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## Transcript

# Burma in Transition: Progress, Challenges and the Path Ahead

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**Michael Williams:**

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Michael Williams. I'm a fellow here at Chatham House and currently in charge of the Asia Programme here, among other things. I'm delighted to chair this meeting this evening about Burma, about Myanmar, about the current situation, how things have developed over the last 18–24 months, what the prospects are for the future; 2012 seems to me to have been a sort of rather momentous year for Burma. One thinks of the visit of Aung San Suu Kyi to this country and to other European countries, and of course also to the United States. One thinks of the many visitors to Burma itself, including most recently President Obama, I believe the first US president to visit Burma.

But also the very significant political events in the country. I was there a few weeks after the May by-elections briefly for a few days and of course those by-elections were such a striking and significant event, and particularly for the extraordinary showing of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the NLD – National League for Democracy.

I'm delighted we have two speakers, Tin Htar Swe, who's head of the Burmese Service of the BBC, perhaps one of the jewels of the crown of the BBC World Service. And we were colleagues on the 6th floor in Bush House many years ago, in the 1980s, when I myself worked there as a writer and journalist on Asia.

I'm also flanked on my left by another colleague, if I can put it that way, in the Foreign Office. Robert was a career diplomat in the Foreign Office, serving in Asia many times. He was head of the Asia Department in the Foreign Office with a very longstanding interest in Burma. In recent years, Robert has worked in Brussels as a key advisor to Javier Solana, when he was the representative for foreign affairs for the EU. And you still retain responsibilities with regard to Burma.

I'd like to start by turning to Swe and asking her to give us her picture of how she sees contemporary Burma – your country – and perhaps also a little about the work of the BBC and how that perhaps has changed in recent months.

**Tin Htar Swe:**

Being a journalist, I suppose I start a little bit about the BBC and how we're operating in the country now. We were not allowed – the Burmese Service –

to do newsgathering inside the country for over 20 years. And suddenly now, this year, my colleague who is in this room, he's been to Burma four times. So that is Burma now. It is now changed. The press information officer, the minister, said he wants Burma media to become public service media by the beginning of 2014. So he's giving a year to change the state broadcasting service to public service media.

And we have been sending a number of people from the BBC, not just from the Burmese Service, but from the BBC World Service and also BBC domestic service. And every single person was given a journalist visa to do newsgathering in Burma. Only two weeks ago, the BBC [World Service] flagship programme, the *Newshour* team was there and broadcasting direct from Burma.

So that is a development. We still do not have a daily newspaper, but there are many local journals. And many journalists feel quite free to operate, because censorship law has been removed. But at the same time, they're not sure whether they can really exercise this newly-found freedom.

One has to also not forget, a number of journalists are now facing legal charges. They are now being sued for the reports they publish or for a few criminal charges and civil charges they're facing. So there are laws still – the laws are such that the journalists are now finding themselves imposing a self-censorship. Rather, there's no censorship board but at the same time they are now very cautious what they should report and what they should not report.

That is where we are now. But one thing is now we are going to provide media training to state broadcasters. The agreement has been signed and the operation will start in the beginning of next year. We also have now the BBC World Service will be also available on direct-to-home channels. That's what is happening in Burma.

Talking about Burma, in the last two years we have seen many changes. And the speed and pace of change happening in the country, I would say it has been quite surreal. We have seen this unlikely partnership of Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein. We have seen, as I said, the lifting of censorship and many issues are also debated in the parliament. We have seen the new labour laws, investment law. We have seen setting up a human rights commission. And also a number of armed rebel groups have signed peace agreements with the Burmese government.

But then the debate about whether there have been real changes. Given what has happened recently to the monks and protestors – they were staging protests against the copper mine project in northern Burma... I would say

more like middle Burma – and this debate about whether there have been real changes, in recent days we are seeing that this debate has grown louder than ever.

I like to reflect a bit on 15 months ago; nobody would have imagined what happened 15 months ago. It was exactly 19 August 2011 that Aung San Suu Kyi met President Thein Sein and that picture was published. That was the first meeting. Neither side disclosed the nature of the discussion, but then Aung San Suu Kyi told the press – she just said two words. She said she finds the President ‘sincere’ and she ‘trusts’ him.

Those two words, from someone who defied the military rule and who was incarcerated for speaking out the repressions of the military regime, those two words from this person have changed the perception of the people on the future of the country.

I'm saying that because I was allowed back to Burma in January 2012, this year, after 24 years. They invited me to participate in the media workshop to discuss about media law. And people I met, for the first time they said they felt slightly optimistic. They used the words 'slightly optimistic', slightly positive. And then in September I went back for another reason, this is that we went to offer media training to the state broadcaster and private sector as well.

And the people, their perception changed. They were very positive. They were very hopeful that things are happening, the future is there. And then my colleague just came back last week, and he said the people are even looking happy and also talking about not only the future, they are not afraid to criticize the government. They've become very vocal in the tea shops or even meeting the journalists asking them questions. They were quite happy to criticize the government.

That is what in Burma is happening. And then another thing, you may be surprised that Wi-Fi is available in Naypyidaw, in all the ministries Wi-Fi is available. And my colleagues from the World Service, they were using the Wi-Fi to send the clips to the BBC. And then the route from Naypyidaw to Rangoon (Yangon), they would send the clips, the audio file, to us. So that is Burma now. Burma is changing.

But what happened a few weeks ago – I'm sure you all have read it in the papers, about the crackdown on the protestors, and the monks were injured. Nobody knows what incendiary device they used; nobody has come out with any explanation yet. But the injuries we saw, it was all over Facebook and YouTube, everywhere.

That really upset the people. The people were shocked. They were shocked to find out the extent of the measures the military was prepared to take to protect their interests. This is the company, the Myanmar military holding, Myanmar [Economics] Holdings Ltd, and a Chinese company – there is a copper mine project, the joint venture between the military and the Chinese company.

The protest against this copper mine is something that military would not tolerate and it shows that. It has affected their interests. So this protest has also shed light on the president. The sceptics always say: is the president as independent as he claims? Is somebody still pulling the strings? People were always wondering. We asked this question when the Speaker of the House came here to London. We had the chance to interview him. We asked this question and he said, 'No. We don't even see him.' But he didn't say that we don't call him. Whether there's a telephone conversation with Senior General Than Shwe, that we don't know.

But whatever it is, he claimed that whatever decision has been taken, it is the present government's decision, nothing to do with the old guards. Now people are beginning to wonder whether the old guards are still pulling the strings. And also the people are wondering – the reforms which everybody is feeling positive about, now they are beginning to wonder whether it may not be true that it is not irreversible.

I like to just quote two people. One is Minister [Tin Naing] Thein, who is Minister of the President's Office. He's one of the advisors. I saw him in the United States, New York, in October. And he said the pace of change is so fast, so drastic that they don't know how to cope. There are so many challenges. They're not prepared. They're not expecting this. And that is what the government is feeling.

And what the opposition is feeling, or people who are sceptics are feeling, I think I would like to quote the president of AIPMC (ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus), Ms [Eva Kusuma] Sundari. Recently she said – she compared Burma with Indonesia – and she said the Indonesia reform process was bottom-up, while the changes taking place in Myanmar today are very much top-down. So there is a lot of work to do.

And in Indonesia – Michael is an expert on Indonesia – it's civil society and media that pushed the reforms, whereas in Burma, civil society is still not quite there yet. And media is still not free yet. Thank you.

**Robert Cooper:**

Let me talk a little bit about this from the perspective of the European Union. That's who I work for and what I know best. Among that, that reflects a little bit on what's happening, quite a lot in fact on what's happening in Burma/Myanmar. Actually, the European Union documents always refer to Burma/Myanmar, because some in the European Union prefer Burma and others prefer Myanmar, so we use both.

This curiously is a subject about which, if you check through the Council agendas, has been discussed rather regularly in Brussels. It's also – sometime in the 1990s, the European Union imposed some sanctions and actually these grew and they grew particularly, for example, with the incidents in 2008 and the killing of monks in peaceful protests.

The EU sanctions were not anything like the same scale as the US sanctions. Actually they were rather limited. There were some visa bans on some of the people we thought had been particularly responsible for these incidents and indeed a large number of the senior military. And there were also bans on import of some of the commodities, in particular gems and timber where the financial interests of the military were heavily engaged. And there was an arms embargo. Maybe that was partly connected in people's minds with the on-going armed conflicts as well.

In addition, there was – I can't put a date on this, but at a certain point the tariff preferences which had been given to Burma under the GSP, Generalized System of Preferences, were brought to an end. That was in connection with the poor treatment of labour, the use of forced labour in particular but a number of other things.

The GSP scheme is specifically connected to labour conditions and labour relations. It's an area where a lot of improvements have been made and the ILO representatives in Yangon deserve a lot of credit for that. They've actually always had excellent people who've done a remarkable job, I think, over time.

The sanctions were never intended – although in some ways the effect was inevitable – were never intended to punish the people of Burma. They were intended to be directed at the authorities. Therefore alongside the sanctions, there were also aid programmes and these focused in particular on health and on rural livelihoods. Not, to begin with, very large, but they grew.

At the time when the US withdrew, or obliged the UN to withdraw, from the global programme, in practice the EU took it up. The global programme was dealing with tuberculosis, AIDS and malaria. And it seemed to us wrong that

this should be brought to an end. So we created a trust fund with other donors to try and continue that work.

We had, you could say, a rather messy policy of some sanctions which were not very dramatic, but in practice acted as a general discouragement for Western companies to do business. And we also had some rather modest aid programmes which were executed not through the government but always through non-governmental organizations.

The reason I tell this story about the sanctions is because the decisions we've had to make have been about those sanctions, and there were basically – if one looked at the sanctions decisions, they were imposed on two grounds. There were two demands you could say. One was for the release of political prisoners, and the other was for – and the wording said something about national reconciliation. What it meant in practice was the need for the government to recognize the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi as a political force in the country. And we decided last April to suspend the sanctions, not to lift them but to suspend them, with the exception of the arms embargo. The arms embargo remains in place.

The suspension of the sanctions was in recognition of the changes and at this point I also say – actually this in some respects, to speak slightly less bureaucratic language, this represents a political miracle. If you'd asked me three years ago what my prediction for the future was, I'm not sure what I would have said. But privately, I would have thought that there was quite a good chance of Aung San Suu Kyi dying in house arrest.

There was absolutely no sign of change. A constitution had been created by what was not a very convincing national convention, and the constitution itself is not very convincing either. Then under this constitution, elections were held with a very high degree of fraud, and without the participation of the NLD which clearly had a good deal of support in the country.

So this is the end of 2010. And then a government is formed and every single member of the government is a member of the military. Most of them have taken their uniforms off, but that's all. So this doesn't look like a very convincing transition to democracy. And therefore it was really a surprise when first Aung San Suu Kyi was released from prison and then we began to see a trickle of releases of political prisoners and then some quite large numbers of prisoners were released as well.

In some cases at least, the release is not perfect, because they have had some difficulty in obtaining passports. They have still been under surveillance. But nevertheless it's quite a lot better than being in prison. And actually some

of them now have been able to travel. So these things have gradually improved.

And then there is the moment that Tin Htar Swe described, when Aung San Suu Kyi, having been no longer under house arrest, met the president and thereafter things moved rather quickly. And a deal is made in practice with the NLD, which accepts with some reservations the constitution and then contests the by-elections in April this year. It's not very long ago, actually. But in some respects these were the first really open elections which have been held in Burma for 50 years.

Not only were the elections held but they were actually held in a rather open manner. I was there myself, and you could see the people watching the votes being counted and relaying to the people watching in the street what the numbers were. So this was really an open process. It's quite remarkable. With also a rather remarkable result as well, in terms of, the NLD more or less swept the board.

So these are really quite dramatic changes. And there are very many imperfections, but what is striking is that the process goes on. We had not – for example, in the European Union, we had, perhaps wrongly but, we had not insisted that censorship should be removed. But censorship has been removed.

Actually even when censorship still existed, I spoke to a lady in Yangon who runs a political journal and said to her, 'Well, how does the censorship operate?' And she said, 'Oh well we have to send the journal to the censor the night before it appears and we get it back and then we have a look and decide whether we're going to do what we're told.' And she didn't. They made their choices and were ready to take risks about this.

Now even that doesn't happen. Perhaps there are other pressures that journalists have to watch for, and one should also maybe take an interest in who owns all of the newspapers as well. But still, this is now in many ways a different country from the one that it was a little while ago.

I don't mean to say that this is irreversible. Nothing is irreversible. And I don't mean that this is finished by any means. There are very, very many imperfections and it's true that the incident that was described just now, the incident at the demonstration at the copper mine, and the response to this was very shocking. It looked like a reappearance of the old regime. On the other hand, one should also take account of the way in which, following this, the government has reacted. The reaction has been to set up an inquiry which is actually under the chairmanship of Aung San Suu Kyi.



So for my part, I'm still in the mood to give the government the benefit of the doubt. Let's see what the inquiry says. I think in the process of change from such an unpleasant regime in a liberal direction, it's not a surprise that there are ups and downs in the process. The real question is not whether there are ups and downs. The question is how the government responds to them.

So far, I don't think that the record is that bad. There are some extremely difficult problems. The continuing violence in the Kachin area is a very large concern and the violence is actually quite large. It seems to have got worse in the last few days. The problem in Rakhine with the Rohingya population is a problem which I think would be difficult in any country. In a country with this history and these levels of poverty, it's a very, very difficult problem.

But on the whole, I must say I'm positively impressed by what the government is trying to do. And I was very impressed by the way that the by-elections are held. If that is the standard that future elections are held, then this will be about the best democratic country in Asia, because they were at a very high standard. But there's a long way to go before we get there. And the constitution is not the best example of a democratic constitution that I know of, to put it rather gently.

So I think there's a lot of changes to take place, but nevertheless, for me as somebody who's taken an interest in Burma for a long time, the last two years have been really astonishing and leave you with an enormous amount of hope. And it's striking to see the process continue in small ways as well as big ways.

Finally, more about what the EU continues to do. We've had aid programmes in Myanmar for quite some time. We are continuing those and increasing the volume, but the first change is that we're now prepared to work with the government as well as with NGOs.

The second change is that it seems to us that we need to – that previously we took areas which were deliberately politically neutral. It's very difficult to be against health. Now it seems to us that our job is to try and reinforce the process of change and so we have now quite large sums of money available to support any actions that seem likely to help bring the ethnic conflicts to an end. Because if you ask what is the biggest danger to this process and to the possible beginnings of democracy, the answer is the ethnic conflicts. This is why the military came to power in the first place. If those are not ended, then democracy will not be safe. We will also put some money into democracy itself. For example, voter rolls and things like that need to be renewed if elections are going to be credible in the future.

Of course, when I say put money behind ethnic conflicts, if areas become peaceful, then we need to go in and try and improve people's lives there as well so that they can feel a difference. They're all kinds of things I think we can do to support the process that is going on and help keep up the momentum.