bureau had been the primary focus of these political purges. In recent years the Military Intelligence Bureau has acted as the broker between the armed forces and Aung San Suu Kyi’s opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). Members of Nyunt’s Military Intelligence Bureau tended to believe that Myanmar’s vital economic interests could only be met by a prudent relaxation of government repression

and the establishment of peace accords with the country's ethnic minorities. Regime hardliners, primarily concentrated in the regular army, saw things differently. Soe Win, Nyunt's replacement as prime minister, was widely considered a political hardliner and a supporter of Than Shwe. Soe Win was credited with being the mastermind behind the violent attacks against pro-democracy supporters in 2003.

In 2008 Than Shwe set out the "roadmap to democracy" which established a protracted timetable to reestablish civilian rule in the country by 2010 while simultaneously preserving a political role for the military. Under the terms of the new constitution, the military will continue to wield significant power, including its guaranteed 25% bloc of legislative seats, its right to nominate one of the three presidential candidates, its control of key security ministries and the powers given to the commander-in-chief. Moreover, it will be free to administer its own affairs and under a state of emergency would wield broad executive, legislative and judicial authority.

Political Participation: Repressed Competition (1)

Despite sporadic efforts at political liberalization over the past few years, it is clear that the generals remain convinced that only the army can guarantee the country's survival. Between 1988 and 1992 the SLORC concentrated its efforts on consolidating its power and eliminating all political rivals. During this period it systematically harassed opposition politicians and student leaders. However, since 1992 political "moderates" within the SLORC/SPDC have sought to open up the political system, albeit tentatively and with mixed results. While opposition groups do operate within Myanmar, nevertheless, their activities are strictly supervised and highly curtailed. The continued absence of electoral politics in Myanmar, along with the widespread violation of human rights, illustrates the overall weakness of the military's commitment to democratic competition.

In the spring of 2002 the government-led reform effort took a small step forward as the SPDC sought to distance itself from the influence of General Ne Win and his political allies. While the aging dictator was no longer an active player in Burmese politics, his family and his political allies within the military remained so. In March 2002 General Ne Win's daughter, Sandar Win, her husband and their three sons were accused by the SPDC of plotting to overthrow the country's military rulers. Sandar Win, who has long argued against the return of civilian rule in Myanmar, has become increasingly upset in the past few years over the family's increasing marginalization from the political and economic activities of the state. While there is no doubt that the Ne Win family were trying to re-establish their power and influence in the country, it is not at all clear that they were actively seeking to overthrow the state. Many political observers believe that the top generals simply used the actions of the Win family as a pretext to root out senior officers in the military who were resistant to the political and economic reforms favored by Khin Nyunt. In the wake of this alleged coup, many senior officers and regional commanders were sacked. Ne Win died under house arrest in December 2002.

Under increasing international pressure to liberalize the political arena, in early 2001 the SPDC acknowledged that it was engaged in secretive talks with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi (who had been under house arrest since September 2000). During 2001 over 200 NLD activists were released from jail and the government allowed thirty-one NLD offices in Rangoon to reopen, albeit under the close supervision of SPDC monitors. In May 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi was released after twenty months of house arrest. While many observers hoped that her release would facilitate the process of political liberalization in the country, unfortunately, she was largely ignored by the regime and the reform effort stalled. While moderates within the SPDC continue to push for change, the military has repeatedly made it clear that it is not interested in a speedy return to democratic competition. This position was made explicitly clear in May 2003 when Aung San Suu Kyi was once again placed under house arrest (or what the government calls "protective custody"). Suu Kyi's arrest followed violent clashes in the north of country between government troops and pro-democracy protestors. While then-Prime Minister Nyunt announced in August 2003 that the government would restart a national convention to draw up a new democratic constitution, his subsequent fall from power has seriously undermined the momentum for political liberalization in Myanmar. The constitutional convention eventually convened by the SPDC in May 2004 was boycotted by all the major pro-democracy and ethnonational political parties. Despite the occasional shift towards conciliation since the rise of the junta, for all practical purposes Burma remains a military-dominated garrison state.

In addition to restricting the activities of pro-democracy forces, the SLORC/SPDC has also acted to limit the activities of ethnic minorities within the country. There are eight major ethnic minority groups and over 135 subgroups living in the mountainous frontiers of Burma. Comprising more than one-third of

Burma's population, many of these ethnonational groups have fought for independence from the Burmese-dominated government for over fifty years. However, since the early 1990s the SLORC/SPDC has co-opted many, although not all, of these ethnic rebel armies. The Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party and the Shan State Army engaged in open conflict with the regime throughout the 1990s. However, in January 2004 the Karen National Union, the most significant ethnic group fighting the government, agreed to end hostilities (although they failed to sign a formal agreement). While these ethnic groups originally sought complete independence from the state of Burma, most of Burma's ethnic opposition groups now call for a federal union granting a degree of autonomy for each within a multi-ethnic state. In September and October 2007, the country's Buddhist monks led groups of up to 100,000 protesters for democratic reform, centered on the home of Aung San Suu Kyi. Although the government did not initially crackdown on the protesters, allowing them to proceed past expected limits, in early October the junta began systematic night-time arrests of dissidents.

The SPDC military junta presented a new constitution on 9 April 2008, drafted by a government-appointed commission; the new constitution was enacted by public referendum on 10 May 2008. The constitution proposes a multi-party political system but reserves a "leading role" for the military. The southern region of the country was devastated by Cyclone Nargis on 2-3 May 2008 and the constitutional referendum was largely forgotten as the country struggled with the aftermath of the disaster. The military government only reluctantly allowed some foreign humanitarian assistance while fervently striving to limit foreign influence and contacts with dissident groups. The government moved to systematically crack down on dissidents in late 2008 through 2009.

On March 2010, the military government announced it had finalized five new laws governing procedures for the planned election; the first details were made public on 9 March 2009. The procedures banned the main opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, from any direct role in the election. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in mid-November, six days after Myanmar held its first election in 20 years. On 6 May 2010 her political party, the National League for Democracy, was declared illegal by the ruling military junta after failing to register for the elections slated for 7 November 2010. While the NLD pressed for a boycott of the election, a small number of lawmakers from Burma's ethnic parties and pro-democracy opposition decided to participate in the election.

The election developed into a contest between three main blocs: the military government-backed USDP; pro-democracy and ethnic minority parties that challenge the military government; and the National Union Party (formerly the Burma Socialist Program Party) which tried to find a way to establish a third force. Following the NLD's boycott of the elections, pro-democracy forces were confined to smaller, lesser-known parties with limited organizational capabilities. In stark contrast to the USDP and NUP, which each fielded over one thousand candidates around the country, the National Democratic Force (NDF), a group that splintered from the NLD, managed to field only 162 candidates while the Democratic Party (Myanmar) fielded only 47 candidates.

The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won over 80% of the seats in both houses of the National Assembly. The USDP is closely aligned with General Than Shwe and consists primarily of members of the military junta and recently resigned military officers. The election sparked fighting in the east of the country between ethnic Karen rebels and government forces, driving tens of thousands into exile in Thailand. In an effort to prevent further instability, the government cancelled elections entirely in five key ethnic areas in the country. The entire election process was deemed to be a sham by international observers.

Myanmar's reclusive leader, Than Shwe, chose not to run for president in 2011, thereby effectively ending his 18 years of direct rule of the country. Despite stepping down from his formal leadership position, he is expected either to remain in charge of the military or play a significant behind-the-scenes role in the new "civilian" political order. Prime Minister Thein Sein (USDP), the military junta's fourth in command, was elected to the post of president by parliament on 4 February 2011.