

MYANMAR

CONFLICT RISK ASSESSMENT
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BACKGROUND

Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948 and functioned as a representative democracy until a military coup in 1962.¹ Myanmar became a military dictatorship, with the power of the military formally enshrined in the Constitution in 1974.² Under the Constitution, the Army is guaranteed 25% of seats in the upper and lower chamber – this provides the military with substantial political power, and requires their consent for any Constitutional changes.³ Recent history has seen escalating tensions between the military, ethnic armed groups and pro-democracy supports, including the National League for Democracy (NLD). Myanmar began its democratic transition in 2011 with a nominally civilian government, ending nearly 50 years of military rule.⁴ In December 2015, the NLD won national elections and become the ruling party in Myanmar.⁵ Alongside its political transition, Myanmar has increased its engagement with other states, which have in turn lifted sanctions against the country.⁶ Ethnic and religious tensions remain high in the country, and result in poor treatment of minorities including Burmese Muslims. 2012 clashes in Rakhine State “sparked waves of ethno religious violence mostly targeting the country’s Muslim minority”.⁷ In the summer of 2015, treatment of the Rohingya gained international attention as thousands attempted irregular migration to nearby countries in Southeast Asia in order to escape systemic violence and persecution.⁸

STAKEHOLDERS

Internal Stakeholders

Actor	Effects
National League for Democracy	The NLD, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, is Myanmar’s largest pro-democracy political party. After winning a majority in the 1990 general elections which was not recognized by the military junta, it has been unable to participate in elections until 2011. The NLD officially became the government in power in January 2016.
Insurgent Groups	Three prominent armed ethnic groups: the Kachin Independence Army, Ta’ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, were excluded from participating in negotiations and are frequently in conflict with the government. ⁹ These groups operate primarily out of the Shan and Kachin States and have been known to forcefully recruit the local population. ¹⁰
Burmese Military	The Tatmadaw are the military arm of the government of Myanmar, and are recognized as the largest perpetrator of human rights abuses such as bombing schools and Buddhist temples, firing on civilians, and rape. ¹¹ The Tatmadaw has also been used for the violent suppression of protests. ¹²
NCA Stakeholders	On 15 October, a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed by eight of the 18 ethnic armed groups in Myanmar ¹³ . Further peace talks with the eight signatories were conducted from 12-18 January, with both the NLD and military officials participating; a framework for future talks has been planned. ¹⁴
Radical Buddhist Clergy	Extremist Buddhist monks and upper level clergy members such as Ashin Wirathu have increasingly incited violence against the minority Muslim population in the past few years, ¹⁵ mostly against the Rohingya of the Rakhine State. ¹⁶ These riots have largely been ignored by the police, ¹⁷ and are the cause of much of the internal and external displacement of Myanmar Muslims. ¹⁸

External Stakeholders

Actor	Effects
Thailand	There are 72,900 registered refugees and 51,500 ‘people in refugee-like situations’ from Myanmar in camps located on the Thai border. ¹⁹ Thailand’s 2014 military coup has increased travel/living restrictions in camps. ²⁰
The People’s Republic of China	China has been investing in large scale infrastructure projects in Myanmar, including a controversial dam on the northern border between China and Myanmar. ²¹ It has been reported that China has been backing the armed ethnic group, the United Wa State Party ²² . The railway and port projects in Myanmar will ensure China’s reduced reliance on the Strait of Malacca for their sea based trade.
The Republic of India	India is the largest market for Myanmar exports, ²³ and also the sponsor for many infrastructure projects in Myanmar. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Friendship Highway and the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Route are expected to be completed in 2016. ²⁴
United States	The US pursued a full reengagement strategy with Myanmar to “recognize the positive steps taken and to incentivize further reform,” ²⁵ including restoring diplomatic relations, establishing a US-AID mission and easing sanctions. ²⁶ Obama was the first sitting president to visit Myanmar. ²⁷ IN FY 2015, the US provided USD 50 million in humanitarian assistance. ²⁸ Increased US influence provides an alternative to Chinese dependence.
ASEAN	Myanmar was the ASEAN Chair in 2014 ²⁹ as a reward for progress and incentive for continued reforms. ³⁰ Operating on a rotation, Myanmar had previously been passed over as chair due to its strained relationship with neighbours. ³¹ ASEAN provides opportunity for improved relations with ASEAN members and non-member countries including the US, Japan, Canada and Australia. ASEAN members are principally affected by irregular emigration from Myanmar.

KEY INDICATORS

History of Armed Conflict

High Risk; Decreasing ↓

Stabilizing Factors

The number of battle-related deaths in Myanmar has seen a significant decrease from 702 in 2012 to 249 in 2013.³² Although high the number of internally displaced people has seen a steady decrease from 587,000 in January of 2015 to 514,000 in December of 2015.³³

Destabilizing Factors

Around 50% of IDP shelters in Myanmar and Thailand do not meet minimum humanitarian requirements.³⁴ Around five million people live in mine-contaminated areas.³⁵ International refugees from Myanmar have reached 479,706.³⁶

Assessment

The armed conflict in Myanmar has displaced a large amount of the Burmese ethnic minorities, and continues to do so in the northern states. This is indicative of a high level of risk. In relation to the displacement of the Muslim minority, the risk is increasing as the violence and discrimination increases alongside it. In terms of the general population however, the risk is decreasing as the ceasefire has led to the gradual resettlement of many refugees and IDPs, and the numbers of those being resettled is steadily increasing.

Governance and Political Stability

High Risk; Decreasing ↓

Stabilizing Factors

In 2011, Myanmar began its transition to civilian control.³⁷ In November 2015, the NLD won almost 80% of elected seats for an outright majority in both chambers.³⁸ Turnout was high at over 80% and elections were considered free and fair.³⁹ On February 1, 2016, the first freely elected government in over 50 years held its opening session.⁴⁰ Leader of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi has spoken of a government of “reconciliation;” although campaigning on Constitutional reform the NLD appears willing to wait.⁴¹ Myanmar’s Freedom of the Press score in 2015 has improved by over 23 points since 2006 to 73/100⁴² and a vibrant media scene has emerged since abolition of pre-publication censorship in 2012.⁴³ Myanmar was ranked 147th by the Corruption Perceptions Index 2015, showing improvement.⁴⁴ Protection of human rights is expected to increase with new government.

Destabilizing Factors

The Constitution guarantees 25% of seats to the military.⁴⁵ Suu Kyi is constitutionally prohibited from becoming President (Article 59F)⁴⁶; it is unclear who will be President when Thein Sein steps down at the end of March.⁴⁷ Regime durability is unknown, and there is cause for concern given the NLD’s 1990 electoral win and the military’s subsequent arrest of NLD party leaders.⁴⁸ Self-censorship of journalists is high due to threat of imprisonment; in 2014, 5 members of the media were imprisoned for 7 years.⁴⁹ Corruption remains endemic. International groups remain concerned over political prisoners; amnesties were granted in 2012, but in 2015, 112 persons were imprisoned for violation of the Peaceful Assembly Law.⁵⁰

Assessment

Myanmar is in the midst of a political transition, the success of which will be determined in the coming months based on appointment of a President and governing relationships with other parties, including the military. There is a sense of change that poses a risk for conflict if the military resists change or expectations are not met.

Militarization

High Risk; Decreasing ↓

Stabilizing Factors

A ceasefire agreement in 2015 included 8 armed ethnic groups, including the largest United Wa State Army as well as many of the other largest armed groups.⁵¹ Military expenditure has decreased from being 4.0% of the GDP in 2013 to 3.7% of the GDP in 2014.⁵² Arms imports have also decreased from 278,000,000 in 2013 to 72,000,000 2014.⁵³ The number of armed forces personnel has remained constant according to World Bank data, at 513,250 individuals.⁵⁴

Destabilizing Factors

The Kachin Independence Army and Karen National Union continue to forcibly recruit people from villages in Shan state and Kachin state, respectively.⁵⁵ Government military action in the past year has continued to displace and kill many.⁵⁶ From 2013 to January 2015, 723 cases of underage recruitment by the Myanmar Army were reported to the UN.⁵⁷

Assessment

The forced recruitment and human rights abuses on both the side of the government forces as well as the ethnic armed groups in recent years is indicative of a high level of risk. The ceasefire agreement of 2015 and the decline in government military expenditure show a decrease in risk and it is likely to continue into the future.

Population Heterogeneity

High Risk; Increasing ↑

Stabilizing Factors

Religious make-up remained steady: 89% Buddhist, 4% Christian and 4% Muslim⁵⁸ (some estimates Muslim as high as 10%).⁵⁹

Destabilizing Factors

Rohingya required to identify as Bengali⁶⁰ and other Muslims as Indian or Pakistani.⁶¹ "Race and Religion Protection Laws" adopted Spring 2015 allow for discrimination against Muslims.⁶² No Muslims in parliament, and only 0.5% of candidates that ran were Muslim compared to 14.9% Christian.⁶³ Unsubstantiated rumors enough to kick off violent riots between Buddhists and Muslims.⁶⁴ Political, religious and security officials linked to past Buddhist/Muslim violence.⁶⁵ Most Rohingya live in camps, terrible conditions and unable to leave.⁶⁶ Mixed messages from NLD on Rohingya situation.⁶⁷

Assessment

Though the religious make-up of the country has remained relatively stable, the animosity towards Muslims has increased with further restrictions being placed on them. The new ruling NLD party has not committed to lessening the ethno-religious tensions sown by the previous government and there are no Muslims in Parliament.

Demographic Stress

Medium Risk; Stable →

Stabilizing Factors

Population growth has remained steady for the past 10 years, fluctuating between 0.7% and 0.9%.⁶⁸ Youth bulge has lessened to 28.6%.⁶⁹ Population density has grown slightly with 81.8 people per km² (national census reports 76.1) and is above the global average of 56 but well below the East Asia and Pacific average for all income levels and for developing countries.⁷⁰

Destabilizing Factors

Urban population has been growing steadily over the past 10 years at a rate, on average, of 2.5% and currently 33.6% of total population resides in urban areas⁷¹ (though the national census reports 28%).⁷²

Assessment

Though the growth in the urban population causes some concern because most of the violence that has taken place in Myanmar in recent years has been located in urban centres, the stability of the other demographic indicators has led to a rating of medium risk and stable.

Economic Performance

Medium Risk; Decreasing ↓

Stabilizing Factors

GDP has been growing at a constant rate of just over 8%.⁷³ Myanmar remains in the bottom 35 countries for GDP per capita,⁷⁴ there has been a steady growth of over 7% annually.⁷⁵ Myanmar's CPIA trade rating remains just above average at 3.5 (on a scale of 1-6)⁷⁶ just below the global average of 3.8.⁷⁷

Destabilizing Factors

Foreign direct investment has been unstable for the last 5 years fluctuating between 901 million USD and 2.5 billion USD.⁷⁸ Sharp reversal in the net trade in goods between 2012 and 2013 swinging from +591.7 million USD to -439.9 million USD.⁷⁹ The official exchange rate has also fluctuated wildly since 2011 going from 5.4 kyat per USD to 984.3 kyat per USD in 2014.⁸⁰

Assessment

Foreign direct investment looks to be soaring with unofficial numbers for 2014/15 estimated at more than 8 billion USD.⁸¹ The shift in the exchange rate is explained by the central bank changing from a fixed exchange rate to a managed float.⁸²

Human Development

Medium Risk; Decreasing ↓

Stabilizing Factors

Human development indicators are improving. 81% and 80% (2015) of the Burmese population have access to improved water sources and sanitation, respectively.⁸³ HIV/AIDS is not prevalent with a stable rate of <1%.⁸⁴ Primary education rates are high at 114% (2010), and have remained above 100% through the 2000s.⁸⁵

Destabilizing Factors

In 2015, Myanmar ranked 148th on the Human Development Index with a score of 0.536⁸⁶ (compared to 132nd / 0.583 in 2006⁸⁷). Although the life expectancy has increased, average life expectancy remains low at 65.7 years (2013).⁸⁸ Under-five mortality rates have improved to 50 (2015) and maternal mortality rates have improved substantially to 200 (2013)⁸⁹ but remain high. Health expenditures are low at 1.8% of GDP per capita⁹⁰, contributing to poor health outcomes. Primary enrolment rates above 100% signals late-enrolment or grade repetition; secondary enrolment rates of 50% (2010) signal poor primary school achievement.⁹¹ Data suggests high rates of child labour.⁹²

Assessment

Although HDI rankings and scores have fallen, all indicators show improvement. Recent gains can likely be attributed to an influx of official development assistance in recent years⁹³; the government must sustain recent gains in order to reach a level of development similar to its Asia-Pacific neighbours.

Environmental Stress

High Risk; Increasing ↑

Stabilizing Factors

Arable land has remained constant at 0.5 acres per capita.⁹⁴ In 2015 44.2% of total land in Myanmar was covered with forests.⁹⁵ Although increasing slightly since 2006, Burma remains less densely populated than its regional counterparts with 81.8 people per square km of land.⁹⁶

Destabilizing Factors

In 2013, there were 18,930.3 cubic metres of freshwater resources per capita, a decrease in over 850 cubic metres per capita since 2007.⁹⁷ Myanmar has one of the highest rates of forest loss; between 2010 and 2015, it lost 1.35 million acres (1.8%) of forest per year.⁹⁸ Myanmar is the second most affected country by extreme weather events between 1995 and 2014.⁹⁹ Recent extreme weather events include 2015 floods which affected over 1 million people¹⁰⁰ and 2008 Cyclone Nargis which affected up to 2.4 million people and killed up to 138,000.¹⁰¹

Assessment

Myanmar is highly vulnerable to climate change; the fast and growing rate of deforestation amplifies vulnerabilities. Extreme weather events will place additional stress on the environment, as well as result in large reconstruction costs.

International Linkages

Medium Risk; Decreasing ↓

Stabilizing Factors

Myanmar has been participating more frequently in the international community with new trade agreements, funding and construction projects. These projects are primarily with India¹⁰² and China.¹⁰³ Since 2012, most of the international economic sanctions placed against Myanmar have been lifted.¹⁰⁴ The amount of international developmental aid money and aid programs has increased since the destabilization of the military.¹⁰⁵

Destabilizing Factors

More than 25,000 Rohingya have been smuggled out of Myanmar in boats during the first three months of 2015, attempting to reach Thailand, Indonesia and Australia.¹⁰⁶ This has caused tensions between Myanmar and these countries.¹⁰⁷

Assessment

Previous governments have not pursued active international engagement and have been isolationist. Changes in government and increased foreign investment in infrastructure will better integrate Myanmar in the international system.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Best Case Scenario	Worst Case Scenario
<p>The military is willing to reduce its legislative power and works cooperatively with NLD which enables them to meet the expectations of the electorate. Foreign direct investment increases as international partners gain confidence in the political stability of Myanmar. This will also lead to an elimination of sanctions. There are no serious natural disasters which gives NLD time to address climate vulnerabilities. NLD takes steps to address entrenched ethno-religious tensions in the country by recognizing the Rohingya as Burmese citizens and allowing them to leave their camps; and by addressing the increasingly militant radical Buddhist clergy. Additionally, new ceasefire negotiations will include all armed groups.</p>	<p>NLD is unable to meet expectations leading to resentment in the population and clashes between the military and prodemocracy groups culminating in the military seizing power. The NCA disintegrates and there is increased recruitment by armed ethnic groups. Thailand moves towards forcing Rohingya refugees to return to Myanmar which leads to increased unrest and the military government to increase the repression of Muslims. This leads to a decrease in international engagement, reduced foreign direct investment, sanctions put back in place, aid withdrawn and a return to isolation. GDP stalls as instability grows. An increase in the intensity and frequency of natural disasters compounds these problems.</p>
Most Likely Scenario	
<p>The governing relationship between the NLD and military is maintained through a delicate balance of power that results in slow, incremental and insignificant reforms. Progress is perceived as too slow by the electorate whom begin to lose faith in the NLD's ability to govern. Religious tensions continue to increase and extremist Buddhist elements increase hate speech against Muslims. Religious tensions escalate into small-scale riots and violence, and will expose weakness in the government's ability to control the population. Treatment of Rohingya will remain status quo, but the situation will worsen for Muslims in other parts of the country. Although there is little (if any) risk of the military forcibly seizing control, the government's inability to affect substantial change will increase the military's rhetoric as an effective governing body and grant it the ability to act as a more explicit spoiler to the ruling party. Nonetheless, GDP and FDI will improve due to the perception of Myanmar as an increasingly stable country and increased openness. Foreign relations will continue to improve in the short term.</p>	

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