

# Myanmar

The dramatic reforms taken place in Myanmar in recent years have transformed this long isolated country into a more open society, one actively seeking to re-engage with the region and the world. Competitive elections, a lively parliament, a more vibrant media, and a growing civil society have allowed for debates on a range of issues concerning the nature of the state and the development agenda that were previously not possible. The landslide electoral victory of the opposition National League of Democracy under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership in November 2015 has underscored further the potential to deepen the democratic transition.



In support of the extraordinary transition underway in Myanmar, The Asia Foundation re-established a resident country office in 2013 after an absence of more than 50 years. The Foundation's programs work with partners in government, the private sector, and civil society to build the country's capacity for regional and global integration, strengthen the core institutions and processes of democratic governance at national and local levels, support initiatives for inclusive economic development, promote women's empowerment; and increase public access to information through policy research and dissemination, and through our Books for Asia program which has been in operation in Myanmar since 2007.

## **SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION**

Regional and global integration are fundamental to Myanmar's successful transition to a more open and dynamic society. To this end, The Asia Foundation supported the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) to enhance its knowledge of critical issues in international relations, particularly related to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the country became the chair of the regional body in 2014. The Foundation organized a series of training seminars in collaboration with MoFA

on a range of topics from India's Look East policy to preventive diplomacy to ASEAN economic cooperation. The Foundation organized a course on basic research methodology for MoFA staff in 2013, and assisted MoFA to establish a library to provide updated information and resources for improved research capacity in the Ministry.

In addition, the Foundation has been providing ongoing support to MoFA officials to attend George Washington University's summer training program on U.S. foreign policymaking process since 2013. Whenever possible, the Foundation also supports experts from Myanmar to participate in international and regional seminars and forums, such as the "Law and Best Practices on Maritime Boundary Delimitation" workshop in Jakarta in 2015 and the "Anti-Piracy Cooperation in Southeast Asia" workshop in Hanoi in 2016.

## **STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE**

**Parliament and Legislative Strengthening:** Development of well-functioning parliamentary processes is central to Myanmar's democratic reform. In 2014 the Foundation organized a study tour for an eight-member delegation from the Union Parliament and Parliament's Office to South Korea's National Assembly, with a particular focus



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on budgeting oversight and enabling public participation in the legislative process. The Foundation also provided special book collections to the Parliament's three libraries. Given the lack of knowledge and technical skill about legislative drafting, in 2015 the Foundation supported four Myanmar participants from Parliament, the Office of the Union Attorney General, and from civil society to attend a two-week training course on legislative drafting at Tulane University, supplemented by a study tour in Washington DC focusing on regulatory impact assessment and public participation in the lawmaking process in various forms.

**Transparent and Accountable Governance:** Given the decades of authoritarian military rule, the transformation of the public sector is key to the country's democratic transition and economic development. The Foundation has worked to support public sector reform through new research to improve the public's understanding of how the Myanmar state is currently structured, which resulted in a major report: *Conceptualizing Public Sector Reform in Myanmar*. In 2015, the Foundation launched new programs to improve fiscal transparency, a pressing need considering the widespread lack of publicly available budget data in Myanmar. These efforts involve providing trainings to government officials, elected representatives, and civil society on public financial management as well as supporting the public dissemination of budget data.

**Decentralization and Local Governance:** Decentralization and center-local relations as mandated by the 2008 Constitution is a critical issue for both the country's stability and its long-term development. Decentralization is also a highly challenging process given the history of highly centralized governance, subnational conflicts, and ongoing disputes over the constitution in Myanmar.

Given this context, The Asia Foundation and the Myanmar Development Resource Institute's Centre for Social and Economic Development (MDRI-CESD) jointly carried out an extended research effort between 2013 and 2015 to map the state of subnational government in Myanmar to contribute to the policy discussions of government, development partners, and civil society organizations on broader governance, peace, and decentralization issues. The first-ever comprehensive report on State and Region Governments in Myanmar was launched in September 2013, followed by an Asia Foundation-CESD series of discussion papers in 2014 and 2015 focusing on key issues related to decentralization and subnational governance, including: fiscal decentralization, women's political participation, the central role of the General Administration Department, the functions of Development Affairs Organizations (better known as municipal offices), municipal governance, state and region public



finances, and the management of local development funds. All of these research reports can be accessed on the Foundation's website at [www.asiafoundation.org](http://www.asiafoundation.org).

In addition, informed by the empirical data from the research outlined above, the Foundation is providing direct support to build the capacity of state and region governments to implement necessary changes in the reform process and for further decentralization. In 2014, the Foundation, together with MDRI-CESD and VNG International, provided basic training on public financial management (PFM) to relevant officials and members of state and region parliaments in Mon and Shan states and in Tanintharyi and Ayeyarwady regions. In June 2015, the Foundation launched a multi-year subnational governance program aimed at supporting state and region governments, including municipal offices, to improve their planning and budgeting processes, expand their public engagement strategies, implement necessary legal reforms, and strengthen revenue collection and management. The Foundation collaborated with the Renaissance Institute in 2016 to provide new state and region MPs with introductory training on key aspects of Myanmar's subnational governance systems and processes, and PFM trainings will be extended to all 14 states and regions over 2016.

**Elections:** Myanmar held its national parliamentary and subnational elections in 2015. While national elections are a major political event in any country, these elections hold exceptional significance in Myanmar given the recent democratic transition. To inform efforts by both government and civil society to contribute to effective electoral processes as well as the long-term goal of building a strong democratic state, the Foundation conducted a national survey of civic knowledge and values in 2014. The survey found that in the early stages of Myanmar's transition to democracy,



cautious public optimism is tempered by a variety of challenges, including limited public knowledge of government institutions and their functions, limited understanding of democratic principles, as well as deep political polarization. Informed by the civic survey data, the Foundation worked closely with the Union Election Commission, Myanmar CSOs, and the app developer community in Myanmar to generate the *Mae Pay Soh* (Let's Vote) initiative, a voter education effort through mobile and web apps for the 2015 elections. Digitized candidate information, political parties, incumbent performance, and voter's frequently asked questions along with other official election information were provided. Almost 12 million requests for information to the Mae Pay Soh database were recorded before election day.

### SUPPORTING THE PEACE PROCESS

Myanmar's peace process has gained momentum following the signing of the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015 and the beginning of the resultant Political Dialogue in January 2016. The Asia Foundation has been supporting the peace process through documenting and analyzing issues of critical importance to enabling stability on the ground as well as more meaningful negotiations. In particular, the Foundation has focused on improving understandings of how ethnic armed organizations administer territory as well as provide basic social services, resulting in two major reports: *Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar and Ethnic Conflict and Social Services in Myanmar's Contested Regions*. Over 2016, the Foundation is conducting more detailed research into social service provision in contested areas, especially regarding health and education. The research findings will be used to help further discussions within and among government, civil society, and development partners around "convergence," namely how government social service systems and those of ethnic armed organizations involved in the peace process can interact or at least accommodate one another during the peace process.

### SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The success of Myanmar's reform process will be guided by the extent to which economic growth can be delivered to address both poverty and competitiveness that would generate sustainable and inclusive development. Attracting much needed foreign direct investment is critical, but providing a conducive environment to foster a vibrant domestic private sector is also important for the long term. To address the lack of available data and information on businesses in Myanmar, The Asia Foundation provided support to carry out the first-ever nationwide survey on business in 2014 jointly conducted by the OECD, UNESCAP, and the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. In early 2016 the Foundation released a study examining local economic governance in Myanmar, which included

recommendations on specific reforms that would increase transparency and effectiveness of the licensing process. The Foundation is also working to identify key constraints to a more enabling business environment in the states and regions through an economic governance index that would also consider social impact on local communities.

### WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Political Representation:** Women's representation in politics was low in Myanmar, numbering only 6.0% of all elected MPs in the national parliament and 3.8% of all elected MPs in subnational parliaments. Those figures have increased significantly after the 2015 elections, increasing to 13.7% in the national and 12.5% in the subnational parliaments. Concrete insights and recommendations from the pioneering group of women parliamentarians of the outgoing Parliament can serve to inspire and inform the incoming women MPs. To that end, The Asia Foundation has partnered with Phan Tee Eain (Creative Home), a women's empowerment organization, to conduct a survey and series of case studies of this "first" generation of women parliamentarians. The study's initial findings were announced in the first Women MPs Forum in 2015 and the final report will be released in mid 2016 at the second Women MPs Forum, where women MPs can learn from the experiences of their predecessors as they begin their own term in Parliament.



**Entrepreneurship:** Although women actively participate in economic activities in Myanmar, the Foundation's 2014 civic knowledge and values survey found a strong view within society, cutting across gender lines, that men make better business executives than women. Foundation experience over the decades has also identified that networking provides important knowledge but also inspiration to women entrepreneurs. To this end, the Foundation is supporting opportunities for business women in Myanmar to network, share experiences, and learn from other women entrepreneurs in the region. In 2014, the Foundation supported three Myanmar women entrepreneurs to attend the South Asia Women's Entrepreneurship Symposium in Bangladesh.



*The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.*

**Protection and Providing Opportunities:** Trafficking of women and gender-based violence are becoming more visible since the country's opening, as more information is available but also as a result of socio-economic change in Myanmar. Recognizing an important need for improved and accessible counseling services for victims of trafficking and gender violence, the Foundation partnered with the Karen Women Empowerment Group to build its counseling practice by establishing a safe and confidential space in which counseling and referral services can be conducted, as well as supporting further training for the resident counselor. Additionally, the Foundation provided support to Colorful Girls, an initiative to provide a safe space for young girls in activities that build their life skills and confidence, and providing them with necessary information about trafficking and gender violence.

### **BOOKS FOR ASIA**

The Asia Foundation has been providing donations of new, high-quality, English-language educational and children's books to Myanmar since 2007 in partnership with the U.S. Embassy. Over the past eight years, the Foundation has donated nearly 200,000 books from leading publishers to more

than 400 educational and research institutions throughout the country. To address the lack of children's books in local languages in Myanmar, the Foundation partnered with The Third Story Project to produce four beautifully illustrated children's books with the themes of gender equality and environment protection which have been widely distributed. The Foundation is also partnering with the Myanmar Library Association to revitalize the role of high school libraries through a pilot effort in six high school libraries in Yangon, Mandalay, and Magway.

Special book collections on topics of specific relevance have also been assembled and provided to a number of institutions in the country: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Parliament's Office, President's Office, the Myanmar Institute of International and Strategic Studies, the Institute of Economics, and the University of Yangon's International Relations Department. Finally, the Foundation carried out the first in-depth nationwide study of the country's public libraries to gauge their operations, capacity, and needs that will inform future support by the Foundation and others to the development of community libraries in Myanmar.

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