



INDIA-US INSIGHT

*"Advancing the Strategic Potential of India-US
Relations, Accelerating India's Economic Development"*

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Myanmar @ end-January 2012

by Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia



Myanmar's Tatmadaw (military) strategists and pundits who gave the finishing touches, some two years back,

to their 2003 plan to bring about controlled political change, have ample reasons to celebrate the extent of success achieved so far.

Each arm of the triangle of Myanmar's politics comprising the Government, NLD and ethnic minorities, has registered progress as compared to the situation prevailing in January 2010. Government-NLD relations have improved considerably, with Suu Kyi and her other party candidates ready to participate in April by-elections as a prelude to entering the Parliament. Following the release in batches of a sizeable number of political prisoners, new winds of freedom are blowing in the land. The Government has concluded ceasefire agreements with several insurgent groups, the Karens being the most important of them all. NLD and other political forces continue to back national reconciliation, while being conscious that nothing substantial can be achieved in a hurry and

the Government remains the indispensable interlocutor and planner of future moves.

Likewise, the country's relations with the international community look more promising than ever before. An unending series of high-level visits has lent new legitimacy and prestige to President Thein Sein's government. He now plans an early tour of ASEAN capitals. Foreign travels by Suu Kyi are also likely to begin in the coming months. Sanctions by the US and EU are under review even as the EU has already lifted visa restrictions on top leaders. Purse strings for aid flows are getting loosened. Western corporate leaders are also beginning to consider anew investment prospects.

Nevertheless, potential pitfalls remain on the road ahead. By-elections will have to be qualitatively different from the November 2010 general elections; if they are not genuinely free and fair, this can cause a huge setback. Suu Kyi's support is neither total nor unconditional; she trusts the President but not many in his government and military. The US-Myanmar equation will move forward gingerly even as Myanmar's impatience for withdrawal of sanctions rises. Assuming the ASEAN Chair will be a morale-boosting prize, but it will come only in 2014 and the Government has

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much work to complete in order to earn it. As for economic reforms, they will need a much longer gestation period.

Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin has concluded a productive visit to India this week. He became the first foreign minister from his country to address a special gathering of diplomats, members of the strategic community and the media at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) in New Delhi on 25 January 2012. He asserted that reforms would be “incremental, systematic and dynamic”, claiming that the process was now “irreversible.” For the sake of his country, all well-wishers of Myanmar/Burma should hope that he is right. Lasting consensus and resilience among principal stakeholders will be the key to future developments.

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