

Epilouge

Developments Since July 2003

This thesis was submitted for examination at the end of July 2003. In August, the regime went through another restructuring, and embarked on a second attempt to resolve the political impasse to their advantage. On 25 August 2003, General Khin Nyunt was appointed as Prime Minister. Lieutenant-General Soe Win filled the position of Secretary-1, and Lieutenant-General Thein Sein was appointed as Secretary-2.

On 30 August 2003, General Khin Nyunt announced a step-by-step political programme for 'the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system'. The political programme consists of:

1. reconvening of the National Convention,
2. drafting of a new constitution in accordance with the basic principles laid down by the National Convention,
3. adoption of the constitution through national referendum,
4. holding of free and fair elections for Pyithu Hluttaws (legislative bodies) according to the new constitution,
5. convening of Hluttaws attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution,
6. building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Hluttaw, and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw.¹

This programme, commonly referred to as a 'road-map', was greeted with a mixture of scepticism and cautious support.

¹ 'Speech by H.E. General Khin Nyunt, Prime Minister of the Union of Myanmar on Development and Progressive Changes in Myanmar Naing-ngan', 30 August 2003, Myanmar Mission, Geneva.

The National Convention is due to convene on 17 May 2003. The credibility of the Convention relies on the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest (the NLD's pre-condition for attending), and an absence of the restrictions on delegates that characterised the National Convention from 1993 to 1996.

The political developments in Myanmar since August 2003 reinforce, rather than refute, my thesis. The road-map represents an attempt to bring back on track the regime's strategy to facilitate the emergence of a political system that adheres to international norms of democracy while entrenching military power. The road-map forms an re-acknowledgment by the regime that their rule without moral authority is unsustainable. It is also an attempt to regain the moral upper-hand after the regime's loss of face following the attack on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters in May 2003.

As any observer of Myanmar politics would know, the road-map is not original. The holding of 'free and fair elections', and the convening of the National Convention, were attempted in 1990 and 1993 respectively. Both failed when the regime realised it could not control the outcome, and still retain credibility. In fact, as discussed in Chapter Four, the 1991 election and the National Convention actually undermined the regime's legitimacy further.

The road-map comes in a different environment. Censure against the regime from the international community is milder (notwithstanding the fluctuations of isolation and engagement), and the opposition within the country has been undermined by a decade of inertia and intimidation. The regime indubitably believes that it can achieve its desired outcome in this process. Coming from a relatively stronger position, it may be willing to make more concessions.

As my examination of social development under SLORC/SPDC has shown, initial experimentation with more moderate (though erratic) political and development policy in the early 1990s was replaced with a retreat to a hardline approach in the mid-1990s. From the late 1990s, the regime once more became willing to experiment with a more moderate approach to its policy. This approach manifested in significant policy shifts, such as the initiation of

confidence building talks with the NLD in 2000, and the more open approach to dealing with the social problems underlying the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Overall, SPDC's conception of political and development strategies to entrench its power and legitimacy remains limited by its lack of autonomy from its security agenda. While there is some room within these strategies for policy experimentation, the fact remains that the regime's hold over how policy plays out is tenuous. If, in the regime's view, an experiment gets 'out of control', the policy experiment will quickly be ended. The political programme towards disciplined democracy outlined by General Khin Nyunt will be implemented within these parameters.

Canberra, 14 April 2004.