



Min Ko Naing (centre), a student leader from the failed 1988 pro-democracy uprising, waving to supporters at a pagoda last Saturday, after his release from prison. Myanmar's release of political prisoners has drawn praise from long-time critics of its once-authoritarian government, but obstacles remain as the country embarks on the reform path. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

# Myanmar's road to democracy

BY ALISTAIR D. B. COOK & BRIDGET WELSH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

LAST week's release of more than 600 political prisoners and signing of the peace agreement with the Karen National Union are markers of transformative ongoing processes of national reconciliation and democratisation taking place in Myanmar. The developments are substantive, as power is moving away from the military towards the civilian leadership. The changes are revolutionary, given nearly 50 years of military government.

An estimated 650 prisoners were released, believed to be a third of the political prisoners held. What distinguishes these releases is the diversity that they represent of the government's oppo-

nents. They include leaders of the Shan ethnic group, the 1988 Generation students, journalists and monks involved in the 2007 uprising dubbed the "Saffron Revolution". The list includes Shan leader Khun Tun Oo; Min Ko Naing, Nilar Thein, Ko Jimmy and Htay Kywe of the '88 Generation Student Group; journalists Zaw Thet Htwe, Ngwe Soe Linn, Hla Hla Win and blogger Nay Phone Latt; and monk U Gambira.

The move also saw former prime minister Khin Nyunt released from house arrest and let out military intelligence officials who were purged in 2003. This group was seen to be pushing the country towards political opening by beginning dialogue with Ms Aung San Sui Kyi and ethnic communities, only to be jailed and removed from power. Almost a decade later, reforms are finally bearing fruit. President Thein Sein is show-

ing that his government means business when it talks about transformation.

The manner of the releases illustrates the presence of a more confident reform-oriented leadership. The releases came through presidential pardon, indicative of a stronger embrace of the rule of law and civilian authority. Previous decisions were approved by the National Defence and Security Council. But in this latest move, the President used Act 401(1) of the new Constitution, marking the shift of power away from the military towards more civilian processes.

The noticeable absence of military endorsement of the releases simultaneously signals it is distancing itself from politics. Since the 2010 transfer of power, the Commander-in-Chief, General Min Aung Hlaing, has articulated that his focus is on building a professional armed

force. While the lines between the civilian and military authorities are still grey, given the fact that most of the senior civilian officials come from the military, the diffusion of powers among different civilian and military actors is encouraging.

These changes came immediately after the historic agreement signed between the Karen National Union and the government. The KNU was the only ethnic group not to have signed a ceasefire agreement, so this pact is a bold move towards national reconciliation after decades of fighting. The recent negotiations show that the government is seeking political solutions rather than sending in troops. The willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise is an important step forward.

While we are seeing a genuine movement towards political openness in Myanmar, we're not there yet. Last week's developments were important hurdles that needed to be crossed, to reach out across the opposition and do so in a manner that legitimises the rule of law and civilian authority.

Yet, there remains much more to be done, and it will not be easy. To transform a system from the inside after nearly 50 years of authoritarian rule is difficult. Among the powerful elites, there is resistance to change, and understandable mistrust in society. Optimism must be tempered with an appreciation of the reality of how hard it is to bring about change to a system closed for so long.

There are further hurdles to cross. More engagement is necessary with ethnic minorities, as there remains deep mistrust. Relations are particularly tense in Kachin state, where the Myanmar armed forces and Kachin Independence Army continue to square off.

Tensions simmer in other parts of the country as well, from the Wa territory to Shan state. Fighting is still part of the landscape. Not to be forgotten are the remaining political prisoners; many of them may lack the prominence of those recently released but have played important roles in standing up to earlier abuses of power. Other serious challenges remain - from building political institutions and policy delivery to basic economic reforms. It is comparatively easier to sign an agreement or release prisoners than to build trust and keep promises, especially in a society that has endured years of unfulfilled hope.

This openness will need to deepen and broaden. President Thein Sein has shown that he is willing to deliver, to meet the conditions of the West to remove sanctions. The US response to restore diplomatic relations is positive, but will need to go further. Now more than ever the international community needs to reciprocate with substantive support, and move Myanmar further along the road to democracy.

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# Teheran's behaviour explained

BY RAY TAKEYH

THE perennial conflict between Iran and the West has entered a dangerous new phase, with tensions rising in the Persian Gulf since Iran threatened retaliation for last week's assassination of a chemical engineer linked to the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

What accounts for Iran's behaviour? Behind all the sound and fury, Teheran is diligently pursuing a three-track policy that involves provocation of the international community and making noises about diplomacy as it relentlessly marches towards the bomb.

In recent months, the Islamic republic has engaged in conduct that has confounded even its most seasoned observers.

Shortly after a critical International Atomic Energy Agency report published in November was followed by threats of sanctions by the European Union, Basij militia masquerading as students stormed the British embassy in Teheran.

Washington's recent attempt to restrict Iran's oil trade by sanctioning its central bank prompted Teheran's threat to destabilise the global economy by closing the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway through which a sixth of the world's oil passes.

Such bellicose actions are a departure for a regime that has long exercised a modicum of restraint in its belligerence.

Indeed, such behaviour makes sense only if we appreciate that Iran sees itself as locked in conflict with the West and is determined to respond to recent escalations in US policy with escalations of its own. Armed forces deputy chief of staff Masud Jazayeri said last month that new guidelines for the armed forces from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei included this: "From now on, we will make threats against threats."

Iran hopes that its unsettling conduct will prompt Russia, China and members of the non-aligned community who fear war to defy US efforts to tighten sanctions.

The second track of Iran's strategy involves signalling its willingness to resume negotiations with the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany.

It is important that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons has always involved negotiations. A diplomatic path that is sporadic yet protracted can provide an umbrella under which Teheran advances its nuclear programme. It is no coincidence that Iran has timed its latest diplomatic gesture with the intensification of its nuclear activities. By threatening the disruption of global oil supplies yet dangling the prospect of entering talks, Iran can press actors such as Russia and China to be more accommodating in an effort to avoid a crisis that they fear. Any concessions that Iran may make at the negotiating table are bound to be symbolic and reversible.

Beneath all its bluster and threats, Iran is