

MYANMAR'S MULTIPLE TRANSITIONS

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November 8th, 2015 was a momentous day for Myanmar, as the elections held in the country marked a milestone in its history. The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won an astounding victory. In the House of Representatives (*Pyithu Hluttaw*), out of the contested 330 seats (the House has 440 seats but 110 are reserved to the army), the NLD won 78.9% of the votes and 255 seats, obtaining 57.95% of total seats in the House. In the upper house (the *Amyotha Hluttaw*, or House of Nationalities) the NLD won 80.4% of the popular vote and 135 seats out of the contested 168 (the House has 224 seats but 56 are reserved to the army), thus gaining 60.27% of all seats in the House. The new Parliament will convene on January 31st, 2016, and it will have to elect a new government and a new president.

The striking success of the NLD represents a major step forward on Myanmar's path towards democracy, all the more important in a country under *de facto* military rule since 1962. Despite this landmark event, however, the road ahead is filled with challenges requiring wise and steady governance if Myanmar is to become a case of democratic and social success. **Dr. Giuseppe Gabusi**, from the Torino World Affairs Institute, discussed Myanmar's multiple transitions at the **3rd Italian Lecture Corner**, held in Hangzhou in November 2015 and sponsored by Zhejiang University's Center for Italian Studies, a partner of the **TOChina System**.

Myanmar's democracy remains imperfect. A constant tension between the two dominant political actors in the country – the NLD and the Tatmadaw, the armed forces of Myanmar – is expected to persist in the years to come. Constitutionally, the Tatmadaw is entitled to 25% of seats in Parliament, which are not contested in elections. In addition, it is set to retain control over key State institutions, including the ministries of Defense, Interior and Border Affairs. In the absence of

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T.wai's research team visiting the Parliament of Myanmar in the capital Naypyidaw in 2014. A delegation of the City of Turin is due in Myanmar from December 11 to 14, 2015; T.wai participates with the head of the Myanmar research agenda, Dr. Giuseppe Gabusi



constitutional reforms, the military will exert significant power over Myanmar's strategic policy-making, alongside the NLD.

Other than the relationship between the newly elected Parliament and the military, one crucial feature of Myanmar's democracy is the interaction between the centre of the country and its periphery: the new leaders will need to develop a productive dialogue with the 135 ethnic and 15 armed groups living in the border regions. It is vital for the stable development of Myanmar that these communities and actors be engaged by the central government if an effective federal system of government is to be implemented, narrowing economic inequalities and fostering broader reconciliation in society. Even though there still is a lack of reliable data, Myanmar's Gini coefficient – measuring inequality in income distribution – is now recorded by the World Bank at 0.29, but according to some OECD estimates it varies greatly among states and regions, ranging from 0.3 (moderate inequality, at the level of France) to 0.51 (high inequality, more akin to Brazil).

At the social level, failure to engage the full spectrum of actors in Myanmar's society would result in a dangerous widening of the gap between the Bamar ethnic group, which constitutes two-thirds of the population, and ethnic minorities, which in at least five states are in fact local majorities. These include the Rohingya Muslims, a community of 1.3 million people living in the Rhakine State, on the western coast of Myanmar, near the border with Bangladesh. The Rohingyas have long suffered persecution and discrimination due to their ethnicity and religion, culminating in the violent death of at least forty men, women and children in January 2015. Despite having lived in the country for generations, the Rohingyas are utterly disenfranchised, since they are denied Burmese citizenship, and suffer from numerous restrictions to personal freedom. Discrimination and violence against the Rohingyas are particularly serious, being driven by the Buddhist population of Myanmar, which reveals a dangerous trait of what is otherwise considered a peaceful religion. The brutality against the Rohingya minority started in June 2012, after the rape and murder of a Buddhist woman, allegedly at the hand of a Rohingya Muslim.

In the security sphere, stability requires that the government find a solution to several internal conflicts. On October 15th, an embryonic framework for national peace was established, in the form of a Nationwide Cease-fire Agreement. Eight out of the 15 armed ethnic groups signed the protocol, which however represents only a partial success, since the two largest militias – the Kachin and the Wa – have refused to sign.

Myanmar is not only witnessing a political shift from an authoritarian regime to a democracy: it is embarked on a structural economic transition too. As the nation moves from command economy to market incentives, Myanmar has the potential to develop its economy in the global system, provided that an adequate

institutional framework is put in place and implemented credibly and transparently. Vertically, the government needs to pursue a plan for national development, capable of creating an economic system that leverages the country's assets – its natural resources, agricultural products (already constituting a significant portion of Myanmar's exports), and clothing industry – to generate sustainable growth and comprehensive human development. Horizontally, the military has to renounce its former economic privileges, rooted in its presence in light and heavy industry.

As Myanmar undergoes such momentous political and economic transformations, its foreign policy posture is expected to change. At the time of Myanmar's isolation from the outside world – due to international humanitarian sanctions –, the country developed a close partnership with China, a partner with a keen interest in Myanmar's natural resources. In recent years, however, the country's military-turned-civilian leadership, which kick-started the transition, has pursued a steady rapprochement with the United States, as demonstrated by President Barack Obama's visits to Myanmar in 2012. While cutting its natural ties with China is not an option, it is certainly salutary for Myanmar to diversify its portfolio of international partners. Italy is an especially dynamic one, thanks to the role played by the **City of Turin** under the current mayor **Mr. Piero Fassino**, former EU Special Envoy to Myanmar (2007-2011).



Aung San Suu Kyi is facing her hardest test yet: delivering on her promises in ways that meet the diverse expectations of a people looking to building a brighter future



Aung San Suu Kyi is currently barred from the presidency of Myanmar, due to a constitutional provision (art. 59/f) forbidding anyone having a parent, spouse or legitimate child with foreign citizenship from becoming president or vice-president. Nevertheless,

she openly admits that she will be the *de facto* leader of the country, exerting a strong influence on the new president, who is due to be elected by the new Parliament in March 2016. The NLD has won the popular mandate and the number of seats needed in Parliament to govern. It is now called to confront its hardest challenge yet: delivering on its promises in ways that meet the diverse expectations of a people looking to building a brighter future.

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