

President Thein Sein's Inaugural Speech

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On 30 March 2011, the new President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, U Thein Sein, delivered his inaugural speech to both Chambers of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament)¹. To many Burmese democrats, nothing U Thein Sein said made any difference or will make any difference since he is perceived to be the faithful and loyal servant and puppet of Senior-General Than Shwe, former head of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and, as many believe, still the power behind the throne.



Senior-General Than Shwe came to power after the Burmese military re-asserted itself in 1988 when General Ne Win's civilianized Burmese Socialist Programme Party government began to crumble following 6 months of nation-wide pro-democracy demonstrations (General Ne Win himself seized power in 1962). Senior-General Than Shwe's goal was to ensure that the Burmese military play a leading role in determining Burma's political future. U Thein Sein himself is a former general. He served as the SPDC's Secretary-1 and as the regime's Prime Minister. As far as many people are concerned, U Thein Sein is the regime's pretty face. His job is to make continued military rule in Burma acceptable to the international community.

Many Burmese democrats and their international supporters contend that the Burmese military should not be given any recognition whatsoever. The military organized general elections in 1990 and lost - accordingly, the military should have accepted defeat and recognized Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy as the winner and handed over power at that time. The military ignored the election results, continued ruling, drafted a new constitution which was 'adopted' by a referendum in 2008, and held 'free' elections in 2010, in order to legitimize military rule. Therefore, according to this line of thinking, nothing short of the military handing over power to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would be acceptable.

Since this is not likely to happen, it may be useful to take U Thein Sein's speech at face value and analyze it for any indications of possible change under the new civilianized government.

ANALYSIS

First, U Thein Sein asserts that he is responsible to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) and the Union government. He then says that he and all Hluttaw representatives (including the 25% military appointees) *"are duty bound to honour and safeguard the constitution"* and *"to cherish and protect at risk to life the constitution and the democratic nation to be built in line with the constitution."*

¹ A translated version of the speech as published by the New Light of Myanmar can be found here: <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-03-31.pdf> (NLM) 31 March 2011 (p. 1)

It may be unremarkable for a leader in a western democracy to make such statements, but this is quite remarkable in the Burmese context because it is the norm to swear allegiance to the Army (Tatmadaw) - not to a constitution. The Tatmadaw, in fact, is not bound by the 2008 Constitution. Allusion is also made to a democratic nation which is an anathema to Tatmadaw doctrine. If President U Thein Sein is really going to hold his government and the parliament accountable to the constitution, it would be a very interesting first step.

Next, U Thein Sein jumps right into the issue of national unity focusing on the ethnic nationalities. This is at the same time curious and significant since the international focus has been the regime's reconciliation with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. He talks about *"the hell of untold miseries"* suffered by the people because of the decades of armed conflicts and *"the dogmatism, sectarian strife and racism"* causing the conflicts. No recent Burmese national leader, and certainly no Burmese military leader, has ever talked about these issues and made it the government's top priority to build national unity in order to build *"a peaceful, modern and developed nation"*.

While again it should be normal in a democracy for a government to address such issues, it is very unusual in Burma because matters of national security and armed conflicts in the border areas where the ethnic nationalities live is generally considered to be outside the purview of a civilian government. These issues are usually the sole responsibility of the Tatmadaw. While U Thein Sein gives the usual rationale for the conflicts and the Tatmadaw's role in saving the country from collapse, the fact that he is addressing the issues raises many interesting questions.

President U Thein Sein then talks about the *"Three Main National Causes: Non-disintegration of the Union, Non-disintegration of national solidarity, and Perpetuation of sovereignty"* and outlines the *"three types of might to accomplish these national causes: (1) political might (2) economic might and (3) military might,"* that his government will be pursuing.

In talking about *"political might"*, U Thein Sein goes back to the theme of national unity with the ethnic nationalities and talks about concrete measures such as roads, railroads, bridges, health and education and socio-economic measures to improve the living conditions of the ethnic nationalities. But, he also makes an interesting mention of the need to ensure that there is a *"flourishing Union spirit,"* [which is] *"the fundamental requirement of national solidarity."* The ethnic nationalities have long contended that the Tatmadaw's nation-building doctrine lacks a 'Union spirit'. The President mentioning this in his inaugural speech sends a strong message.

Then U Thein Sein curiously acknowledges that *"there are so many individuals and unlawful organizations inside and outside the nation that do not accept the State's Seven Step Road Map and the Constitution."* He ends by cryptically stating, *"They are all citizens of our country. Therefore, they have to accept our government as their government constituted with national races of their own."* The bottom line seems to be that everyone must accept and work with his government, but the fact that U Thein Sein acknowledges that there are many who are citizens who do not accept the regime's Seven Step Road Map and Constitution is a very crucial departure from the position of previous governments.

The fact that it is followed by another reference to the Constitution is intriguing. While urging that *"every citizen has to avoid any activities and speeches that harm the image of the country and interests of the people"* and urging people with *"different ideas and concepts, to work closely in matters of (the) same views"*

in the national interests", the President reminds his listeners that "According to Chapter (XII), the people have been vested the rights to amend the constitution in line with procedures".

It is curious once again that U Thein Sein should bring up this issue so soon. The previous administration had made it very clear that it does not want the Constitution to be changed. To make any amendments a 75% vote is required. Given the Tatmadaw's 25% bloc and the government's 60% bloc in the National Parliament, it would be impossible to make any amendments without the consent of both the government and the Tatmadaw. In any case, this leaves open the possibility that the President would consider amending the Constitution if national unity could be achieved.

However, U Thein Sein makes it clear that change has to come through the framework that has been set up. *"If an individual or organization stands for election in accordance with the democratic practice to come to power in a justice way, that will be acceptable to everyone. Therefore, I would say our government will keep peace door open to welcome such individuals and organizations."*

U Thein Sein then goes on to talk about the *"economic might"* towards which his government will work. In addition to agricultural development, he talks about industrialization which is an area that has been long neglected by successive military governments.

He then touches on the *"military might"* that his government intends to build. Without criticizing or acknowledging shortcomings, he states that Burma needs a *"world-class Tatmadaw"*. Once again, he seems to be quietly asserting that the armed forces are under the purview of his government.

Then, using economic reform to *"improve the socio-economic status of the people"* as the basis, U Thein Sein goes back to the theme of amending financial and tax policies for the evolution of a market economy and to encourage the development of small and medium enterprises. *"We will promulgate all necessary policies and laws so that the fruits will go down to the grassroots level and the entire people enjoy better socio-economic status."*

U Thein Sein then makes one of the most comprehensive policy statements in recent times on the economy:

"There are different opinions and procedures regarding the market economy in the international community. In some countries, the market is not under the control of the governments concerned. In some countries, the governments concerned take control over the market to an extent. We will exercise the market economy in which the government takes control over the market to a certain degree. It is because any capitalists, traders and privileged persons cannot monopolize the market, not because we intend to restrict the market economy. In this case, we will put national interests in the fore, and will control and restrict the market in minimum. In the process, we have to ensure proper market economy designed to reduce the economic gap between the rich and the poor, and development gap between urban and rural areas. We will attract foreign investments and establish special economic zones to create jobs and technical know-how, and we will provide assistance to national entrepreneurs for development of their industries and boost productivity. We are also determined to improve the living conditions of peasants and workers. We will occasionally update the laws to safeguard the rights of peasants. We will step up tasks for agricultural development, ensuring reasonable prices of agricultural produce, and improving the quality of agricultural produce. In particular, we will create employment opportunities, stabilize commodity prices and encourage welfare and social security for the convenience of workers and labourers. And we will

ensure that minimum pay scale meets current living costs. We guarantee that national workers inside and outside the nation enjoy all rights."

He then goes on to talk about education:

"We need more and more human resources of intellectuals and intelligentsia in building a modern, developed democratic nation.... Therefore, we will promote the nation's education standard to meet the international level and encourage human resource development... We will practise free compulsory primary education system, improve the standards of present universities, colleges, and high, middle and primary schools, provide more teaching aids, sharpen the abilities and improve the socio-economic status of educational staff, and increase the enrolment rates in middle and high schools. In that regard, we will work in cooperation with international organizations including the UN, INGOs, and NGOs. We will promulgate necessary laws for private education schools. Moreover, we will provide stipends for higher education abroad and stipends for outstanding students at home."

Whether or not he can deliver, President U Thein Sein has, for the first time since the 1960's, reversed the thinking on education and the need for intellectuals and the intelligentsia in building a modern developed nation. His promise to *"work in cooperation with international organizations including the UN, INGOs and NGOs"* is also a surprising touch since, in the past, all things foreign were suspect.

A similar promise is made regarding the health sector:

"We will improve quality of ... hospitals ... and skills of medical staff..., the quality of rural health centres and medical staff. In the process, we will work together with international organizations including the UN, INGOs, and NGOs. We have a plan to promulgate necessary laws to standardize the health care services of private health centres. We also have a plan to set up a health care system covering the participation of the State, the people and altruistic organizations to beef up community health care. We will work more closely with international organizations in pursuit of the national projects on control and prevention of the three diseases: AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria."

He goes on to make another surprising statement: *"We guarantee that all citizens will enjoy equal rights in terms of law, and we will reinforce the judicial pillar. We will fight corruption in cooperation with the people.... So, we will amend and revoke the existing laws and adopt new laws as necessary to implement the provisions on fundamental rights of citizens or human rights."* It, of course, remains to be seen what security laws are revoked and how vigorously corruption is tackled. But the fact that U Thein Sein makes such claims is surprising.

He also addresses the issue of the environment:

"Another task we will have to implement is environmental conservation. In that regard, we will pay serious attention to conservation of forests and woodlands and take measures in various sectors to reduce air and water pollution, control dumping of industrial waste and conserve wildlife. We will lay down a new policy in which we will work for economic development in parallel with environmental conservation. We will mobilize participation of the people and social organizations in the tasks for environmental conservation and create renewable energy at low cost. We will review and amend laws and enact new laws on environmental conservation."

Like national unity, U Thein Sein then pledges that his government will prioritize and “*guarantee the fundamental rights of citizens.*” Ambitious words indeed. He then outlines a 10-point work program for the parliament including:

- Bills to safeguard fundamental rights of citizens in line with the constitution
- Amend some journalism laws in line with the provisions of the constitution
- Laws on environmental conservation and laws on industry and mining for environmental conservation
- Laws to amend the programmes for rescue and rehabilitation regarding natural disasters due to climate changes, and long-term preparedness against natural disasters.

The President then affirms the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in Burma's foreign affairs, claiming that Burma has never posed threats to international and regional peace and security. This is an oblique reference to the UN Security Council which has been invoked from time to time in discussing the situation in Burma. U Thein Sein also reaffirms Burma's commitment to the UN, ASEAN, BIMSTEC and other regional organizations. He also makes an appeal to the international community “*to end various forms of pressure, and to stop providing assistance and encouragement to anti-government groups*”.

Finally, he once again touches on the need

“to show our genuine goodwill towards those who have not accepted the constitution because of being skeptical about the seven-step Road Map in order that they can discard their suspicions and play a part in the nation-building tasks. Likewise, we need to convince some nations with negative attitude towards our democratization process that Myanmar has been committed to see the interests of the nation and the people to serve those interests only in the constitutional framework and not to try to disrupt democratization process outside the constitutional framework and harm peace, stability and the rule of law. The Union Government will welcome all actions done within the constitutional framework but prevent and take necessary action against all actions done outside the constitutional framework. Democracy will promote only hand in hand with good governance. This is why our government responsible for Myanmar's democracy transition will try hard to shape good administrative machinery.”

In summary, it can be said that President U Thein Sein made an impressive speech. He is firm about not tolerating attempts to bring about change outside the framework of the Constitution, but at the same time he appears to be willing to even amend the Constitution if national unity and national reconsolidation could be achieved. He does not shy away from or deny that there were problems. He acknowledges them, including issues of national security and the Tatmadaw. He also seems quite open and transparent on health, education, economic and even environmental issues, which is quite a departure from previous norms where everything had to be shown to be perfect.

While he has made a good start, the key question is: can U Thein Sein deliver? It is clear that the speech was not scripted by Senior-General Than Shwe. But will the Senior-General tolerate such candour and deviation, however slight, from the President whom he appointed to maintain the status quo? Will the new Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing tolerate the President's meddling in military affairs? Or will he trash the President's national unity plans by attacking the ethnic armies that have not laid down their arms? Recent events in Shan State where the Tatmadaw is attacking civilians seem to indicate that,

whatever the President may say about a "Union spirit", the Tatmadaw may be bypassing him and taking orders directly from the strongman, Senior-General Than Shwe.

How the hardline Vice-President (former General) Tin Aung Myint Oo, how the Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw (former Joint-Chief of Staff General) Thura Shwe Mahn, and how USDP party chief (former General) Htay Oo react to the President's speech in the days to come – whether they support his initiatives or block them – will also be interesting.

What is clear is that in spite of the protestations of some Burmese democrats and their international supporters that nothing has changed fundamentally, change has come to Burma.

Whether that change can be sustained or whether the situation will revert to the status quo is the real question. And a parallel question for democracy advocates outside the country is this: Should we try to encourage more change or should we push everything back to where it was?