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BETWEEN ‘STRATOCRACY’ AND ‘MORAL DEMOCRACY’: AN APPRAISAL OF MYANMAR’S POLITICAL TRANSITION UNDER SUU KYI

Abstract

Leaving colonial past, Myanmar started its journey as a democratic, secular, multi-religious and multi-cultural state in 1948. Initially it adopted western right based democratic principles in its constitution. However, when political leaders failed to resolve post-colonial socio-political and economic problems of the country, military echelons took control of the political space of Myanmar. Thereafter, uninterrupted military rule from 1962 to 2010 established a deep rooted ‘stratocracy’, where the military unanimously dominated social, political and economic institutions of the country. On the other hand, democratic forces were also reinvigorating their movements against military rule. After the 1988 uprising, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as an iconic leader and united all sections of the society including students, monks and ethnic minorities with a vision of resurrecting democratic rule in the country. A western educated Suu Kyi was a supporter of ‘right based democracy’. But, to accommodate all sections of the society, she developed an indigenous idea of democracy, which is known as ‘moral democracy’. Therefore, the accession of Suu Kyi in the state power in 2016 raised new hope that she would challenge the longstanding ‘stratocracy’ in Myanmar and establish a ‘moral democracy’. In this backdrop, this paper is an endeavour to understand how far Suu Kyi is successful to break the shackles of six decades long military rule in Myanmar and what achievements she has made to accomplish the principles of ‘moral democracy’ in her country. The paper finds that Suu Kyi has achieved very little for moral democracy and in some issues her compromise with military raised questions about her commitment towards people of Myanmar. But still she is the best hope for democratic forces of the country. On the other hand, the military still needs her to defend themselves from the western criticism and to invite more investment in the country.

Keywords: Myanmar, Stratocracy, Moral Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi

1. Introduction

Since independence in 1948, the political history of Myanmar was embroiled between ‘stratocracy’¹ and democracy. Under the leadership of General Aung San,

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¹A number of terminologies are available in the existing literatures referring to the military rule in Myanmar: military dictatorship, military regime, praetorianism, authoritarian regime etc. Nevertheless, the prominent

the founding leaders of the country drafted a constitution in 1947 and accepted parliamentary democracy as the system of governance for Myanmar. The constitution proposed the country as a multi-ethnic and multi-racial one, and recognised equal rights for all the citizens of the country. However, the assassination of General Aung San in 1947 was a shock for Myanmar, because there was no iconic leader like him who could unite the country towards a common objective. U Nu took the responsibility of prime ministership and could not maintain the ideological position of the state which was decided by General Aung San. U Nu allowed special position for the Buddhism in the state to gain support from the majority Barmars. Though he declared that all other religions will receive equal treatment, minority groups were not convinced by his statements. On the other hand, the spirit of the Panglong Agreement, which General Aung San signed with other ethnic groups, by accepting a federal system, were diminished. Because the ethnic groups lost their confidence with the U Nu government and they have started to revolt against the state.

The political stagnation and escalation of rivalry in the country facilitated General Ne Win to stage a military coup in 1962. The coup changed the trajectory of the country from democratic system to military rule. Ne Win suspended the constitution of the country on three grounds: to restore the union, to reinstate order and harmony and to solve economic problems facing the nation.² He adopted ‘Burmese Way of Socialism’ and started reforming the country towards socialist democracy. His socialist policies distanced him from religious monks and his Burmanisation policies escalated conflict with ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, political and economic crisis led the country towards another military coup and toppled Ne Win from the centre of power in 1988. The coup led by General Saw Maung held in a time when student movements were challenging the day to day activities of the state. On the day of coup, the Ministry of Defence ordered all the armed forces to resign from the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the party of Ne Win, and to resume performing their original duties, working for the perpetuation of the state,

experts on military rule, i.e., Samuel E. Finer, Morris Janowitz, Eric A. Nordlinger, Philippe C. Schmitter, Claude E. Welch, Amos Perlmutter and Anton Bebler categorised military regimes in the context of civil-military relations and constitutional as well as legal perspectives. The terminologies to refer military regimes are used synonymously, though the experts sometimes differentiated between them. Present paper uses the term ‘stratocracy’ due to some special feature of this term, which the author finds most suitable to define military rule in Myanmar: (a) a stratocratic military government is always led by the military chiefs; (b) in stratocracy, the military persons occupy all the government and political institutions of the government, where in all other categories military allows at least minimal civilian participation; (c) in stratocracy, the military bears a kind of legitimacy, because in this system military is the only organised institution to run the government, all other forces remain non-existent or not capable to run the country. Moreover, in this system military officers are promoted in the higher ranks mostly on merit basis; and (d) in the context of Myanmar, since the military led the independence movement of the country, there was a wider acceptance of the military in the early periods of the country’s independence. Therefore, military considers them as the sole saviour of the country and a symbol of national integrity and unity.

² Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, Ithaca, New York, USA: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 80.

for national unity and for consolidation of strengthening of sovereignty. The military dropped the original ethnic names of its military units. This was the last step in erasing the federal structure of the country. The military established State, Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The regime ruled till 2011 and developed a complete stratocracy in the country. Though they organised an election in 1990, after the election they have denied transferring power to the popularly elected the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military rule under Ne Win accommodated civilian engagement in the power structure of the country and 1974 constitution facilitated a constitutional rule. But, under General Saw Maung, Myanmar emerged as a complete stratocracy where military took the control of all social and political institutions.

Due to strong domestic and international pressure, the SLORC declared a road map for democratisation in the country in 2003 and accordingly, developed a constitution in 2008. Under the constitution, military organised national election in 2010. But, the NLD did not participate in the election claiming that any election under the new constitution could not be free and fair. However, when military arranged election in 2015, the NLD participated in that and by winning majority seats in the parliament, they formed a new government. The NLD bears a strong contradictory ideological position with military. The party was formed after student uprising in 1988 mainly by retired military officers who were demanding democratic transition of the country. Nevertheless, coincidentally, Aung San Suu Kyi had reached Myanmar before the uprising to meet her mother, who was sick at the time. Suddenly student movement started and under the request of students, Suu Kyi joined the movement. Subsequently, she emerged as the iconic leader of the country and took the position of Secretary General of the NLD.

At first, she asked for right-based democracy in the country due to her allegiance to western democratic values. But later, she understood that for Myanmar, a “moral democracy”³ based on Buddhist principles would be more suitable. Her

³ The term “Moral Democracy” is an interpretation of the philosophies of Aung San Suu Kyi. No evidence is found that Suu Kyi ever used this term in his words. But her speeches and writings justify that she wants to establish a system of democracy in the country which should be indigenous and represents the Buddhist values of Myanmar. In the context of Myanmar, the term “Moral Democracy” was first used by Matthew J. Walton in his PhD dissertation “Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought” at the University of Washington in 2012, available at https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Walton_2012-thesis-Burmese_Buddhist_Political_Thought.pdf, accessed on 17 July 2020. Later, the term was elaborated in Matthew J. Walton, “Burmese Buddhist Politics”, Oxford Handbooks Online, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.013.21, available at: <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935420-e-21?print=pdf>, accessed on 17 July 2020; and Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 177. However, Aung San Suu Kyi’s philosophies on “Moral Democracy” was first comprehensively elaborated by Michal Lubina, *The Moral Democracy: The Political Thought of Aung San Suu Kyi*, Warsaw: Scholar Publishing House, 2018.

idea of moral democracy made her a popular leader among the Buddhists as well as emphasis on the visions of her father General Aung San increased her acceptance among the ethnic and religious minorities also. Therefore, when she took the responsibility of the State Counsellor in 2016, hope and expectations of the people increased exponentially. A new era started in the political history of Myanmar. On one hand, to protect longstanding stratocracy, the military wants to maintain power and they want to protect the constitution of 2008, which was made by the military and secures their interests. On the other hand, Suu Kyi promised for democracy and rule of law for the people of all races and religions of the country. People are expecting that she would undertake reforms to achieve moral democracy, which she has promised. Therefore, a continuous tension is existent in Myanmar between stratocracy and moral democracy.

In this backdrop, this paper endeavours to understand the achievements of Aung San Suu Kyi that how far she broke the shackles of the stratocratic system in Myanmar and how much she has achieved in her mission towards moral democracy. The paper is divided into five sections including introduction and conclusion. Section two deals with the established stratocratic order and tries to understand values of moral democracy of Suu Kyi. Section three focuses on the context of political transition in Myanmar and what factors motivated political forces of the country to start a democratisation process. Section four makes the assessment where Suu Kyi reached after four years of her succession in power and what are her major achievements and failures during her first tenure in the government. The fifth chapter is the conclusion which makes an assessment of the transition of Myanmar from the stratocratic order to moral democracy.

2. Between ‘Stratocracy’ and ‘Moral Democracy’

Stratocracy is a system of government where top military echelons control all kinds of political and administrative power of a country.⁴ The rules and laws of the country depend on the will of military. Government positions are always occupied by commissioned officers and military leaders, who get promotion in higher ranks due to their merit and efficiency. Therefore, it often functions as meritocracy, and a stratocracy always may not be an autocratic regime.⁵ The ancient state of Sparta is considered as the first stratocratic system of government. In the context of Myanmar,

⁴ John Bouvier and Daniel A. Gleason, *Institutes of American Law*, New Jersey: The Law Book Exchange Ltd., Vol. 1, 1999, p. 707.

⁵ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1958, and Thomas B. Hoffer, “Meritocracy”, in David L. Levinson, Peter W. Cookson, Jr. and Alan R. Sadovnik (eds.), *Education and Sociology: An Encyclopaedia*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 435-442.

formation of its military is connected with the independence movement of the country. As a student leader, when General Aung San was escaping to China for asking help to revolt against British rule, he was intercepted by the Japanese military. The then Japanese government offered him their support against the British government. He took Japanese support and returned to his country. Later, with 29 comrades, he went to Thailand to take military training from the Japanese military. After his return to Myanmar, he fought against the British government and successfully won against the British army. However, later he negotiated with the British government and left the alliance with Japan. Under his leadership, military in Myanmar made enormous contribution in the independence movement. Therefore, after independence, they emerged as an influential institution in the political space of the country.

The values of independence war were always an inspiration for Burmese military. General Aung San noted, “our Tatmadaw is not a mercenary army and it is unlike the one formed by the British.”⁶ However, at least four elements influenced the core values of Myanmar military.⁷ First, the idea of Thakhins—a movement in colonial Burma, mostly organised by students around the 1930s—was the base line for the development of the ideology of Burmese military. Thakhins was a movement – “opposition to colonial rule, independence and socialism”⁸. General Aung San was one of the members of the group and he led a group of Thakhins who took military training from the Japanese army. Therefore, Thakhins had a strong influence in the ideological orientation of Burmese military. Second, the idea of loyalty to the Japanese army was an important ingredient for Myanmar’s military. Due to primary orientation, the Myanmar military developed a sense of self-confidence from the Japanese military. Third, the British army also influenced the motivation of the Burmese army. Loyalty to the British monarch, military professionalism, separation between politics and military affairs made them aware about their responsibility in a democratic country. Fourth, private armies also have relevance in the formation of the national army of Myanmar. Such forces existed in the 1930s and were nothing new in the independent Burma. General Aung San formed the People’s Volunteer Organisation (PVO) from Burman soldiers who were not taken into the new army. But due to their role in the law and order activities, military was influenced by their policies as well. Nevertheless, military emerged as the most organised force in Myanmar. They have a motivation to protect the country.

Although the 1947 constitution established a democratic system of government and military accepted civilian supremacy, the army was able to gradually

⁶ Maung Aung Myoe, “The Soldier and the State: The Tatmadaw and Political Liberalization in Myanmar since 2011”, *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, 2014, p. 10.

⁷ Josef Silverstein, “Burma’s Struggle for Democracy: The Army against the People”, op. cit., p. 75.

⁸ Ibid.

expand its political role.⁹ In fact, after the assassination of General Aung San, there was no other leader who could unite all forces of the country. Though U Nu took the responsibility, he was not able to achieve political and social stability. Political split in his union party, the promulgation of Buddhism with special status, and lack of law and order pushed the country towards uncertainty and created a field for military coup. General Ne Win as chief of armed forces, took it as an opportunity to stage a military coup in March 1962. He formed a revolutionary council and later a new system of government was developed under the constitution of 1974. Viewing civilian politics as fractious and corrupt, the army suppressed all parties and civil society organizations (CSOs). Ne Win also established the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the only legal political party in the country in 1971. The army developed a powerful self-perception as “the only national force capable of protecting and safeguarding the nation.”¹⁰ To establish military’s dominance, Ne Win adopted a number of policies: (a) he introduced Burmanisation policy to legitimise military’s position among the Burmese population; (b) declared Burmese way of socialism, which gave him an unanimous power; (c) established the BSPP and declared all other parties unlawful; (d) adopted new constitution in 1974, but military remained at the centre of politics; (e) declared Burma as unitary state and no real concession for ethnic minorities; (f) adopted nationalisation policy; (g) reduced foreign influence in the country; (h) adopted the Citizenship Law of 1982; and (i) the military established absolute leadership in all areas of society including economy.

General Ne Win’s draconian rule weakened civilian institutions of the country. His initiatives to unite the country created more divisions in the society. Therefore, the popular uprising of 1988 compelled him to leave the power by another military coup. Senior General Saw Maung captured power and formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). He declared four tasks for the SLORC: (a) maintaining law and order; (b) provide secured and smooth transportation; (c) strive for better condition of food; and (d) hold multi-party general election.¹¹ By suspending the constitution and outlawing the BSPP, the military announced that it would be guided by three national causes: non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of national sovereignty.¹² The SLORC established its stronghold in politics in different ways: (a) abolition of

⁹ Mary P. Callahan, “Burma: Soldiers and State Builders” in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, pp. 413-433.

¹⁰ Curtis Lambrecht, “Oxymoronic Development: The Military as Benefactor in the Border Regions of Burma” in Christopher R. Duncan (ed.), *Civilizing the Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 153.

¹¹ James F. Guyot, “Myanmar in 1990: The Unconsummated Election”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1991, p. 205.

¹² Lee Jones, “Explaining Myanmar’s Regime Transition: The Periphery is Central”, *Democratization*, Vol. 21, No. 5, 2014, p. 787.

the 1974 constitution and dissolving the parliament; (b) modernisation of armed forces; (c) the size of military increased from around 200, 000 personnel in 1988 to 400,000 by 1999; (d) used its power to set up corporate groups in order to expand its interests and family members of military took ownerships of large corporations; (e) established the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (UMEH) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), which were given licenses in different businesses. Such as construction, hotels, transport, gem and jade extraction, and agriculture. As a result, military emerged as the most important business actor in the country; (f) organised the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) as the most important organisation for gathering public support and keeping a grip in the society. Later, it was transformed as the most organised military backed party in Myanmar.

After the military coup of 1962, General Ne Win took initiatives to establish military's dominance in the politics of Myanmar. But he later wanted to increase civilian engagement in politics. On the other hand, the SLORC came with more rigorous position of military in the political and administrative affairs. There were some doctrinal differences between Ne Win regime and Saw Muang as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Differences between BSPP and SLORC

	Socialist Rule (BSPP)	Stratocratic Rule (SLORC)
Legal basis for the “State”	Constitutional	Extra-constitutional
Dominant State Ideology	Socialism, Nationalism and Buddhism	Nationalism
State-society Relations	Antagonistic	Antagonistic
Form of Political Organisation	Authoritarian, Socialist	Authorities, Military
Basis of Policy Style	Top-down	Top-down “Muddling Through”
Form of Centralised Organisation	Mostly Unitary, Highly Centralised	Party Centralised

Source: Alex M. Mutebi, ““Muddling Through” Past Legacies: Myanmar Civil Bureaucracy and the Need for Reform”, in Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Robert H. Tylor and Tin Maung Than (eds.), *Myanmar: Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005, p. 143.

Though there were differences between military rule of Ne Win and Saw Maung, both of them developed a stratocratic system, where military emerged as a unanimous force in the political space of Myanmar. However, the SLORC's stronghold was challenged after the election in 1990. When military denied transferring power to Aung San Suu Kyi after the election, military was criticised from within and outside. Though they continued suppressing democratic movements, later they were compelled

to initiate reform agenda. Therefore, in 2003, military declared a “road map” to democracy and adopted a constitution in 2008. Under the new constitution, military arranged an election in 2010 and quasi-military government took the power. The largest opposition party, the NLD did not participate in the election claiming that the constitutional provisions are not capable enough of ensuring a free and fair election.

Though military governments were trying to suppress democratic forces, the political movements for democracy were always active in the political history of Myanmar. The democratic movements are rooted with the independence struggle of the country. In fact, before the writing of the 1947 constitution, its authors were struggling to decide the form of government of Myanmar would to be followed among the three: First, they could have returned to some form of monarchy, which existed before the British rule. Second, they could have created a bureaucratic authoritarian system, which was institutionalised at the end of the 19th century. Third, parliamentary democracy like the British Westminster system. General Aung San chose the third, considering it would help unite the country and all other ethnic groups would feel secured to remain integrated under a federal system, which he promised in the Panglong Agreement of 1947.

In fact, General Ne Win’s national solidarity act of 1962 declared all kinds of political activities unlawful. Political discussion remained only in the informal sphere among students, teachers, lawyers and writers. Only Burma Communist Party remained silently very active. Ethnic minorities were mostly busy to fight against military suppression. The strong democratic movement started in Myanmar in 1988 and after the formation of NLD, it got momentum. The conceptualisation of democracy was promulgated by three ways in Myanmar. Firstly, military backed the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) promoted an idea of “disciplined democracy”, which was rooted in a notion of discipline, most commonly associated with the former military government that ruled the country from March 2011 to until March 2016. Secondly, the western democratic system, an understanding of democracy that draws on same liberal arguments regarding rights and freedoms, which is known as “right based democracy.”¹³ Third is “moral democracy”, reflects reasoning about democratic values and practices that often make explicit reference to Buddhist principles.

When Aung San Suu Kyi started democratic movement, she was focusing on four values of democracy, which were developed by Robert Dahl: (a) the protection from state abuses or exclusion of minorities; (b) the right of any citizens to vote or to run for office; (c) freedom to form and join organisation; (d) freedom of expression.¹⁴

¹³ Matthew J. Walton, “Burmese Buddhist Politics”, op. cit.

¹⁴ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 1971, p. 303.

Suu Kyi also talked about two types of freedoms, which were developed by Berlin: negative freedom and positive freedom.¹⁵ Negative freedom is safety from the abuses of the state and positive freedom is related with the function of formulating and expressing political preferences. However, a good number of monks was against western model of democracy. They claimed that democracy was a western import and it might pose a danger to traditional Burmese values. Therefore, to accommodate Buddhist values, Aung San Suu Kyi developed new idea of democracy which is known as “moral democracy”. In 1992, she published an article and explained her idea of “moral democracy” in the context of Myanmar. She argued that Buddha’s four causes of decline are in the heart of Myanmar: (a) failure to recover that which has been lost; (b) omission to repair that which has been damaged; (c) disregard of the need for reasonable economy; and (d) the elevation of leadership with morality.¹⁶ She also mentioned about Buddha’s view of kingship which is expected to observe the Ten Duties of Kings, the Seven Safeguards against Decline, and the Four Assistances to the People, and to be guided by numerous other codes of conduct such as the Twelve Practices of Rulers, the Six Attributes of Leaders, the Eight Virtues of Kings, and the Four Ways to Overcome Peril.¹⁷ The ten duties are liberty, morality, self-sacrifice, integrity, kindness, austerity, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance and non-opposition. Suu Kyi summarised her idea of “moral democracy”: “The quest for democracy in Burma is the struggle of a people to live whole, meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world community. It is part of the unceasing human endeavour to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his own nature.”¹⁸ Michal Lubina identified some of the essential features of Suu Kyi’s moral democracy: (a) it is based on non-violent principles; (b) freedom from fear; (c) indigenisation of democracy and human rights; (d) an alternative seat of authority; (e) unity, responsibility and discipline in the governance system; (f) achieving unity through diversity; (g) women’s rights would be preserved from “mother of nation” perspective, not from the western feminist stance and (h) reconciliation.¹⁹

Suu Kyi’s idea of moral democracy helped her to accommodate all the social and political groups in her long struggle for democracy. In the last 20 years, Myanmar’s political space was struggling between major forces of stratocracy and democracy. On one hand, military wants to maintain ‘stratocracy’ which was established in Myanmar by military generals in the last six decades. On the other hand, Suu Kyi took the responsibility of State Counsellor by winning 2015 election

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concept of Liberty”, in Isaiah Berlin (ed.), *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 121-154.

¹⁶ Aung San Suu Kyi, “In Quest of Democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1992, p. 606.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 707.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Michal Lubina, *op. cit.*

to establish ‘moral democracy’ in the country. After four years of Suu Kyi’s rule in Myanmar, it is relevant to understand that how far she achieved her vision in her way to moral democracy.

3. The Context of Political Transition in Myanmar

After the Second World War, a series of post-colonial states emerged in what came to be known as the Third World. These states were characterized by immense diversity in their mode of life, level of socioeconomic and politico-cultural development, ethnic, racial and religious compositions, beliefs, convictions and prejudices. It prompted Rupert Emerson to refer to Third World nations as “peoples which are not yet nations in being but nations in hope”.²⁰ The independence and assertion of political sovereignty have, among others, created for them objective conditions for nation building in the widest meaning of the term. The task, however, proved to be much more complex and difficult than the leadership of concerned countries could even imagine. The process of nation building is highly complex and contradictory. It includes not only economic development, but goes far beyond to encompass the complex, interrelated and interdependent changes in the society as a whole. It implies economic, social, political as well as cultural development in a balanced and integrated way, embracing the diversity of social, ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities, and geographical regions in harmony with prevailing values.

The political transition in Myanmar demands a deeper look from a broader prism of underlying motives of the country and the associated concrete factors creating the condition for change. There are multifaceted factors that can be attributed as the drivers of political and economic reforms in the country. Myanmar’s economic interests include: (a) ensuring greater market access for its abundant natural resources, particularly energy resources, (b) boosting economic growth by means of increased trade and investment, (c) increasing economic independence and performance by opening multi-front economic engagements. It has rich endowments such as its natural resources, labour force and geographic advantage which show good potential for growth.²¹ The underlying motive for the government’s shift in politics is to be more of a last resort to pull the nation out of economic despair.²²

²⁰ Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise of Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples*, Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 94.

²¹ Asian Development Bank, *Myanmar in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities*, Manila, Philippines, August 2012.

²² Sydney Bergen, “Development, Democratization, Good Governance and Security: A Case Study of Burma/Myanmar”, December 2012, available at <http://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/bergen-burma>, accessed on 25 July 2016.

The country aspires to be one of the next rising economies in Asia by successfully leveraging its resources and geostrategic importance.

After five decades of oppressive military rule, Myanmar emerged along with several countries of the Arab world as part of what seemed the latest global democratic wave.²³ Though most visible and credible reforms have come to take place since 2011, Myanmar's contemporary progression towards democracy had a monumental landmark when the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) announced the "Seven-Point Roadmap to Democracy" in August 2003.²⁴ The steps of the roadmap involved reconvening the National Convention to finalise the principles for the new constitution, drafting a new constitution, organising national referendum on the constitution, conducting free and fair elections for parliament, convening parliament under the new constitution and, finally, the building of a modern, developed and democratic nation.

The constitution of 2008 established a set of new institutions, including an elected president, a bicameral national parliament, 14 regional governments as well as regular multiparty elections.²⁵ This creation of the position of President separated from the commander-in-chief of the armed forces was significant for the historically militarised government.²⁶ Besides, the election of a military-backed, semi-civilian government in November 2010 represented a clear break with the past.²⁷ The elections by the military junta hand over power to the civilian parliament. These initial steps toward democratisation seem to demonstrate Myanmar's transformation into a more pluralistic form of government.

The political transition in Myanmar is connected with the emerging economic and geopolitical factors of the region. The country has been facing continual sanctions for few decades by many countries who are demanding reforms and liberalisation of the country.²⁸ In 2005, the US succeeded in bringing the attention of the UN Security Council to Myanmar, and United States declared the situation a threat to regional

²³ Corey Pattison, "Barriers to Reform in Myanmar: Displacement of Civilians in Kachin State", *Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration*, Vol. 2, No. 2. 2012, p.?

²⁴ Bergen, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Tin Maung Than, "Myanmar's 2010 Elections: Continuity and Change", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2011, pp. 190-207.

²⁶ Bergen, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Charles Petrie and Ashley South, "Mapping of Myanmar Peacebuilding Civil Society", paper prepared in the framework of the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) presented in the Seminar 'Supporting Myanmar's Evolving Peace Processes: What Roles for Civil Society and the EU?', Brussels, Belgium, 07 March 2013.

²⁸ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "ASEAN Pariah: Insecurity and Autocracy in Myanmar (Burma.)", in Donald K. Emmerson (ed.), *Hard Choices: Security, Democracy, and Regionalism in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009.

security.²⁹ These sanctions were not only putting pressure on the political regime, but more crucially go in contrary with the economic interests and international ambition of the country. There has been a gradual rise of political awareness among citizens and many prodemocracy fronts including political parties, civil society organisations (CSOs), media and student movements that were putting pressure on the military backed government to undertake wide-scale reform initiatives. The most serious internal pressure to military power came from the demonstrations of Buddhist monks in September 2007, which ended in brutal crackdown and death of 31 Buddhist monks.³⁰ Though opposition groups failed to bring about a regime change, they have seriously undermined the legitimacy of the military government, which might have accelerated the transition to disciplined democracy.³¹

Myanmar is strategically located in Southeast Asia and in close propinquity with South Asia and hence a neighbour of the region's two economic giants, China and India. The constructive engagement of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma became a member in 1997, following the Asian way of avoiding direct criticism was more successful. As it allowed military leadership to build up contacts to the outside world and to foster economic development.³² Besides, Myanmar's participation in sub-regional groupings such as Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) forums and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) could have accelerated the drives for economic liberalization and opening up. Myanmar's effort to follow the steps of the rising Asian economies indicates its regional and international ambitions. Myanmar aspires to rise as a major economic power by renewing economic relations and opportunities within the international community and utilising the abundance of its natural resources. Gaining the chair to the ASEAN in 2014 was evidence of regional recognition of the changes happening in Myanmar.³³

Following these landmark developments, there have been concrete steps taken since 2011 to further expedite reforms. This process includes three areas of political reform: political reconciliation, political freedoms and electoral reform, and some administrative and bureaucratic transformations. The political reconciliation started in November 2010 with the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was ordered

²⁹ Noele Crossley, *Evaluating the Responsibility to Protect: Mass Atrocity Prevention as a Consolidating Norm in International Society*, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 185.

³⁰ Debora Di Dio, "Myanmar: Prospect for Change", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 41, Issue 3, 2011, pp. 501-505.

³¹ Marco Bunte, "Burma's Transition to Disciplined Democracy: Abdication or Institutionalization of Military Rule?", German Institute of Global Affairs, *Working Papers*, No. 177, August 2011.

³² Adam P. Macdonald, "From Military Rule to Electoral Authoritarianism: The Reconfiguration of Power in Myanmar and its Future", *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 1, 2013, pp. 26-30.

³³ Bergen, op. cit.

under house arrest since July 1989. In order to facilitate her return to the formal political process, electoral legislation was amended to remove certain provisions. In December 2011, the NLD became a legally registered political party, with Suu Kyi as its chairperson. The subsequent months saw the majority of political prisoners having been released and imprisoned dissidents were allowed to involve in the political process.³⁴ Besides, as part of the transition process, the current regime signed tentative peace agreements with eleven armed groups in 2011.

But for democratic reform to function effectively, Myanmar has to handle many constraints and challenges in a balanced and careful manner. These primarily involve: (a) the reform, being a top-down process, was heavily criticised for ulterior motives favouring the military; (b) the former authoritarian system lacked willingness to put at risk its absolute control of the government by distributing power equally among elected officials; (c) the reform permanently institutionalised the military's role in the government through legislative reforms and gives the military veto power over any amendments to its clauses; (d) national human rights commission still faces questions about its independence from government and about the extent to which it can deal with abuses by the military; (e) there is increased social unrest and renewed calls for autonomy within Myanmar's ethnic minority areas and the upsurge of sectarian violence between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state; (f) the damaged bureaucratic structure and the poor capacity of bureaucratic staff persist; and (g) the mistrustful civil-military relations continues, particularly the military being fully autonomous and subject to neither executive nor judicial civilian authority.³⁵

Without being the president of the country, how Aung San Suu Kyi fulfilled expectations of the people, emerged as a major issue since she is the most popular leader of the country. After the election of 2015, she declared that she would not be the president, but develop a system where she could take real control of the country. She chose a person as president who was a very close ally of her, and she also took the responsibility of the foreign ministry. Moreover, she is the State Counsellor, president office minister and in-charge of the peace process and addressing the situation in the Rakhine state. The victory of the NLD in the November 2015 election has increased peoples' expectation from Suu Kyi. In most of the states, instead of voting ethnic leaders, people voted in the name of Suu Kyi. Hence, expectations of the people from the new government also increased.

Suu Kyi is the most respected leader in Myanmar. She has emerged as an icon of democracy in the country. Her long struggle for democracy united the whole nation

³⁴ Udai Bhanu Singh, "Do the Changes in Myanmar Signify a Real Transition?", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 37, Issue 1, 2013.

³⁵ Bünthe, op. cit.

to fight against the military rule. The NLD won the election in her name. Almost all ethnic groups in the country voted the NLD expecting Suu Kyi would address their concerns.³⁶ Moreover, though the NLD won the election under the leadership of Suu Kyi, the constitutional provision prohibited her to be the president of the country. It is true that she holds very important portfolios, but constitutionally, the president is the supreme authority in the country. Maintaining relations with all the forces and continuing the leadership emerged as a challenge for Suu Kyi.³⁷ Any change in the leadership would create factions in the party which might strengthen the position of military. In addition, fulfilling the demands of all people remains a challenge for Suu Kyi. Ethnic groups and regional leaders may find it as an opportunity to strengthen their positions at regional levels.

After five decades, a democratically elected government has sworn in Myanmar. Within such a long undemocratic period, democratic institutions have lost their character. The authoritarian regimes abolished democratic principles and institutions.³⁸ Weak political parties and election systems, fragile legal system, ethnic conflicts, religious fanaticism are main challenges for consolidation of democracy. Moreover, the military's unscrupulous control in the decision-making process and presence in democratic institutions are considered as major challenges in the way to democratic governance. A democratic state needs to accommodate all the stakeholders in the governing system. Free media, flourishing of civil society, inclusion of minority and marginalised groups are prerequisites for institutionalisation of democracy. Independent judiciary and effective functioning of parliament can guide the executive to democratic practices. Since for long, Myanmar has not been practicing democratic values, therefore, Suu Kyi is facing difficult challenges in the process of democratisation of the country.

4. Where Suu Kyi Reached

Aung San Suu Kyi's arrival in power in 2016 was considered as a landmark in the political history of Myanmar. During five decades of military rule, hundreds of democratic activists sacrificed their life for democracy.³⁹ Therefore, expectations among people were high that Suu Kyi would change the destiny of the country

³⁶ Almost all ethnic groups voted in favour of Suu Kyi instead of voting their ethnic leaders. Only two ethnic parties, the Arakan National Party (ANP) and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) proved a bit successful in the election.

³⁷ Christina Fink, "Myanmar's Post-Election Future: Challenges and Opportunities for Aung San Suu Kyi", *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2016.

³⁸ David Hook, Tin Maung Than and Kim N. B. Ninh, "Conceptualizing Public Sector Reform in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, June 2015.

³⁹ Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999.

towards a new trajectory in accordance with the vision of her supporters. Suu Kyi herself was in house arrest for 15 years in her path of struggle to establish democracy. Her commitment and popularity made her an icon of democracy both in home and abroad. Except military, all political forces of Myanmar rallied under her leadership to establish a democratic system in the country. In fact, from 1962 to 1988, Myanmar military under Ne Win suppressed all democratic forces of the country. When Suu Kyi came in the political scenario in 1988, the democratic movement found a momentum.⁴⁰ Being the daughter of General Aung San, the founding father of Myanmar, she was accepted by all political forces of the country except the military. Moreover, formation of the NLD gave a formal platform for movement against the military. At the beginning, NLD's movement was only protesting against the military, but the iconic presence of Suu Kyi showed a way under whom which the nation could be united to move forward. Suu Kyi declared that her movement would be non-violent, and it would follow Buddhist principles.⁴¹ Therefore, within a short span of time, she integrated people for democratic movement. The military government under the SLORC arranged election in 1990 but denied transferring power to the elected representatives and suppressed political activists.

As mentioned earlier, due to international and democratic realities, Myanmar military declared a road map for democracy in 2003 and accordingly developed a constitution in 2008. Though they have promised democratic transition, constitutionally most of the powers remain in the hand of military, as shown in the Table 2.

Table 2: Constitutional Stipulations Protecting Military's Core Interests

Core Interest	Constitutional Provision
Institutional Autonomy	Article 6F : Military's role in national leadership
	Article 20B : Military institutionally separate entity
	Article 203 : Military supper commander is the Commander in Chief (CinC) of military (not the President)
	Article 20F : Military the Guardian of the constitution
	Article 342: President nominates CinC with National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) concurrence

⁴⁰ Seth Mydans, "Challenges to Myanmar's Military Junta Gains Momentum", *The New York Times*, 23 September 2007.

⁴¹ Stephen McCarthy, "The Buddhist Political Rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi", *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2004.

Security Portfolio Control	Article 20E : Military tasked with defending the three national causes
	Article 201 : NDSC highest executive body in the state; large military representation
	Article 322Bii : CinC appoints Minister of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs
	Chapter II : State of Emergency Power
Constitutional Change Veto	Article 109/141: CinC appoints all military MPs occupying 25% of parliamentary seats
	Article 436: 75% parliamentary approval required for constitutional change
	Article 60Biii : Military MP bloc appoints 1 of 3 presidential candidates
Protection from Prosecution	Article 445: Prohibits prosecution of previous military junta
	Article 204 : Presidential power to grant amnesty with concurrence of NDSC

Source: Adam Macdonald, “Perpetual transition: The institutional of military tutelage systems in Myanmar and Thailand, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 45, Issue 3-4, 2018.

The constitution established presidential system and two houses of parliaments for the country. In all the parliament houses, national and regional, military occupies 25 percent of seats. To make any amendment, 75 percent MPs need to vote in favour of the bill, which means the military can impose veto power against any bill. They control important ministries of the country and National Defence and Security Council (NDSC). The legal system cannot prosecute any general for any kind of crime and military can take full control of the country during emergency. Though due to international pressure, military allowed civilian faces in the government, but the constitution protects and preserves longstanding stratocracy in the country.

On the other hand, Aung San Suu Kyi leads the largest political force in Myanmar. At first, her vision was to establish Myanmar as a right-based democratic country in accordance with the vision of the father of the nation of Myanmar, General Aung San.⁴² But, later she felt that some of the Buddhists monks were against western democracy, and therefore, she promoted the idea of “moral democracy”. In the last three decades of democratic movement, her vision was to transform Myanmar from a stratocracy to a moral democracy. During the 2015 election, her party declared an election manifesto and focused on issues they were going to implement after

⁴² Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear: And Other Writings*, New York, USA: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 173-174.

election. The issues were based on her principles of moral democracy. The election manifesto promised that the NLD would strive for democratic changes in the country: Firstly, the NLD declared action plans for ethnic affairs and internal peace. They promised to develop a peaceful, prosperous and durable union through solidarity with all ethnic groups. The party committed that it would introduce dialogue based on the Panglong spirit and establish a genuine federal order in the country. Secondly, they promulgated that they would reform the constitution to ensure tranquillity and security for all sections of the society in accordance with basic human rights and democratic standards, guarantee ethnic rights, create genuine multi-party democratic system, checks and balance among legislative, executive and judiciary, and protect equal rights for all citizens. Thirdly, the party committed to develop a fair and just government system, which would ensure freedom and security for all people. They promised to minimise government expenditure, eradicate corruption, establish fair and unbiased judiciary and guarantee constitutional rights for all citizens. They also promised to develop the Myanmar military as “strategically efficient” and formulate a foreign policy which could enhance and extend the country’s global presence and engagement. Fourthly, the manifesto highlighted on the economic development and prosperity of the people. They described their plan for agriculture, livestock and fisheries industry, education, health, energy, environment, women issues, youth issues, communication and urbanisation. By making such promises, Suu Kyi achieved tremendous support from the people and formed the government in March 2016.

However, after receiving power, some of the hard realities came in front of Suu Kyi: First, though Suu Kyi arrived in power as elected leader, there was no significant transfer of power from the military to civilian authority due to constitutional provisions. Before the election, constitutionally it was decided that Suu Kyi would not be the president due to family bondage with foreign citizens, but she always promised people that she would be the executive head of the country.⁴³ After election result, the position of State Counsellor was created in the parliament and under a legal framework, Suu Kyi sworn in the power of the country. But the constitutional provisions prevent her to take any decision which can change the existing power structure of the country. Second, she emerged as an iconic leader, but had no experience of working in government. Moreover, her experience is based on a personalistic leadership, but leading in the institutional framework needs special skills. Therefore, how to connect all layers of the institution, came as a challenge for

⁴³ According to Chapter 3, Article No. 59(f) of the constitution of 2008 of Myanmar, the president must be someone who “he himself, one of the parents, the spouse, one of the legitimate children or their spouses not owe allegiance to a foreign power”.... “[They shall] not be subject of a foreign power or citizen of a foreign country ... [or] be persons entitled to enjoy the rights and privileges of a subject of a foreign government or citizen of a foreign country”.

her. Third, the people around her are also mainly for their personal loyalty, but none of them has experience of working in the government. Fourth, she rejected many chances of uniting opposition political parties. Her failure and unwillingness raised questions regarding her commitment towards democratic values. Fifth, Suu Kyi's relations with civil society organisations (CSOs) weakened after short span of her arrival to power. Though she promised for a horizontal decision making, but she followed a vertical administrative structure, which is not compatible with democratic values.⁴⁴ There is always a pressure on her for democratic reform of the constitution, but she has very limited power to change anything without consent of the military.

Within such limitations, Suu Kyi formulated some of the business laws to facilitate foreign investment in the country. New laws like the Myanmar Investment Law (MIL) of 2016, the Myanmar Investment Rules (MIR) of 2017 and the Myanmar Campaign Law (MCL) of 2017 have facilitated foreign investment, which have eventually created many jobs in the country.⁴⁵ Myanmar government took initiatives to invite foreign companies in their energy and infrastructure sectors.⁴⁶ It is argued that Suu Kyi's government adopted some of the measures which helped to make governance system of the country more inclusive and secured the rights of some marginalised people. The NLD government also initiated policies to ensure decentralisation of power among different institutions of the country. Suu Kyi government is trying to make local government more effective and more connected with the people. On the economic front, the NLD took the 12-point economic policy agenda in 2016.⁴⁷ This document provided few concrete details about policy goals or implementation plans. It stresses, among other things, the importance of developing a market-oriented system in all sectors of the economy; a fair distribution of natural resources between states and divisions to promote national reconciliation of a federal state; addressing infrastructure shortcomings; and reviving and boosting agricultural exports. Such policies helped expand Myanmar's economic progress.

The military did not intervene in the policies of Suu Kyi, which were not affecting their supremacy in power structure. In fact, some changes in the business sector were convergent with the military's interest. The new business laws facilitated military corporate to get more investment from the West.⁴⁸ Military was eager to

⁴⁴ Richard Roewer, "What the NLD's top-down Party Structure Means for Myanmar", *East Asia Forum*, 101 May 2020.

⁴⁵ "New Investment Law Helps Myanmar Rebuild its Economy and Create Jobs", The World Bank, 25 January 2017, available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/01/25/new-investment-law-helps-myanmar-rebuild-its-economy-and-create-jobs>, accessed on 14 May 2020.

⁴⁶ "Republic of the Union of Myanmar: Institutional Strengthening of National Energy Management Committee in Energy Policy and Planning", Asian Development Bank, Project Number: 46389-001, 2016.

⁴⁷ Aka Kyaw Min Maw, "Stability and Expectations: Economic Reform and the NLD Government" in Malcom Cook and Daljit Singh (eds.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2018*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018, pp. 221-241.

⁴⁸ "2019 Investment Climate Statements: Burma", The US Department of State, available at: <https://www.state>.

have such opportunities and for those reasons, allowed Suu Kyi in power that she would connect the country with the western corporate world. But when she initiated any reform agenda from stratocracy to democracy, the military vehemently opposed such initiatives. Therefore, till 2019, she remained almost silent to initiate any process to change the constitution towards democratic principles. Her silence is explained by many as that, if she initiated any process, the military could topple her government. But on the eve of the scheduled election at the end of 2020, Suu Kyi initiated constitutional amendment bills in the parliament to show people her interest and commitment for democracy. When the NLD proposed law to make Suu Kyi as State Counsellor, military claimed the process as unconstitutional, but they did not challenge it in the constitutional court.⁴⁹ After the 2015 election, the military was not aggressive enough to prevent Suu Kyi from taking power, as bit might create tension nationally and internationally.⁵⁰ But the constitutional provisions are safeguarding the dominance of the military.⁵¹ On the other hand, Suu Kyi also did not raise issues which might create severe conflict between her government and the military.⁵² However, when a scheduled election is coming, the NLD felt an urge to move for constitutional reforms in the parliament.⁵³ By the process, the NLD wants to convince voters about their commitment for democratic reform.⁵⁴ Therefore, on 29 January 2019, the union parliament established the 45- member Joint Parliamentary Committee for Constitutional Amendment (JPCCA).⁵⁵ After following different layers of scrutiny, 14 amendment bills were submitted for secret voting in the parliament. Only two bills were passed, which has very little implications for the political structure of the country. But main issues which have political implications, were not passed in the parliament mainly due to opposition from the 25 per cent parliamentary members from the military.

At least eight proposed constitutional amendments were highly contested and due to the military's veto power, parliament could not pass those bills.⁵⁶ First, as of Article 436 of the constitution of 2008, any constitutional amendment needs 75 per

gov/reports/ 2019-investment-climate-statements/burma/, accessed on 13 May 2020.

⁴⁹ "Myanmar's Stalled Transition", *International Crisis Group*, 28 August 2018.

⁵⁰ Roger Lee Huang, "Myanmar's Way to Democracy and the Limits of 2015 Election", *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 2017.

⁵¹ Roger Lee Huang, "Re-thinking Myanmar's Political Regime: Military Rule in Myanmar and Implications for Current Reforms", *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, 2013.

⁵² Zoltan Barany, "Burma Suu Kyi's Missteps", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2018.

⁵³ Larry Jagan, "Myanmar's Ruling Party Prepared Controversial Changes to the Constitution", *South Asia Journal*, 23 June 2019.

⁵⁴ Marry Callahan and Myo Zaw, "Myanmar's 2020 Elections and Conflict Dynamics", *Peace Works No. 146*, United States Institutes of Peace (USIP), Washington, D.C., USA, April 2019.

⁵⁵ "Constitutional Amendment Bills in Myanmar, 27 January 2020", *International IDEA Interim Report*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Stockholm, Sweden, 13 March 2020.

⁵⁶ San Yamin Aung, "Flashpoints: Myanmar's Eight Most Hotly Contested Constitutional Amendment Proposals", *The Irrawaddy*, 07 March 2020.

cent vote from parliamentarians. In the present parliament, the percentage of different parliamentary groups is divided: NLD, 59 per cent, ethnic minorities, 11 per cent, pro-military USDP, 5 per cent and military, 25 per cent. Therefore, the military can veto in any amendment in the parliament. The NLD proposed that the constitution should be changed by two-third majority of elected members of parliament. The military has applied veto power against the bill. Second, the Article 4 of Myanmar constitution denotes, “the sovereign power of the union is derived from the citizens”. Based on the spirit, the NLD proposed to amend Article 6 (f) of the constitution, where constitution legalises the defence forces’ political leadership role. The NLD claimed that one single organisation ought not to permanently play a leadership role. Third, the NLD proposed gradual decrease of military’s share in the parliament from 25 per cent as in the Article 14 of the constitution. The amendment proposed that after 2020 election, it would be 15 per cent, after 2025, it would be reduced to 10 per cent and after 2030, decreased to 5 per cent. The Military vehemently rejected it and applied veto power in the parliament. Fourth, Article 40 (c) gives sovereign power to the Commander-in-Chief during the state of emergency that could lead to the disintegration of the country. The NLD claimed that the provision gave military the power of coup and proposed the president should take lead in such a time. The military rejected this claim and argued that giving president such power during emergency would not be a wise thing, as he does not know anything about the security apparatus of the country. Fifth, the NLD proposed for amending Article 6 (d) of the constitution, “flourishing of genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system”. They said that democracy did not need to be modified, hence rid from “disciplined” democracy was necessary. But the USDP claimed that the word “disciplined” was needed, because allowing “indisciplined” democracy would result in chaos and instability. Sixth, Article 59 (A) prevents Suu Kyi to be president of the country. The NLD proposed to change the provisions, but the USDP claimed that General Aung San proposed such a provision, while drafting the first constitution of the country in 1947. However, the military proposed to extent that limit of the ministers and regional chief minister also. Seventh, the NLD proposed for reform of military dominated national defence council. The council is composed of 11 members and 6 are from military. But military prevented this proposal. Eight, the military and the USDP were in favour of changing Article 261 where president can select the chief ministers of provinces. But the NLD denied doing it.

By taking amendment proposals in the parliaments, Suu Kyi tried to show people that she had strong desire to change the constitution, but due to military’s, influence could not do it. It may help her to protect popularity among the people. Nevertheless, critics argue that instead of fighting for moral democracy, she compromised with military to remain in power.⁵⁷ There are a number of issues

⁵⁷ Timothy Mclaughlin, “How Aung San Suu Kyi Lost Her Way”, *The Atlantic*, 28 September 2018.

where she could fight for promoting democracy in the country. She always promised for resolving ethnic minority issues, but after arrival to power, could not take any effective measure. Though she started the 21st Century Panglong initiative, severe disagreement among stakeholders stalled the process.⁵⁸ For resolving ethnic conflict in Rakhine State, Suu Kyi formed Annan Commission.⁵⁹ But after receiving reports from the commission, any progress is not visible.⁶⁰ Moreover, her continuous silence of the issues of Rohingya persecution questioned her commitment for democracy in the international arena. She is silent against the military's oppression and policy of satisfying radical Buddhists which questioned her commitment towards democratic change in the country.⁶¹ By compromising her longstanding fight for democracy, she now became silent about activities of the military and radical monks to secure her position in the power.⁶²

Her selection of chief ministers of ethnic minority areas, without following democratic process, undermined her iconic position and democratic principles.⁶³ She maintained a personalistic political order and did not develop any progress to determine successor, though she crossed 75 years of life.⁶⁴ A septuagenarian generation are controlling the power of the NLD and Suu Kyi took little initiative to connect the next generation to accommodate in the politics of her party.⁶⁵ A top-down approach of her administrative order does not go with the principles of democracy.⁶⁶ Though she could not progress democratic reforms due to the military's intervention, there were many scopes for her to make administration more democratic and decentralised.⁶⁷ Moreover, the economic stagnancy and lack of any coherent social

⁵⁸ Paode A, "Why Myanmar's New Peace Process is Failing", *The Diplomat*, 04 March 2017.

⁵⁹ The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State was formed on 23 August 2016, headed by the former Secretary General Kofi Annan. The Commission released final report on 24 August 2017.

⁶⁰ John Clifford Halt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rakhine, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives and Siege and Fear*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.

⁶¹ Ronan Lee, "A Politician, Not an Icon: Aung San Suu Kyi's Silence on Muslim Rohingya", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, 2014, pp. 321-333; Min Zin, "Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma: Why Now?", *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 2015, pp. 375-397 and Tamas Wells, "Democratic 'freedom' in Myanmar", *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 26, Issue 1, 2018, pp. 01-15.

⁶² Darwin Peng, "Understanding Aung San Suu Kyi's Silence on Rohingya", *Harvard Political Review*, 21 February 2012.

⁶³ Aung Aung, *Emerging Political Configurations in the Run-up to the 2020 Myanmar Elections*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2019, p. 35.

⁶⁴ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "From Peace Icon to Pariah: Aung San Suu Kyi's Fall from Grace", *The Guardian*, 23 November 2018.

⁶⁵ Jeremy Luedi, "Special Report: Is Myanmar's Honeymoon with Aung San Suu Kyi Over?", *Global Risk Insights*, 02 March 2017.

⁶⁶ Richard Roewer, "What the NLD's top-down Party Structure Means for Myanmar", op. cit. and Zoltan Barany, "Burma Suu Kyi's Missteps", op. cit.

⁶⁷ Andrea Passeri, "Myanmar: Aung San Suu Kyi's Disappointing Leadership", *Commentary*, Italian Institute for International Studies, Milan, Italy, 11 December 2019.

policy questioned her commitment for the marginalised people.⁶⁸ One of her political agenda was to secure political rights for all citizens. But her silence on issues of violence against people by the military questions her authority in the country. She could not ensure civilian control in the country and rule of law still remains illusion in Myanmar.⁶⁹ Therefore, her ideals of Buddhist values are questioned nowadays. However, since there is no alternative political leadership developed in the country, she still remains a hope for democratic activists. Nevertheless, she has already lost the confidence of ethnic minorities and is in race to grasp the support of radical Buddhists for winning the next general election.⁷⁰

The political upheavals in Myanmar made it clear that any political transition in the country would be difficult without effective reconciliation, at least among the three political forces: the military, the NLD and the ethnic minority groups. There are more than 31 Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) in Myanmar. The ethnic groups comprise with 30 to 40 per cent of the population and own 57 per cent of the land of Myanmar.⁷¹ Therefore, negotiation and accommodation with them are an unavoidable prerequisite for any kind of transformation there. Within such a milieu, the military wants to ensure their supremacy in the political space of Myanmar. Suu Kyi's political strategies are explained in two ways. Her followers argue that she has great will to establish democratic system in the country, but constitution and administrative control prevents her to make any change. They also claim that if she goes into direct confrontation with the military, the hope of transformation will be destroyed. At least, within existing framework, she is creating some space for democratic forces of the country. On the other hand, the dominant argument is that she excessively compromised with the military. If she could raise her voice, there might be some more space for democracy and rule of law in the country. Her unconditional silence on ethnic and minority issues diminished her iconic position among democratic forces nationally and internationally. Nevertheless, the realities suggest that Suu Kyi has to show more strength, if she really wants to achieve her vision of moral democracy. If she cannot make any change, she may remain a puppet of military rulers in the coming days also. The upcoming election of the country will determine her real desire in politics, and it is evident that the future of Myanmar history will be decided on how the military, the NLD, ethnic groups and radical monks persuade their policy to secure their position from ethical and realpolitik positions.

⁶⁸ Kristian Stokke, Roman Vakulchuk and Indra Øverland, "Myanmar: A Political Economy Analysis", Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, Norway, 2018.

⁶⁹ Catherine Renshaw, "Myanmar's Transition without Justice", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 38, Issue 3, pp. 381-403.

⁷⁰ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Myanmar's 2020 Elections: What Does the Future Hold", *The Diplomat*, 06 May 2020.

⁷¹ Jenny Franco, Hannah Twomey, KhuKhu Ju, Pietje Vervest and Tom Kramer, *The Meaning of Land in Myanmar*, The Transnational Institute (TNI), Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2015, p. 808.

5. Conclusion

The uninterrupted military rule from 1962 to 2010 established a deep-rooted stratocracy in Myanmar, where the military ensured its dominance in political and administrative institutions of the country. The process was started by General Ne Win and later, his successors institutionalised this stratocracy. Though the military allowed some institutional mechanisms to accommodate democratic forces, the ultimate control remains in the hands of military by constitutional and legal provisions. The stratocracy excluded almost all minorities and ethnic groups from the political space of the country. On the other hand, the rise of democratic forces after 1988, enabled Aung San Suu Kyi to start a movement against the stratocratic order. She understood the desire of the people of the country. Therefore, in addition to right based democracy, she promulgated an indigenous idea of democracy to accommodate Buddhist philosophies in the governance system of the country. Her idea of democracy is termed as 'moral democracy'.

At least for the past three decades, Myanmar's political order entangled between the two political ideologies: stratocracy and moral democracy. The military adopted all kinds of measures to suppress democratic movements of the country and democratic forces also sacrificed a lot to achieve their visions of moral democracy. Nevertheless, due to domestic realities and international pressure, the military declared a "road map" for democracy in 2003 and adopted a new constitution for the country in 2008. Under the new constitution, a national election was held in 2010 and a military backed government initiated a reconciliation process with the NLD. Though the NLD did not participate in the election of 2010 claiming that free and fair election was not possible under the constitution of 2008, new realities convinced the party to participate in the by-election of 2012 and national election of 2015, which facilitated Suu Kyi to be the State Counsellor of the country.

Suu Kyi's arrival in power was a significant event in the political history of Myanmar. The military echelons found it as an opportunity to invite foreign investment in the country for their corporate interests, claiming that a democratic process in the country had started. Creating economic opportunities and inviting foreign investment were the agenda of Suu Kyi also to facilitate economic development and generate jobs for the growing youth population of the country. Therefore, when she took initiatives for economic development and facilitating foreign investments, the military did not interfere. But when she was trying to change anything which might affect their interest, they applied veto power, which was preserved for them constitutionally. On the other hand, democratic forces were expecting that she would show some charismatic way-out to curtail the dominance of the stratocratic order and expedite democratisation process in the country. Ethnic groups and minorities

desired that she would take measures to protect and promote their rights. But during the early years of her tenure, she remained silent about any change of the constitution. In 2019, she initiated bills in the parliament for changing some provisions of the constitution, but the military opposed it. It is claimed that during the early days of her tenure, Suu Kyi did not raise the issues in the parliament due to her fear that it might create tussle with the military. But on the eve of the upcoming election in November 2020, she took those issues to convince people that she was very much committed for the democratic transition of the country. Nevertheless, her silence on the actions of military against religious and ethnic minorities raised question about her iconic identity of democratic movement. It is argued that she excessively compromised with the military to remain in power and followed a realpolitik policy.

Is Suu Kyi compromising with her ethos of moral democracy? A good number of her followers will say that if she vehemently opposed the military, she could have lost the opportunity to protect the space she has already created for democratic forces of the country. Her open confrontation with the military might weaken her support base in the country to the radical monks and to the people who want to see Bamar dominance in Myanmar. They believe that she will take right steps when time comes to ensure democratic transition of the country. On the contrary, to many, her delay on taking strong measures for democratisation process in the country and silence on the violence against minorities shows that she is following a realpolitik approach and the vision of transition of the country towards moral democracy under her leadership is fading. During the first tenure in power, she has made little success to transform the country from the stratocracy to moral democracy. But to many, she still remains the hope of democracy in Myanmar. Her popularity may be weakened to some people, but largely, she is still the most important symbol of democratic movement in the country and her large number of followers expect that she would fulfil her commitment in the days to come. She is still relevant to the military also. Because, she works as a signboard for them to deflect western criticism and they find it as an opportunity to be connected with western companies to fulfil their corporate interests. Therefore, results of the upcoming election will be crucial for all forces for protecting their image and upholding their political goals in the political space of Myanmar.