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THE ARMY AND ELECTIONS IN MYANMAR

Toshihiro Kudo

The Myanmar military government plans to hold elections in 2010, the second national elections under their regime. In the first elections, held in May 1990, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won over eighty per cent of the seats in the legislature. The NLD's landslide was unexpected by the army, and it refused to give up power.

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The army learned lessons from this *failure*, and has been carefully preparing for the elections this time around. The new constitution adopted in the referendum of May 2008 includes many undemocratic provisions that favor the army, with one of them allowing the army to secure one-fourth of the seats in the bicameral legislature without running for elections. Aung San Suu Kyi is now *legally* under house arrest for almost all of 2010 following an August 2009 verdict of guilty of violating the law safeguarding the state against the dangers of subversive elements. Many dissidents and opponents have been arrested and sentenced to long prison terms in the last couple of years. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-supported mass organization, is said to have transformed into an influential political party. Faced with these actions by the army, both domestic democratic forces and the international community condemned the military government.

Here, one question comes to mind. Why does the army want to hold elections this time around if the generals are so afraid of losing power that they are willing to resort to unjust measures to win? There has been international pressure put on the Myanmar army to conduct free and fair elections. However, we should remember that the generals have never surrendered to such pressure in the two-decade-long history of the military regime. The domestic democratic forces, the NLD in particular, did not want the new elections. On the contrary, they demanded that the army acknowledge the results of the 1990 elections and convene the parliament. The generals must have their own reasons to hold elections after an interval of twenty years.

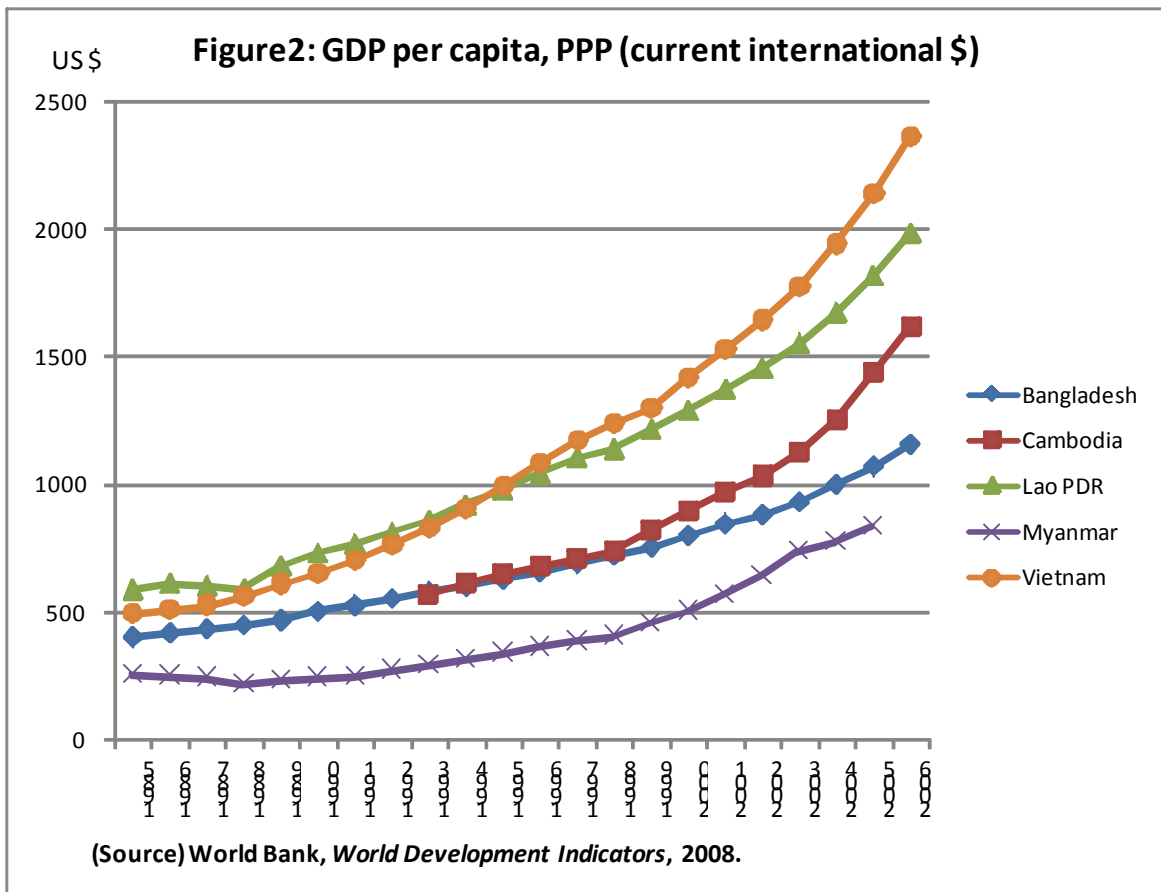
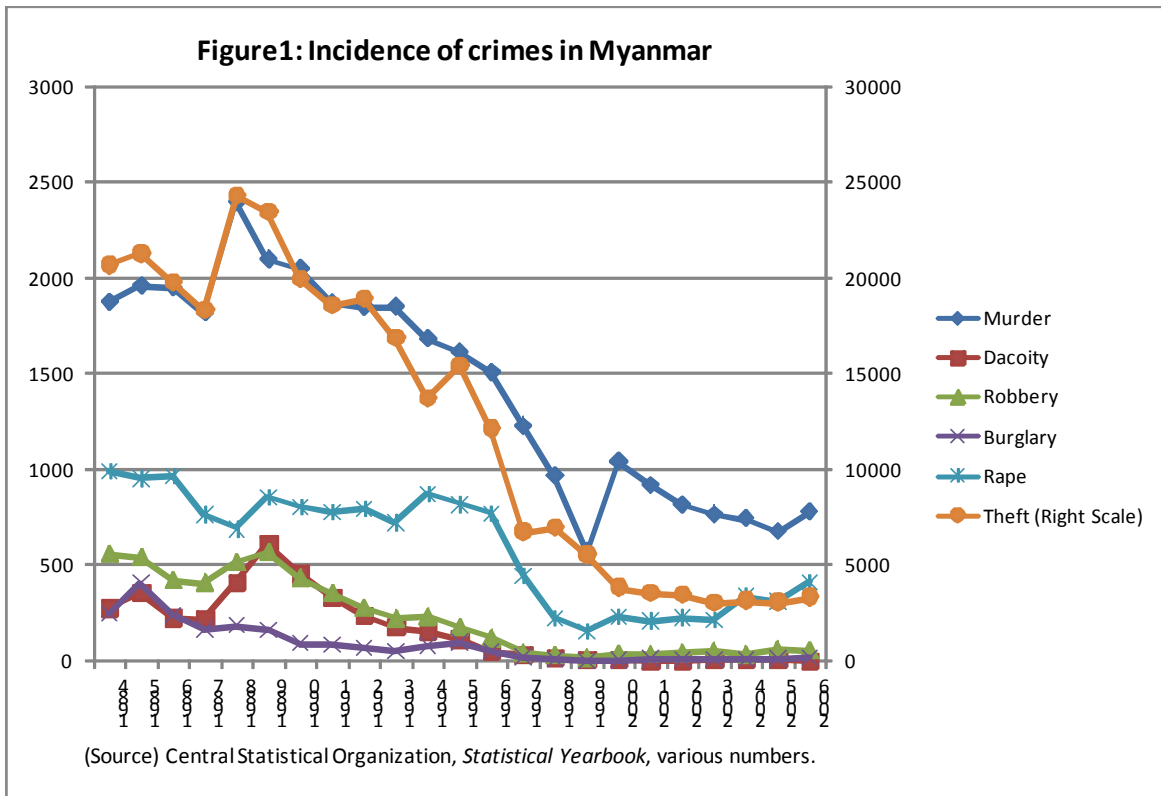
This is a difficult question, but let me try to answer by putting myself into the generals' shoes. First, the generals naturally want legitimacy. They have long been criticized as illegitimate since they seized power in a 1988 coup and neglected the result of the elections in 1990. The 2010 elections will be an opportunity for the generals to remove their disgrace, but only if they win.

Second, the generals are now more confident about order and security in the country. The principal objective of the army coup in September 1988 was to restore order and security. They established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and the name represented their foremost

objective. In fact, the original Burmese name for the SLORC did not include the word “law,” and the generals apparently wanted to restore order and security even at the expense of law.

Have order and security in fact been restored? It is difficult to measure the degree of order and security, but the incidence of crimes may tell us some information (Figure1). The incidence of crimes, including serious cases such as murders, rapes and dacoity was relatively high in the latter half of the 1980s and the early 1990s. A surge of crimes including murders, dacoity and thefts was observed in 1988 and 1989, probably due to the disorder caused by widespread people’s uprisings for democracy and their suppression by the army in 1988. The incidence of crimes showed a dramatic decline from the mid-1990s up to 2006, the latest year in which statistics were available. You may think such a decline happened due to rampant corruption among the Myanmar police, who often overlook criminal cases for “tea money.” This may be the case for thefts. However, serious crimes such as murders and robbery are recorded relatively correctly even in less developed countries, and the decline of serious criminal cases in Myanmar probably reflects a better security situation in this country. It is good news that the military government has successfully restored order and security, and this provides favorable environment for the army to hold elections.

Third, the army probably would like to expand its power base in order to promote economic growth. Economic performance under the present military regime had been poor. The military government was handicapped, since they had to develop the economy from a very low level. They inherited an impoverished economy from a quarter-century-long socialist regime. Nevertheless, they failed to catch up even other less developed economies in Asia (Figure2). For example, the difference in GDP per capita between Myanmar and Vietnam was US\$242 in 1985. Twenty years later, the gap had widened to US\$1,306. The military government initiated an open-door policy and transition toward a market economy soon after its seizure of power. However, the bad image of the military regime kept foreign investment and economic cooperation from coming into Myanmar on a large scale. Economic sanctions imposed by the United States (US) and European Union (EU) damaged Myanmar’s garment and



other emerging industries. Recent economic growth has been supported only by exports of natural gas and other resources to neighboring countries, and has failed to generate income for general farmers and workers.


The army needs a broader power base inside the country and better image outside the country, in order to enhance economic growth. It is said that the military government has been recruiting businesspersons and academics as candidates for their side in the 2010 elections. For example, the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) modified its rules in March 2009, so that the Federation's executives and members can join political parties and run for elections. The new government that will be established after the 2010 elections may be able to obtain more foreign investment and economic cooperation, if it is regarded as reasonably legitimate by the international community.

Fourth, Senior General Than Shwe probably needs the elections more than other army officers. He is aging (thought to be 76) and rumored unhealthy, and has been in power for nearly eighteen years since April 1992, when he is thought to have ousted his predecessor, General Saw Maung. He also arrested Ne Win, former strongman throughout the socialist period (1962-88), in March 2002. He might be worried that his turn is next. He may also be aware of the fact that not all army officers are happy with the present political and economic situation in Myanmar.

As the International Crisis Group Report of August 2009 correctly stated, the army-led roadmap that includes these elections reflects as much a generational transition as a political one. Than Shwe has to retire safe and sound so that he can secure himself and his family in the future. Having elections could be a gamble for him, but not having elections also poses a risk for him. The elections may be a survival strategy for Than Shwe and other generals who must leave the political arena anyway.

In conclusion, we confirm again that the 2010 elections in Myanmar were planned and will be implemented by the generals, having been influenced neither by pressure from the international community and domestic opposition nor by the people's desire for democracy. It was the generals' decision, in

particular Than Shwe's, and was probably intended to serve mainly as their survival strategy. Accordingly, it is almost sure that the 2010 elections will not achieve genuine "democracy" in Myanmar.

What we are left to ask is whether in the end the 2010 elections will be good for the people and economy. They could be good if the elections bring about a broader power base for the new government, including reformist young army officers, and the new government launches a series of political and economic reforms. They could be bad if the elections bring about increased political conflicts, divides and violence that jeopardize the security of the society. They could also be bad if the new government fails to gain proper recognition from the international community and, as a consequence of that, fails to obtain foreign investment and economic cooperation. Japan and the rest of the international community needs to understand the complex situation in Myanmar and react flexibly to the new reality after the elections. 

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