

Guest Column

On Leadership and Power in Myanmar

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Some observers, of whom this writer is one, have long considered General Ne Win as the most destructive personal force in Myanmar’s modern history. In his various pivotal but detrimental roles as minister, deputy prime minister, prime minister, political party chairman, and commander of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar’s armed forces), he led the state in a mercurial and essentially whimsical manner—ever downward at his discretion. Once he obtained power, he developed an entourage and a set of classical patron-client relationships that magnified his authority, self-importance, and the arbitrariness of his rule. He was never seriously challenged until he finally resigned in 1988 as chairman of the party he created in 1962.

Yet I have been forced to reconsider this evaluation with the rise of General Min Aung Hlaing, for he has begun to demonstrate the very traits of General Ne Win. True, Ne Win had a unique advantage: almost since independence he had been able to control the Tatmadaw leadership, which was utterly dependent on his whims for promotions and access to power. Min Aung Hlaing is not in that position, but he has used his power to promote a coup unnecessary for the effective role of the Tatmadaw, which it already had, but essential for the personal future of Min Aung Hlaing. He has reinstated restrictions on the society that had been gradually lifted in the previous decade and had given people hope. The destructive forces unleashed by the coup on the part of the Tatmadaw, the civilian Bama ethnic majority, and minority peoples has been unprecedented in Myanmar’s history. Tragically, the Vietnam War analogy of destroying the country to save it comes to mind.

But perhaps our natural concentration on the personalities of the individual leaders obscures a more fundamental aspect of the concept of power in Myanmar’s political culture. By no means unique to any society, many traditional cultures, and all cultures to some degree, regard power as a personal trait and characteristic. It is evident, from pre-colonial Burma and from independence, that power in Burma/Myanmar has been exercised as a personal prerogative of leadership, whether military or civilian. The whims of kings or prime ministers become policy, and policy supersedes law and custom. As personal power predominates, institutions become weaker, and it is evident that since independence the only institution that has been strengthened has been the Tatmadaw. Law has become a means of policy administration, not a method to encourage or enforce abstracted concepts of cultural appropriateness. These weakened legal and administrative institutions allow, even strengthen, the personalization of power. Until recently, religion and religious leaders, like the senior members of the sangha, have been able to mitigate the abhorrent actions of an unbridled laity. That has disappeared, and Buddhism has been coopted into the political maelstrom and used for overt political power purposes.

None of these tendencies, of course, are absolute. The widespread, unprecedented popular demand

for participation in government, as evidenced by the opposition to the Feb. 1, 2021 coup, shows that an erosion of this personalization of power is in process, but one that is likely to be slow, painful, and episodic. There are still no signs of present or potential leadership of any group prepared to release effective authority to the people. Popular representation is no guarantee of democracy, as evidenced from several current worldwide examples. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi remarked that she was above the president—law becoming irrelevant to administration of personal power. U Nu, prime minister in the late 1950s and early 1960s, used his authority to pursue his own agenda.

Because we are witnessing a singular moment in Myanmar affairs, there is no road map ahead. And no element wants a simple return to the military-scripted constitution and conditions of the pre-November 2020 elections. The Tatmadaw is engaged in actions destructive of the state and its own historical reputation. Its continued unity is a subject of speculation. The National Unity Government (NUG) is neither national nor unified, and prevails in only certain areas. The varied ethnic minority leadership, none of which have illustrated democratic authority, calculate for openings that would enhance their individual roles, status and autonomy.

Whatever the outcome—a military-authorized and influenced election in August 2023 that divides political power and continues its prominence; some (unlikely) compromise with fragmented civilian opposition forces; some status quo ante relationships with some but not all of the ethnic minorities; or continuing chaos with limited central authority—the result will be an enfeebled state of questionable legitimacy and effectiveness incapable of supplying the basic needs of its peoples and fulfilling the aspirations that a more liberalized and internationally cognizant younger population now demand. The various and opposite political or armed groups seem bound in webs of self-deception or propaganda, preventing adequate consideration of policy alternatives.

Whatever the importance of external, foreign economic influences for the necessary growth of the society, peripheral or other states will have little direct influence, and certainly cannot control the internal distribution of power. Foreign frustration over internal mismanagement will likely grow, but its influence will likely be ineffectual. UN and ASEAN influence have been marginalized. Nationalistic concern over foreign interventions has been an important theme since the colonial era—xenophobia is widespread. Overt foreign arming of any of the multitude of disparate forces could provoke even greater regional instability and questionable political liberalization. Covert activities would quickly be revealed. Any such foreign intervention would create alien scapegoats of responsibility. Yet humanitarian assistance is necessary, but the means to deliver it are difficult and complex.

And so it is with great frustration that those of us concerned with the future wellbeing of the diverse peoples of Myanmar sense a destructive, meandering, clouded path ahead for the state. We, alas, must await a new generation of aspirants to power, those who dreamed of progress, and who will consider the people as a whole, and not simply their leaders' own parochial interests.

David I. Steinberg

P.S.

• The Irrawaddy. 15 September 2022:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/on-leadership-and-power-in-myanmar.html>

- David I. Steinberg is distinguished professor of Asian studies emeritus, Georgetown University.