



Language

Burma gained independence from the British immediately after the Second World War, and after a period of civilian government has been subjected to a series of military regimes. There has been continuing guerrilla warfare by national minorities in Burma since independence, and protests by students, monks, farmers and workers occurred at various stages in the 1960s and 1970s, but opposition was largely driven underground and large open protests were very dangerous (see Boudreau, [Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia \[1\]](#) (E. II.2.a. [The Long Struggle to Topple Suharto 1988-1998 \[2\]](#)), below – pp. 84-102 ‘Protest in Socialist Burma’.) But in 1988 there was mass unarmed resistance to military dictatorship, which met with brutal repression. Ever since the peaceful opposition has been led and symbolized by Aung San Suu Kyi (daughter of the leader of Burma’s [eventually] armed struggle for independence), who (with qualifications) endorses a Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. Her party, the National League for Democracy, was elected by a clear majority in elections held in 1990, despite harassment by the military, but the junta then refused to recognize the results, and placed Suu Kyi under house arrest. She remained under house arrest for long periods – and when released she tested the regime’s willingness for her to contact the people, and soon lost her liberty again.

A new wave of popular protests, sparked by severe economic problems for ordinary people and led by Buddhist monks, occurred in 2007. This movement was again severely crushed, but the regime did concede a new constitution and the holding of elections, which took place in 2010. Suu Kyi and her party boycotted the elections because she was unable to contest them – but some opposition candidates did stand. Since then there have been signs that the regime now headed by President Thein Sein might be willing to contemplate some reforms – perhaps to escape economic sanctions and reduce its reliance on China. A number of political prisoners were freed, Suu Kyi herself was also released from house arrest in 2010 and allowed to stand in parliamentary by-elections in April 2012, when she and members of her Party (the NLD) won 143 out of the 145 seats up for election. Although the regime still holds a bloc of seats in the Parliament, which in any case has limited powers, this has been seen as a significant move towards normalization and genuine civilian government.

After the military crackdown and bypassing of the 1990 election, Suu Kyi called for an economic and tourist boycott of Burma (officially Myanmar), and there was an international campaign in support of democracy in Burma. North American students in the 1990s spearheaded a campaign for disinvestment, persuading a significant number of major corporations to withdraw by using consumer boycotts and other forms of protest. Continuing boycott campaigns in the West also encouraged companies attracted to Burma by low wages, to pull out. Some individuals also entered Burma to demonstrate and hand out leaflets. (On this transnational campaign see, [No Logo \[3\]](#) London, Flamingo, , 2000, pp. 512, pp. 402-4 and pp. 410-16). Suu Kyi maintained her call for an international boycott until 2010 – despite divisions within the Burmese diaspora about this policy. But after her release in 2010 decided in the light of signs of political change to call instead for qualified international engagement with Burma, a message which other governments have responded to, particularly since the 2012 by-elections.

The Burmese military appear to have been influenced by the scale of Western economic boycotts, diplomatic isolation and a desire to avoid over-dependence on China, to move forward a degree of liberalisation. Rigged elections in 2010 (the first since the military nullified the victory of the NDL in 1990) resulted in a nominally civilian government under the military approved Union Solidarity and Development Party. The new government began to release some political prisoners, allowed the formation of trade unions, and promoted ceasefires with some of the ethnic minorities engaged in armed resistance. The 2012 by-elections to parliament allowed Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the NLD party to win 43 out of 44 seats, and Western governments and the EU engaged in negotiations with the regime. Human rights observers highlighted continuing forms of repression, and the 2008 Constitution ensured that not only are quarter of parliamentary deputies members of the armed forces, but that the Head of the Army appoints key cabinet posts such as Defence, the Interior, Border Control and the Police. But the military accepted the results of the general election in November 2015, which gave a landslide victory to the NLD. Suu Kyi is constitutionally debarred from Presidency because she married a foreigner, but vowed she would exercise *de facto* power and seek to amend the Constitution. The new NLD parliament met on 1 February 2016 and a new government took over in March 2016.

The election also, however, reflected the nationalistic religious intolerance fostered by the Ma Ba Tha movement. No Muslims were elected to parliament (the NLD failed to run any Muslim candidates) and the persecuted Muslim Rohingya in Western Rakhine state (attacked in race riots in 2012) were treated as non-citizens and denied the



vote. Suu Kyi has been criticized for failing to defend the rights of the Rohingya and Muslims more generally although she suggested a NLD government would show tolerance. However, evidence of this in 2016 and 2017 has been poor.

The position of the mainly Muslim population of Rohingya in Burma's Rakhine state became catastrophic after the end of August 2017. Following decades of discrimination and persecution, including being denied citizenship under the 1982 Myanmar Nationality Act, Rohingya militants began to stage attacks against the authorities in 2016-17, and launched concerted attacks on security targets in late August. In response, the Burmese military undertook a campaign of systematic destruction, rape and murder of local villagers (described by the UN Human Rights Commissioner as ethnic cleansing), which drove out over 650,000 Rohingya by the end of the year, mostly into Bangladesh. Under the Burmese constitution, Aung San Suu Kyi and the civilian government have no control over the actions of the security forces, but she has been bitterly criticised for her failure to condemn the military actions publicly.

Sources on post-2010 developments are still limited. But see:

- Popham, [The Lady and the Generals: Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Struggle for Freedom](#) [4] (E. II.1. [Burma/Myanmar: Resisting Military Dictatorship](#) [5])

See also the updated version of Benedict Rogers, *Burma* (no. 589), published in paperback in 2015, which provides a historical overview including good coverage of the ethnic minorities and also explains recent developments, with a nuanced assessment of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Popham, Peter, [The Lady and the Generals: Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Struggle for Freedom](#) [4], London, Rider, 2017, pp. 480

This follows-up to his earlier book *The Lady and the Peacock* and covers the 2015 landslide election and the expressions of intolerance against minorities, especially the Muslim Rohingya.

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[2] <https://civilresistance.info/section/e-resisting-oppressive-dictatorial-military-or-authoritarian-rule/e-ii-asia-and-4>

[3] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2000/no-logo>

[4] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2017/lady-and-generals-aung-san-suu-kyi-and-burmas-struggle-freedom>

[5] <https://civilresistance.info/section/e-resisting-oppressive-dictatorial-military-or-authoritarian-rule/e-ii-asia-and-0>