



Edward Placidi
LA Travel Examiner

Democratic Growing Pains in Fast-Changing Myanmar

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Journalist and school teacher Maung Kyi Thaw said, "Democracy will progress in Myanmar, but it will take time...It all depends on what the generals allow, and how fast they allow it." Photo by Edward I. Placidi

She is watching over the people of Myanmar. Her photo hangs in shops, in restaurants, in private homes. Her portrait adorns many t-shirts. Unseen, but evident in speaking with people, they carry her spirit in their hearts. She is often reverently referred to as "Mama," and indeed she is the nation's political Mother Earth, the symbol of hope and of a better future.

Aung San Suu Kyi has opposed the military rulers for decades. She actually won the presidency in the 1990 election, but rather than assuming office, before the votes were even counted she was placed under house arrest by the generals, where she stayed for 15 years – and emerged as one of the most prominent political prisoners on the planet. Over the following years, she was

recognized with numerous awards for her courageous fight for freedom and democracy, most notably the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Traveling the country, it is self-evident how palpable her influence – and love for her – is. Her National League of Democracy party won the recent election in a landslide and now controls the government. And though the generals-written constitution precludes her from serving as president (they intentionally included a ban on anyone with a foreign-born relative – her husband was British, as are her two sons – to keep her from taking office), she is expected to wield dominant political power. So, doesn't the future obviously look bright for a more free and open society? Well, not so fast.

Just as adoration of Aung San Suu Kyi is palpable, so is uncertainty and even skepticism that the military will loosen the reins. As I journeyed about Myanmar, I made it a point of asking people I encountered – those who spoke some English – if they expected significant changes. Would democracy, free speech, human rights truly take hold, would their lives improve?

The answer invariably was a resounding “yes” – followed immediately by a big “but...” Invariably, the caveat was that “We have to wait and see” or “We can't say for sure what the generals will do. We have been disappointed before.”

The typical opinion – of hope painted with a coat of reservation – was espoused by journalist and school teacher Maung Kyi Thaw. “Democracy will progress in Myanmar, but it will take time,” he said. “We could see gains, then pullbacks, followed by new gains. It all depends on what the generals allow, and how fast they allow it.”

Maung Kyi Thaw's views were shaped by his personal experiences. He was banned from teaching in public schools because they didn't like what he was saying in the classroom, and so now can only work in private schools. He has been consistently harassed over the years for writing articles criticizing the military government. Government agents have showed up at his home and workplace to grill him about his views and writings, but he was never jailed. Looking about suspiciously, he mused that if he is spotted talking with me a government agent may come around tomorrow.

However, he believes a convergence of history and a political family may suddenly bode well for Myanmar. “We only had one great leader in the past, Aung San (widely considered the Father of the Nation as the architect of securing independence from British rule, but who was assassinated in 1947). Now, we finally have another great leader, his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, and this bodes well for the emergence of democracy.”

There has already been considerable easing up, but could another crackdown be coming? Or will there be no going back, but instead a steady progress to a freer people and society?

Only time will tell. In the meantime, the harbingers of change are everywhere.

The means of communication, on a national level, have been altered dramatically. In this long-closed country, cell phones were not allowed only a few years ago, but today they are everywhere, and ubiquitous among the young. It's stunning how many males are watching English Premier League soccer games on their devices.

The opening of tourism has brought an explosion of visitors, probably the most exponential growth of any country in the 2010s. Millions are arriving every year from all over the world, bringing new ideas, perspectives and unprecedented contact with the outside world.

Soaring tourism is spiking the economy and entrepreneurship – the launching of new hotels, restaurants, tour operations, bus and taxi services, boutiques, and more. A significant portion of this new economic activity is in the hands of the politically connected elite, who have a vested interest in seeing it thrive and expand. However, at the same time, it is spawning a new, emerging middle class that is rising up from the country's mass extreme poverty.

Cabbies lament how fast road conditions have changed. Only a few years ago, there were few vehicles on the road, mostly owned by the military and political class. Today, clogged streets and traffic jams are a fact of life in the cities and on many highways.

Myanmar is fast catching up to the rest of the world. In the coming months it will be a fascinating place to visit as the future continues to unfold.

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