

BURMA



INVESTING IN DEMOCRACY AND
ACHIEVING LASTING PEACE



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BURMA: NOW IS THE TIME TO INVEST IN DEMOCRACY AND ACHIEVE LASTING PEACE

by Jieun Pyun and Chris Walsh

Our recommendations:

- THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD STAY ENGAGED AND NOT CUT AID
- THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHOULD HOLD BURMESE MILITARY ACCOUNTABLE AND SUPPORT THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT
- THE ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS SHOULD WORK WITH DEMOCRATIC ALLIES IN THE REGION
- THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR SHOULD INVEST IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Freedom is essential to lasting peace and prosperity, at home and around the world. As such, it is in the vital interest of the United States to support countries transitioning from dictatorship to democracy by helping foster democratic institutions and practices. Today, Burma (also known as Myanmar) is in the early stages of its own unique journey toward democracy and it needs U.S. support to succeed.

In 2015, after a half century of authoritarian rule, Burma's historic elections resulted in the peaceful transfer of power from the military-backed government to a new civilian government led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Three years later, Burma's civilian government has lost its sheen, and the military remains the country's dominant political actor, stagnating Burma's transition.

In 2017, military and nationalist groups launched brutal attacks against the Rohingya minority that continue today. Long subjected to discrimination and isolated in Burmese society, more than 700,000 members of this mostly Muslim ethnic group have been subjected to mass atrocities and forced into exile in neighboring Bangladesh. In the process, the Rohingya have lost their homes and lands where they have lived for generations. Aung San Suu Kyi, long viewed as the country's moral compass, has been widely criticized by the international community for her inaction.

Burmese authorities have denied the findings of multiple international investigations labeling the Rohingya crisis as ethnic cleansing. Internally, the government has clamped

down on media attempting to cover this issue. In mid-2018, two Burmese journalists working for Reuters were sentenced to seven-year prison terms for investigating the military's actions against the Rohingya. This reality reflects a constitutional problem in Burma as key government positions and 25 percent of seats in parliament are reserved for the military. This makes broader political change extremely challenging.

Democracy is difficult; nearly 250 years of U.S. history can attest to that fact — whether it is abolishing slavery, the passage of the 19th Amendment, or the necessity of the civil rights movement, American democracy is still a work in progress. While Burma's government deserves criticism, we must not turn our backs on the country or its people as their own democracy evolves and matures.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD STAY ENGAGED AND NOT CUT AID

We must continue supporting Burma's democratic transition. Foreign aid is a strong signal of our government's commitment to a country. In 2017, the United States provided more than \$110 million in aid to Burma. In response to the Rohingya crisis, the United States announced \$44 million in additional aid for vulnerable people in Burma and Bangladesh to meet the urgent needs of those affected by conflict in Rakhine State.

While providing this humanitarian support, the U.S. must continue dedicating foreign aid to the country's successful transition. That includes support for civil society and economic development. Burma is at a critical phase in its transition to democracy and needs U.S. support to realize a society with strong institutions that respect liberty and protect the rights of all people in the country.

The most concrete way the United States can support this objective is to ensure adequate foreign aid is devoted to democracy and good governance projects in Burma. Now is the time to invest.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHOULD HOLD BURMESE MILITARY ACCOUNTABLE AND SUPPORT THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT

The Burmese military is still powerful and plays a critical role in politics, including the ongoing peace process with ethnic minority groups (which remains the civilian government's top priority). The Burmese government possesses neither the will and moral leadership nor the authority to take action against the military and those responsible for atrocities in ethnic conflict areas.

U.S. leadership could rally allies to exert external pressure. One example would be leveraging the recent recommendations by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar to hold the military accountable. While this would likely be blocked by

permanent U.N. Security Council members China and Russia, it would send a strong message to the Burmese military that the world is watching.

The United States can lead other international efforts to hold military leaders accountable. [Targeted sanctions](#)¹ including travel bans and asset freezes of top military generals, coupled with more vocal leadership from the United States, should be continued.

While holding the military responsible, the U.S. must simultaneously support the civilian government and encourage efforts to strengthen democratic consolidation. In doing so, our message must be clear:

- If Burma is serious about moving toward a democratic society, it must stop victimizing its own minority groups and work on reconciliation between majority Buddhists and other ethnic minorities, including Rohingyas and Christians.
- When the Burmese government shows its commitment to protecting minority rights and ending the country's ongoing crises in a peaceful manner, Burma will gain wider international support and benefits in its transition.

THE ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS SHOULD WORK WITH DEMOCRATIC ALLIES IN THE REGION

We must work closely with democratic allies in the region such as Japan and South Korea. They are both major donors of foreign aid to Burma and their investments are increasing. Burma's powerful neighbor, China, has been increasing its economic and political influence in the country. China is the country's largest trading partner and is leading major development [projects](#)² throughout Burma. Bordering Kachin and Shan States where Burma's longstanding ethnic conflicts exist, they are playing a significant role in Burma's peace process as well. Given China's strong influence, it is important to leverage regional democracies to support Burma's democratization as Beijing does not respect democratic values.

Coordinating with our Asian allies, the United States can better serve as a counterweight to Chinese influence in Burma and help support the development of sustainable, democratic institutions that protect the rights of all people and foster long-term stability.

THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR SHOULD INVEST IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Developing the next generation of civilian leaders must be part of our policy toward Burma and strengthening its democracy. Our government engages Burma's young minds through various exchange and advocacy programs. These federal programs should collaborate with nongovernmental organizations doing similar work in Burma to increase impact by integrating their networks and sharing opportunities.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/us/politics/myanmar-sanctions-rohingya.html>

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2018/01/29/china-and-japans-new-great-game-intensifies-in-myanmar/#377282415ab2>

The George W. Bush Institute's Liberty and Leadership Program (LLP) is one such example. It is developing a new generation of principled, diverse leaders in Burma who are capable of delivering positive change in their society. The leaders work in fields like journalism, politics, and civil society and are open to new, innovative ideas. They view their country's diversity as a strength, and show remarkable optimism and resilience that inspires others.

As part of this program, LLP participants travel to Washington, D.C. to engage with stakeholders in Congress, the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development, and media. These interactions are mutually beneficial as participant stories and experiences from various sectors provide unique insights to U.S. actors on Burma's democratization. While in office, President George W. Bush was adept at placing human faces on the struggles for liberty around the globe. It remains an effective way of demonstrating the need for America's continued support for democracy around the world.

Burma's historic transition is a new beginning. Lasting peace is achievable, but its gains are not guaranteed. Burma should be a priority in the United States' broader Southeast Asia strategy. As China, North Korea, and other challenges in the region threaten stability, helping Burma consolidate its young democracy and offering our friendship to the Burmese people are important for U.S. economic and security interests.

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