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From dictatorship to democracy

The road less travelled

How to make the most difficult political transition of all—and how not to slip back again

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WITH the last votes from Myanmar's farthest corners finally counted, the country's electoral earthquake has been officially confirmed. On November 8th the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won 77% of the seats on offer, while the ruling army's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, only managed a humiliating 10%.



Considering that Myanmar was ruled by a brutal military dictatorship just five years ago, and the NLD was banned, with many of its leaders in prison or under house arrest, this is an exhilarating turnaround. The NLD's landslide gives it a majority in both houses of parliament, and puts it in pole position to pick the next president.

Myanmar's swift, albeit incomplete, transition from dictatorship to democracy is particularly heartening because of failures elsewhere. During the same period, for instance, the Arab spring has wilted. Of all the countries that witnessed popular revolutions in 2011, Tunisia alone remains relatively stable and has held successful elections. Egypt is probably more oppressive and violent than before; Syria and Libya are war zones. Myanmar's neighbours have floundered, too. Thailand elected a charismatic young prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, in 2011, only for her to be overthrown in a military coup three years later. Cambodia and Malaysia both held flawed elections in 2013 that were largely rejected by the opposition, plunging them into crisis. Vietnam and China continue to lock up dissidents and show no sign of letting the people choose their own rulers.

Fake it till you make it

For most countries that attempt it, the shift from dictatorship to democracy seems as difficult as ever. As Russia, Thailand and several other places have shown, there is no guarantee that a

newborn democracy will survive or mature. Myanmar's progress, though impressive so far, is anything but secure. So it is worth asking: what makes for a successful transition?

For a start, any elections, even if flawed or ignored, can put a country on the right path. Nowadays, almost all dictatorships and authoritarian regimes at least go through the electoral motions—such is the homage vice pays to virtue. They rig the results, of course. But sham democracy often whets people's appetite for the real thing. That was what happened in Myanmar, where successive military governments held and won several bogus elections and referendums from 1990 onwards. The NLD boycotted some of them. But pressure grew to make the elections cleaner, and when they were just about fair enough, the NLD seized its chance.

Brazil and Mexico had similar experiences. In the former, the military regimes that followed a coup in 1964 held elections that they could control and win. But as the generals lost popular support, so these elections became harder to manipulate, until in 1985 they lost the presidency to a civilian, Tancredo Neves, and accepted defeat. In Mexico the authoritarian regimes of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) enjoyed the legitimacy of elections which were rigged when necessary. But, again, phoney ballots created a momentum towards real democracy—and attempts to resist became ever more farcical.

In 1988, with the opposition leader ahead early in the count on election night, Manuel Bartlett, the minister in charge of the count, revealed that the computers tabulating the results had mysteriously crashed. "Se cayó el sistema," (the system has crashed) he announced, and the next day the regime awarded itself a victory. It became a catchphrase for electoral fraud, and all that was wrong with one-party rule, and after an impartial electoral authority was set up by the government in 1996 the PRI lost power at the next poll, in 2000. Mexico, for all its drug wars, has been a genuine multiparty democracy ever since.

Bowing to the coming power

This suggests another common feature of successful transitions: a degree of consent by the regimes being replaced. In Myanmar it was Than Shwe, probably the cruellest of the military dictators, who nonetheless started reforms in the early 2000s, responding to popular opposition led by the NLD as well as sharp economic decline. He introduced a constitution in 2008 that provided for a new parliament and elections, and resigned in 2011 to make way for Thein Sein, who was willing to work with Miss Suu Kyi. The constitution gave the armed forces huge undeserved privileges, such as a quarter of parliamentary seats. That was unfair, but many argue that it gave the generals the courage to allow reform in the first place. They knew that they had a stake in the transition and could, to an extent, control it.

Something similar happened in South Africa in the 1990s and in Spain in the 1970s. In South

Africa the ruling National Party decided gradually to dismantle the apartheid system it had created, under which blacks were denied the vote and countless other rights. It negotiated a transition to democracy that included safeguards for the white minority, such as a constitutional guarantee that their property would not be seized. Reassured, whites voted to give up power.

In Spain, as in Myanmar, the dictator handpicked his successor. When General Francisco Franco chose King Juan Carlos as the next ruler, there was little to suggest that he would start down the path to democracy. But the king chose a prime minister, Adolfo Suárez, who started to lift the bans on political parties and hold elections. The confidence that officers felt in Juan Carlos, who had strong links with the armed forces, proved crucial in 1981 when some Francoist generals attempted a coup and Antonio Tejero, a lieutenant-colonel in the Civil Guard, took the parliament hostage. They expected the king to back them. Instead, the monarch spoke up for democracy, and thus gained popularity.

The alternative to reform from within is armed rebellion from below. Sadly, history shows that violence usually begets further violence. Granted, the American revolution



One in the eye for dictators

was pretty successful. But overall, peaceful mass movements have a better record in persuading oppressive regimes to change. The NLD, founded in 1988, played this role in Myanmar, as did the African National Congress in South Africa and the parties led by the “two Kims” in South Korea (for an obituary of Kim Young-sam, one of the architects of civilian rule in Korea, see page 61). In communist Poland the dissident trade union, Solidarity, led by Lech Walesa, attracted a quarter of Poles as members, undermining the regime’s claim to speak for the people. Suharto, Indonesia’s strongman-president from 1967 to 1998, yielded to protests during an economic crisis. Not all these mass-movements were entirely peaceful, but it was the huge crowds that won the day, not the petrol bombs. And peaceful mass-movements are much likelier to foster civic engagement, making it easier for democracy to flourish after the old regime has gone.

Institutions that can mediate between regimes and their critics help, too. Myanmar Egress, a think-tank set up in 2006 when politics was deadlocked, suggested various ways to get things moving again. One of its founders had been in the NLD and another was trusted by the army, since his parents had taught at the Defence Services Academy, Myanmar’s equivalent of

America's West Point. Egress thus acted as a bridge. It engineered the first official meeting between Thein Sein and Miss Suu Kyi in 2011. Tunisia's singular success is partly due to the efforts of its national dialogue quartet, a disparate collection of unionists, employers, lawyers and human-rights activists. They recently won the Nobel peace prize.

Good neighbours and sponsors also feature in successful transitions. The rapid collapse of communism in eastern Europe was ably assisted by the European Union. Countries under the Soviet boot looked west for a democratic example to copy and a wealthy source of support. Similarly, Mexico's still-incomplete democracy was buttressed when it joined America and Canada in the North American Free-Trade Agreement in 1994. South Korea and Taiwan were helped by their "far neighbour", America, after it nudged towards free elections the dictators it had long backed. By contrast, Arab countries had no local beacon of democracy to guide them during their recent revolutions—apart from Israel, to whose democratic virtues they seem strangely blind.

In Myanmar the NLD's leaders have signalled that they will not seek retribution: that no one who co-operates with the new order will be carted off to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. That requires astonishing forbearance: among the NLD's leaders are many who were tortured. Others were murdered. But forgiveness is probably wise. It certainly helped in South Africa, where opposition leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu demanded it of their followers. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in South Africa's new democracy bore witness to past atrocities, but did not prosecute their authors if they confessed.

Forgiveness can thus hasten a transition. But it also carries risks. When members or sympathisers of the old regime are left in place, a "deep state"—a subterranean network of military and intelligence officers, and others—can develop to threaten its successor's long-term health.

Regression analysis

This is what happened in Egypt, Thailand and Russia. When the NLD forms a government in Myanmar next March, it will have to reckon with a well-entrenched army. Miss Suu Kyi—who is, after all, a general's daughter—is likely to be tempted to let sleeping thugs lie. But unless the deep state's power is weakened, democracy may be stillborn. After reunification Germany was rigorous in exposing the Stasi, the East German communist secret police, and removing its agents from positions of power. Purges should not go too far, however. Sacking nearly every Baath party member after Saddam Hussein's overthrow left Iraq without a functioning state.

The sooner the rule of law can be established, the better. Boris Yeltsin's privatisation programme, a rushed attempt to unshackle the Soviet command economy, was hijacked by a

tiny group of opportunists, now known as oligarchs. The chaos of the Yeltsin era paved the way for a former KGB hard man, Vladimir Putin. The notion that no one is above the law never took root in Russia.

If new democracies are to flourish, all these concerns must be balanced against a more practical one. According to Terra Lawson-Remer, an expert on transitions at the Brookings Institution, a think-tank in Washington, they need to move quickly “to deliver material improvements to people’s lives. Otherwise they stumble; people begin to lose faith.” Myanmar—and Tunisia—have a long road ahead. But at least they have examples, not just good intentions, to guide them.

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