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Democratization and Diplomacy in Myanmar: Understanding the Consequence of Democratic Transition on Foreign Relations

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Abstract

The changes following Myanmar's embarkation to democracy have taken a crucial role in shaping its foreign relations. Due to the democratization, Myanmar's external environment has greatly improved with rapprochement to major democratic power, such as U.S., and thus, Myanmar's diplomatic relations with many countries have normalized and expanded in the past few years. However, notwithstanding the external benefits Myanmar gains, it is also criticized on issues such as human rights and peace process where it has to confront external pressure and constraints. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate the effects and affects of Myanmar's democratization on its foreign relations by following one question: To what extent Myanmar's democratization has consequences on its external relations? Using an integrative approach with reliance on primary data, the paper suggests that there are two important elements of Myanmar's democratization, which determine its foreign relations. The first element is human rights, which draws the international attention to Myanmar's demonstration on its commitment to democracy. Concerning Myanmar's performance on human rights, U.S. reciprocates diplomatic normalization under "action-for-action" strategy; on the other hand, Myanmar encounters the diplomatic pressure on the ways it deals with Rohingya as well. The second element is peace, which appears to be the most important step of democratization and even state-building process. Political reconciliation between ethnic armed groups and central government is extremely essential because the civil wars at the borders are becoming a serious threat not only to the country but also to the regional stability and security due to the huge flow of refugees and damages to the immediate neighbors. Hence, these two elements of democratization are seen as challenges to Myanmar's establishment of relations with other democratic countries. Finally, the paper contributes the perception of Myanmar's foreign relations based on two key elements of democratization, which are Myanmar's performance on improving human rights and peace process for national reconciliation.

Keywords: *Myanmar, democratization, human rights, peace, diplomacy, foreign relations*

1. Introduction

The changes following Myanmar's embarkation to democracy have taken a crucial role in shaping its foreign relations. Due to the democratization, Myanmar's external environment has greatly improved with rapprochement to major democratic power, such as U.S., and thus, Myanmar's diplomatic relations with many countries have normalized and expanded in the past few years. However, notwithstanding the external benefits Myanmar gains, it is also criticized on issues such as human rights and peace process where it has to confront external pressure and constraints.

The orientation of Myanmar's foreign policy since 2011 has been determined by its domestic political conditions and challenges that are mainly linked to its democratization. The ways Myanmar government frames the foreign policy and manages the external relations are based on domestic changes. Thus, the concentration on the establishments of new diplomacy is based on complex and difficult domestic conditions, which initially claimed as "inward-looking" foreign policy, since Myanmar has to occupy its foreign policy to satisfy the domestic demands such human rights, well-being of the people, good governance, and peace, to name but a few.

Regarding Myanmar's foreign relations are affected by its democratization, this paper delves into one question: to what extent Myanmar's democratization has consequences on its external relations? The paper is divided into three parts between introduction and conclusion. The first part, on the one hand, indicates Myanmar's changing domestic politics, which highlights the challenges and instabilities of Myanmar's democratization such as regime change, human rights, and peace. On the other hand, the second part identifies the features of Myanmar's diplomacy and its foreign policy approaches in the international system. Understanding both factors support the main thesis statement of the paper by linking Myanmar's domestic politics and foreign policy.

2. Challenges for Myanmar's Democratization

Democratization has brought both opportunities and challenges in Myanmar's new economic and political landscapes. Following the third wave of democratization, which is also commonly known as post-authoritarian transition in third world countries, there are three stages divided: liberalization, democratization and democratic consolidation.¹ At the stage of liberalization, there are reforms that focus on institutional development, political freedom and economic reforms. Previous president, U Thein Sein, is portrayed as "reform icon" for the credits of his effort to the series of reforms such as releasing political prisoners and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, establishing human right commission groups, favoring the will of people and holding election. After this stage, the process of democratization moves forward to the second stage, democratization. At this stage, a whole new government is elected and the democratic procedures are implemented more. This is evident when NLD won 77% of seats in 2015 elections following with democratic implementations such as, focusing peace, assigning new ministers and arranging the congress. Finally, the last stage, which Myanmar has not reached yet, is consolidating Myanmar's democracy, where the democratic institution and liberal norms become a normal and integral part of political life.

As democratization theorists Linz and Stepan state that democratization that starts with the end of authoritarian rule but the executive, legislative, judicial powers are still influenced by the previous regime is insufficient. Hence, a sufficient democratic transition starts with free and fair national elections where there is no full constraints from previous regime on the participation of other parties and voters.² In this regard, a light shed on the future of Myanmar's sufficient democratic transition when NLD won the election as the influence of military starting to erode gradually.

¹Three stages of democratization outlined by Huntington. See Samuel Huntington, *"The Third Wave of Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century"*, Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991; 9.

² Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *"Towards Consolidated Democracies,"* Journal of Democracy, 1996; 14.

However, Myanmar has to face three challenges as it embraces the sufficient democratic transition: Regime change, human rights issues and peace.

Firstly, a changing regime is a significant challenge for civilian government because of not only old issues such as decades-long civil wars, but also new issues like developing state institutions. Despite the new players starting to emerge and take different roles in Myanmar politics, the system – the state institution and the “locked in” position of military³ – still has the impact on the new players even in the new political scene. Along with the first step toward the sufficient democratization, for instance, new state institutions have to be developed and operate better than the old ones. These new state institutions have very low capacities, as they are not fully mature and developed which results the incompetent of the administrations when it comes to proceeding information, making decisions and implementing new policies and dealing with public demands. Although NLD is taking a leading role in this new political scene, its performances are thwarted by the lack of institutional capacity as it generates the second and third challenge of Myanmar’s democratization.

The second, human rights issues, challenge also plays a crucial role in Myanmar’s transition as the international community recommends Myanmar to approach human rights based democracy. Myanmar is currently encountering broad and complex human rights issues such as minority rights, especially the case of Rohingya. As a country that is pressured to prioritize the value of democracy in order to demonstrate its commitment to democratization, Myanmar is often criticized by both international organizations and major democratic powers. A report of Human Rights High Commissioner provides the evidence

³ According to the 2008 constitution, the military has the right to reserve 25% of seats in parliament, the right to manage its own affairs, and the right to take control over security affairs such as ministers for defense, home affairs and border areas. See more information at Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Article 109, 141, 20; and Marco Bunte, *“Burma’s Transition to Quasi Military Rule: From Rulers to Guardians?”*, *Armed Forces and Society*, 2014; 742-764

that Myanmar's 2008 constitution "gives overly broad power to the Government to revoke citizenship without due protection" and "access to justice for victims of human rights violations and abuses has, in the meantime, been sorely lacking."⁴ United Nations Secretary Ban Ki-moon urged Myanmar's new civilian government to pay "full respect" for human rights, to promote human rights and to develop human rights investigation."⁵ Moreover, the U.S. also encourages Myanmar to prioritize human right issues. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry advised Myanmar to focus on the human rights issues concerning Rohingya.⁶

Finally, the decades-long ethnic armed conflicts play a major role in Myanmar's democratization by constraining the transition with the political instabilities. Myanmar is confronting the mass ethnic diversity for decades. The conflicts raise the tensions between armed ethnic groups and military, result in civil wars and political instabilities, which pose threats to its democratization. Furthermore, the ethnic conflicts are also the threats to regional stability by creating a significant flow of refugees and damages to border trades. Due to these ethnic conflicts, Myanmar is seeking security and peace. Without a durable peace, the future of Myanmar's democratization is uncertain because of the possibility of Military's actions to take over power again. As NLD government started to focus on peace, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi called for the 21st century Panglong conference on 27th April 2016, by stating that "Myanmar is thirsty of peace and it is daily essential".⁷ On 31st August 2016, a five-day long conference was started with over 10000 attendees. The conference received

⁴ Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner, "*Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar*", Human Rights Council 28 June 2016.

⁵ "*UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon Speaks on Regional and Global Challenges*," Singapore Management University, 31 August 2016. <https://www.smu.edu.sg/news/2016/08/31/un-secretary-general-ban-ki-moon-speaks-global-and-regional-challenges> (Accessed on 21 September, 2016)

⁶ "Joint Press Availability With Burmese Minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi" *U.S. Department of State*. Available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/05/257583.htm> (Accessed on 21 September, 2016)

⁷ Elven Media Group, "*Suu Kyi Demands Urgent Peace*," 28th April, 2016 <http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/suu-kyi-demands-urgent-peace-talks> (Accessed on 23rd September 2016)

attention from international community as UN secretary Ban Ki-Moon attended.⁸ As national reconciliation is the most important factor in Myanmar's politics, Myanmar's actions on seeking peace and security would have a positive impact on not only Myanmar's democratization but also regional stability.

Challenges for Myanmar's democratization appear to be deep-rooted issues in both civil society and country's politics. The challenging environment for the new government, the human rights violations all over the country and the civil wars limit Myanmar's democratic transition.

3. Diplomacy of Myanmar: Features and Practical Approaches

The challenges of Myanmar's democratization represent the country as failed, weak, and vulnerable state due to its weak economic and unstable political condition. Hence, Myanmar pursues identical diplomacy feature are more likely to submissive as what most weak states pursue in the international system. There are five features of diplomacy that Myanmar tends to practice in its changing external environment: people-to-people diplomacy, steady diplomacy, integrative diplomacy, cooperative diplomacy, and flexible diplomacy.

People-to-people diplomacy represents the interactions at civil society level "such as: dialogue groups, educational projects, scientific collaborations, multinational workshops, and partnership."⁹ Hence, it allows Myanmar to liberalize the people and seeking ties at civil societal level.

Steady diplomacy focuses on repairing bilateral relations that were damaged in the past as well as on strengthening the existing relations in the present. As maintaining bilateral

⁸ The Irrawaddy News, "21st Century Panglong Conference Kicks off in Naypyidaw," 31st August, 2016 <http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/21st-century-panglong-conference-kicks-off-in-naypyidaw.html> (Accessed on 23rd September 2016)

⁹ Sapir Handleman, "The Mind of Peace Experiment: A laboratory for People-to-people Diplomacy," Israel Affairs, Volume 18, Issue 1, January 2012; 1-11.

ties with selective countries is traditional diplomacy, Myanmar also concentrates extending bilateral relations with more countries. Steady diplomacy concentrates on stabilization of existing bilateral ties that Myanmar has with other countries. Such feature of diplomacy is important when Myanmar has to repair its relations with China.

Integrative diplomacy is based on the contexts and location, rules and norms, communication patterns and actors and roles.¹⁰ Regional integration is one of the most important for Myanmar's foreign policy since it creates opportunities for economic liberalization and multilateral cooperation. Thus integrative diplomacy accounts for Myanmar's effort to participate in regional affairs and merges itself with the states in the region as an association. Needless to say, ASEAN is the obvious example to the emphasis of Myanmar's integrative diplomacy.

Cooperative diplomacy, as well as integrative diplomacy, defines Myanmar's actively engaging foreign policy approaches. After decades of isolation, Myanmar's openness creates opportunities whereby Myanmar takes a role in its bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Myanmar cooperates with other countries in factors such as education, human rights, businesses, and so on.

Flexible diplomacy comprised with threefold strategy when Myanmar approaches to maintain the existing ties, establish new ties and preserving the inactive ties. This feature enables Myanmar to make friends with everyone in order to avoid the diplomatic risk at the minimum rate. Maintaining ties in this threefold strategy requires Myanmar not to implement a straightforward or extreme policy that only favor selective major powers. In other words, flexible diplomacy highlights Myanmar's pursuit of neutral position and impartial in participating world affair, but it portrays itself as "Nobody's enemy, but everyone's friends".

¹⁰ Brian Hocking, *Future for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in 21st Century*, Netherland Institute of International Relations, Report No.1, October 2012.

The five features of diplomacy that are explained above appear to be Myanmar's diplomatic features because the government has different approaches based on these diplomatic features. They are:

- a. Seeking foreign aid and economic assistance
- b. Employing economic and diplomatic foreign policy
- c. Focusing on strategic cooperation and actively engages with international organization
- d. Choosing neutral position
- e. Balancing, managing and expanding relations
- f. Acting in passive and reactive mode
- g. Demonstrating its commitment to democratization.

Due to the complexity and broad nature of explaining these approaches, they are categorized in two set of strategies, namely: hedging and engagement strategies.

The first set of strategy is hedging, which is defined as “betting on both sides”¹¹ and “wait and see”¹² strategy. Generally, it “refers to taking action to ensure against undesirable outcomes, usually by betting on multiple alternative positions.”¹³ Moreover, taking action to postpone the response until the uncertain factors dissolve would have the least risk for the country as well. Due to the uncertainty in the international arena, a weak state like Myanmar has various types of external threats, pressures and influence from the diverse external powers. Implementing the policies that favor only one major power, but not the other, would bring risks. Hence, cultivating a middle position presumably exempt Myanmar from

¹¹ Mingjiang Li, Kalyan M. Kemburi, “*China's Power and Asian Security*”, Routledge, 2014; 72.

¹² Shao Binhong, “*The World in 2020 According to China: Chinese Foreign Policy Elites Discuss emerging trends in international politics*” Boston, 2014; 165

¹³ Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies*, Policy Studies Monograph, No. 16, Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2005; 2

potential damage by straightforward and extreme policies. This allows Myanmar, on the one hand, to improve bilateral ties with both major powers for its benefits, and on the other hand, also make it well situated for unfavorable circumstances. In Myanmar's changing external environment, Myanmar's diplomatic behavior focuses on diversifying foreign relations by integrating with ASEAN, welcoming foreign direct investment, normalizing relations with U.S. and E.U., reconsolidating its ties with India and Japan. The flexible diplomacy is practiced in this approach. Myanmar's management of its foreign relations through flexible diplomacy permits more options for the strategy.

The second set of strategies that defines Myanmar's foreign policy behavior is "engagement". This is a common strategy among ASEAN member states when they employ to deal with the rise of China. The "engagement" is a set of strategies that contains ASEAN motivating China to participate in regional integration and socialization, encouraging China to take a constructive responsible as a regional power.¹⁴ There are two purposes of this strategy: developing a sense of partnership between ASEAN and China; and socializing China into the "ASEAN way".¹⁵ Myanmar shares a long border with China and appears as the bridge that connects China and ASEAN according to its geopolitics significance. Myanmar's pursuit of regional integration and approach the "engagement" strategy towards China together with ASEAN would have two advantages in term of economic and security. Firstly, Myanmar seeks to develop closer economic ties with ASEAN would reduce economic reliance on China, on the other hand, however, Myanmar looks forward to gain mutual benefits from China-southeast Asia trade, which is growing at least 25 percent per year.¹⁶ As Myanmar is transforming into a democratic country, it implements a more liberal economic policies and participate as a fully integrated member of ASEAN to engage with

¹⁴ Goh, "*Meeting the China Challenge*", 2005. 36

¹⁵ Denny Roy, "*Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning*", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 27, No. 2, 2005; 305-322

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 311.

China in order to foster regional economy. As for the security, Myanmar tends to participate in regional security and stability, and focuses on integration with ASEAN, so it can counterweight China's strategic weight. The purpose of the engagement approach focuses on regionalism and constructive relations through cooperation in both regional and global.¹⁷ The embrace to regionalism would enhance Myanmar's economic and security by strengthening constructive relations in the region.¹⁸ In this approach, cooperative diplomacy and integrative diplomacy are practice as Myanmar engages non-state actors and state actors based on constructive relationship.

4. Understanding the Consequence of Democratic Transition on Diplomacy

Following the second stage of Myanmar's democratization, the new government has to confront several challenges from transition such as regime change, human rights issues and peace process. Myanmar's democratization has significant influence on its diplomatic approaches. Considering Myanmar as a transforming state that tends to complete objectives of democratization, Myanmar needs a definite foreign assistance and aids. With that being said, Myanmar sees international arena as the place where it could access the opportunities, cooperation and security with the active participation in international community. Certainly, Myanmar aims to establish new relations for new opportunities and assistants, takes the role in bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and posits itself in regional integration projects with the purpose of smoothening its democratization.

Following Myanmar's diplomatic practical approaches that are based on two sets of strategies, regime change and human right issues have influence on why Myanmar prefers

¹⁷MaungAungMyoe, *"Regionalism in Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Past, Present and Future,"* Asia Research Institute. September 2006; 3.

¹⁸ Helen James, *"Myanmar's International Relations Strategy: The Search for Security,"* Contemporary Southeast Asia, Vol. 26, No. 3, December 2004; 530-553.

hedging strategies. As explained in the previous section, hedging includes choosing neutral position and postponing foreign policy decision, some of Myanmar's diplomatic approaches appear to be fit into hedging strategies when it has to deal with major powers.

Myanmar is often criticized for its human rights issues and reform process by the democratic major power, especially the U.S. Needless to say, the U.S. is the major power that promotes democracy and human rights in Asia, Myanmar's flaws in promoting them is criticized and the government is pressured by the U.S regarding these issues. Myanmar is mainly pressured to have a solution with its human rights issues, particularly Rohingya. At the news conference between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the Secretary urged her to focus on Rohingya issues. As a respond, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi asked for "space" and "support" of the U.S. towards the solution.¹⁹ In this sense, Myanmar tended to pursue hedging approaches as it distant itself from the U.S by asking space but at the same time, it is careful not too far away. In this neutral scenario, it shows that Myanmar takes time to make decisions for both foreign and domestic policy. Hence, Myanmar has low capacity of government administration as the new state institutions are still developing during the period of regime change. The new government administration is lack of experience and expertise in implementing the procedures of administration, which means it, has very low capacity of ministry departments and the administrative procedures. Accordingly, the new government is lack of information and capacity when it has to deal with the internal demands and external pressure. Therefore, it has to adopt hedging approaches as it postpone on making decision. In sum, the new and undeveloped state institution results the government's inability to responds the pressures, which is why Myanmar's diplomatic approaches favor hedging strategies in order to hedge the pressure of the U.S and find its own space to handle its own affairs.

¹⁹ "Joint Press Availability With Burmese Minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi" *U.S. Department of State*. Available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/05/257583.htm> (Accessed on June 19, 2016)

Likewise, the second set of strategies is also resulted from Myanmar's transition challenges. All of the features of diplomacy contain in engagement approaches. As engagement approaches focus on establishing constructive relations, regional integration, bilateral and multilateral cooperation, active foreign policy that engages with the international community, all five of feature of diplomacy contain in this second set of strategies. To link this type of diplomatic approach and democratization is to understand "inward-looking" foreign policy, which the government aims to seek outside opportunities in order to make inside conditions better. Since NLD formed a new government, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was assigned as state counselor, Myanmar has been focus on cooperation and encouraging other major powers to support Myanmar's democratization in many ways.

Following Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's visits to China proves that Myanmar's diplomatic approaches in engagement strategies can be highlighted when Myanmar attempts to engage China in the sense of constructive ties regarding regional stability and security Myanmar's purpose engaging China is to maintain regional stability by handling border security between the two countries. The ethnic conflicts and civil wars going on along the China-Myanmar border have always been a threat to the trade, energy transportation and even the lives of Chinese people who live close to the war zones. Encouraging China to take a constructive role when it comes the regional stability, Myanmar seeks China's support on its peace process.²⁰

Moreover, her meeting with the U.S President Obama is also significant for explaining its engaging diplomatic approaches. The two countries "commit to continued cooperation in addressing remaining challenges, such as strengthening the rule of law, promoting respect for human rights, countering trafficking in persons, combatting corruption, and advancing anti-money laundering efforts and counter-narcotics

²⁰ "Joint Press Release Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar" Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1390889.shtml (Accessed on 31st August 2016)

activities.”²¹ In terms of economic bilateral ties, the U.S lifted more economic sanctions and both countries aim to enhance economic engagement. In addition, they both would expend people-to-people tie in educational factors.²²

Not only Myanmar attempts to approach to major powers with engagement strategies, Myanmar also engages ASEAN to strengthen the constructive ties. The main reason ASEAN is important for Myanmar is regional economic integration. There will be large-scale infrastructure projects such as cross-border highways and rail lines in the Mekong River region, which includes Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia along with Myanmar and Laos.²³

Given the diplomatic approaches of Myanmar’s new government, they appear to be actively engaging to major powers, region and non-state actors as well. This indicates Myanmar’s engagement approach towards the international community for the purpose of smoothening democratization in Myanmar.

Overall, Myanmar’s diplomacy and the practical approaches differ according to its internal situation. From this perspective, Myanmar’s approaches can be explained when it manages and responses the domestic political instabilities that are generated from democratization. An unstable state like Myanmar has no capability to expand its national interests beyond the state, such as promoting its political value in other countries. Precisely, Myanmar’s national interests are limited to its domestic needs; thus its foreign policy objectives, orientation and behavior are shaped by those needs.

²¹ “President Obama and Aung San Suu Kyi Celebrate Progress in Burma,” The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2016/09/15/president-obama-and-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-celebrate-burmese-progress> (Accessed on 26th September 2016)

²² *ibid.*

²³ Nikkei Asian Review, “Myanmar’s Leaders Target ASEAN Ties with First Foreign Trip” 7th May 2016. <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Myanmar-s-leaders-target-ASEAN-ties-with-first-foreign-trip> (Accessed on 26th September 2016)

5. Conclusion

The paper has argued that Myanmar's diplomacy is forged by the democratization. The internal challenges appear to be the sources of explaining the diplomatic approaches and features. The democratic transition generates demands. The expectation from the people, coupled with from the international community on the NLD government is high, which means the demands are even more challenging for the new government. Myanmar's democratization needs massive support, the new state institution needs to be developed further, human rights need to be promoted, a more durable peace needs to be concreted, the influence of military should be adjusted gradually and social and economic development should be taken into account. Based on these challenging tasks of democratization, Myanmar's diplomatic approaches differ time to time. Eventually, hedging and engagement approaches are the most suitable approaches as of now, since they generate more foreign policy and strategic options and enhance Myanmar's bargaining position. Diplomatic features such as flexible diplomacy, cooperative diplomacy, and integrative diplomacy are the most convenient features during the time of transition. As Myanmar is opening up and carrying out the initiating challenging tasks, diversifying relations with flexible diplomacy; engaging multilateral cooperation; and establishing constructive relationships are important for the challenges.

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