

Myanmar Today

I. Introduction

Myanmar, officially known as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar is geographically situated in the south-east Asia region. As the largest country on mainland South-East Asia, it shares borders with China, Laos and Thailand in the east and Bangladesh, India in the west, the Bay of Bengal to the South-West with the Andaman Sea.

The country covers an area of 261228 sq miles (677000 square kilometers), ranging 582 miles (936 kilometers) from east to west and 1275 miles (2051 kilometers) from north to south.

Myanmar is made up of over one hundred national races, of which the main national races are Kachin, Kayah, Kayan, Chin, Burma, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. The Population of the country is over 60 million. Urban and Rural ratio in Myanmar is 30:70.

II. Background

Myanmar has emerged as a new nation in line with its Constitution which adopted on 29 May 2008, and so it is on the right track of transition into new era and new system. The process of building a modern and developed nation has posted milestones of success, and is also moving forward at an accelerating pace.

As a developing country, Myanmar has been practicing market economy system to raise socio-economic status of its people. And in building a modern and industrialized nation in accord with the Constitution, Myanmar makes strenuous efforts for proper evolution of market economy through agricultural development in combination with all-round development of other sectors. At the same time Myanmar exercising independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy and upholding the principles of peaceful coexistence among nations, tries its best to catch up with not only regionalization but also globalization process.

The government has set immediate priorities to achieve good governance, clean government, fundamental rights of the citizens, rule of law, transparency, accountability, and fight against corruption, reduction of income disparity, creation of harmonious society, economic reform and environmental conservation. Now major changes are taking place in Myanmar in unprecedented scope and rapid pace.

III. Structure of the State

The Union is delineated and constituted by seven Regions, seven States and the Union territories. They are Kachin State, Kayah State, Kayin State, Chin State, Sagaing Region, Taninthayi Region, Bago Region, Magway Region, Mandalay Region, Mon State, Rakhine State, Yangon Region, Shan State, Ayeyawady Region and Union territories.

Nay Pyi Taw, the capital of the Union, prescribed as Union territory, shall be under the direct administration of the President. It is located the central part of Myanmar. Day-to-day functions would be carried out on the President's behalf by the Nay Pyi Taw Council led by Chairperson. The Chairperson and members of the Nay Pyi Taw Council are appointed by the President and shall include civilians and representatives of the Armed Forces.

Yangon Region is the most densely populated and Mandalay Region has the largest population. The smallest population is Kayah State. In terms of land area, Shan State is the largest and Yangon Region is the smallest.

States and Regions are divided into districts (kha yai). These districts consist of townships (myo ne) that include towns (myo), ward (yat kwet) and village-tracts (kyay ywa ok su). Village-tracts are groups of adjacent villages (kyay ywa).

IV. Setting off the new administrative machinery

Myanmar now has a constitution based parliamentary democracy system. The President and Vice-Presidents represent the Union. The term of office of the President and Vice-Presidents is five years and shall not serve more than two terms. The Head of the Union and the Head of Executive of the Union is the President.

The legislature, called the **Pyidaungsu Hluttaw** (Union Parliament), is bicameral and made up of two parliaments: The 224- seat upper house **Amyotha Hluttaw** (National Parliament) and the 440- seat lower house **Pyithu Hluttaw** (People's Parliament). The upper house consists of 224 members of which 168 are directly elected and 56 are appointed by Armed Forces while the lower house consists of 440 members of which 330 are directly elected and 110 are appointed by Armed Forces.

The three branches of sovereign power namely; legislative power, executive power and judicial power are separated, to the extent possible, and exert reciprocal control, check and balance among themselves. The three branches of sovereign power, so separated are shared among the Union, Regions, States and Self-Administered Areas.

Myanmar is divided into twenty- one administrative subdivisions, which include seven states and seven regions, those are of equal status, five ethnic self-administered zones and one self-administered division.

These self-administered zones and self-administered division include the following:

- (1) Naga self-administered zone: consisting of Leshi, Lahe and Namyun Townships in Saging Region.
- (2) Danu self-administered zone: consisting of Ywangan and Pindaya Townships in Shan State.
- (3) Pa-O self-administered zone: consisting of Hopong, Hsihseng, Pinlaung Townships in Shan State.
- (4) Pa Laung self-administered zone: consisting of Namhsan and Manton Townships in Shan State.
- (5) Kokang self-administered zone: consisting of Konkyan and Laukkai Townships in Shan State.
- (6) Wa self-administered zone: consisting of Hopang, Mongma, Panwai, Nahpan, Metman and Pangsang Townships in Shan State

Self-administered zones and Self-administered division are administered by a Leading Body. The Leading body consists of at least ten members and includes State or Regional Hluttaw members elected from the zones or Divisions and other members nominated by the Armed Forces. The Leading Body has both executive and legislative powers. A Chairperson is head of each Leading Body.

V. The Structure of Government

According to the Constitution, the Union Government and the Regions and States Government were formed.

In the Union Government, there are (9) Union Level Central Organizations and (36) Union Ministries. The Union Level Central Organizations are as follows:

- (1) President Office
- (2) Office of the Union Government
- (3) Hluttaw Office
- (4) Union Supreme Court
- (5) Union Constitutional Tribunal
- (6) Union Election Commission
- (7) Union Attorney- General Office
- (8) Union Auditor-General Office
- (9) Union Civil Service Board

Each ministry is headed by one Union Minister and one or two or three Deputy Ministers respectively. The Union Civil Service Board (UCSB) is one of the Central Government Organizations and headed by one Chairman (Union Minister Level) and 4 members (Deputy Minister Level). It is under the control of the President and carrying out the duties of selecting, training of civil service personnel and prescribing of civil service rules and regulations.

Each region and state has a region or state government headed by one Chief Minister (Union Minister level) and 9 ministers (Deputy Minister Level). The structure or formation of the ministries are different according to their roles and functions.

The Union Government shall comprise with the President, Vice-Presidents, Ministers of the Unions and the Attorney-General of the Union. The Financial Commission has been formed with the President, Vice-Presidents, the Attorney-General of the Union, the Auditor-General of the Union, Chief Ministers of the Regions and States, the Nay Pyi Taw Council Chairperson, the Minister of Finance of the Union.

Myanmar's democratic practice is in its infancy, so it has to take a long time to be mature. Governing bodies at all levels play a crucial role in the nation's administrative mechanism.

If the administrative mechanism guarantees the people's life security and civil servants treat the people fairly and the people lead a peaceful life under the protection of the law, the constitution that shapes the administrative mechanism will be reliable. And the people will put reliance and trust in the legislative and executive bodies.

Another task to make the Government's functions more effective is cooperation among ministries. According to the Constitution, the nation sees not only the Union Government but also Region and State Governments. Therefore, cooperation between the Governments is of great importance. So, cooperation between members of the Government is a must to expedite administrative mechanism.

VI. A remarkable step taken by the new government

The government led by President U Thein Sein, The Pyidawngsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) comprising Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Parliament) and Amyotha Hluttaw (National Parliament), the judiciary body of Supreme Court, the central level bodies have been functioning harmoniously. States and Regions governments and parliaments have also been given substantial autonomy power to freely serve the interest of the people of their respective States and Regions.

The government undertook a series of economic, social, political reforms to improve socio-economic life of the people, a number of economic reform initiatives and structural adjustment have also been introduced strengthen trade and economic activities. Investment law has been amended to attract more foreign investments. International financial institutions have been invited for

consultations to initiate financial and monetary reforms. Now exchange rate for Myanmar currency “Kyat” has been floating freely, since April 2012.

Over one and half year of tenure of the office of the new Government, Myanmar has seen a number of promising positive changes. Among those changes, addressing the issues of poverty alleviation is a noticeable step taken by the new Government. According to the statistics on basic needs of households collected jointly by the UNDP and the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, poverty rate in Myanmar had dropped from 32% in 2004-2005 to 26% in 2009-2010. However to meet the goal (1) of the UN Millennium Development Goal-poverty rate to be halved by 2015; Myanmar's poverty rate would have to be reduced to 16% by 2014-2015.

The Union Government has formed the Central Committee for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation, work committees and State/Region committees. At the National Workshop on Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation held from 20th to 22nd June 2011, experts, scholars and departmental officials presented papers and compared notes on tasks for rural development and poverty alleviation.

The Workshop adopted eight tasks as follows:

- (a) Development of Agricultural productivity;
- (b) Development Livestock breeding and fisheries;
- (c) Development of small-scale rural productivity;
- (d) Development of microfinance institutions;
- (e) Development of Cooperative tasks ;
- (f) Development of rural socio-economy;
- (g) Development of rural energy;
- (h) Environmental conservation.

In order to carry out the above mentioned tasks successfully, the government, citizens, and career officials are working together hand in hand.

VII. Introducing the Series of reforms

Apart from addressing the issues of poverty alleviation in national level, the new governments has introduced reform process in view of creating new environment conducive to all round development. Reforms are in progress and changes taking place in multiple sectors towards a new system encouraging every citizen observes the discipline as it serves as the guardian of law and order in a society enjoying equality, justice and freedom together with peace, prosperity, stability and the rule of law.

Our people aspire all-round development for the country that lagged behind development for many years mainly due to instability and the absence of peace lingering for decades especially in the remote border areas. As the government is in the service of fulfilling the wishes of the citizens, it focuses on its own people and adopted the people-centred system as the core of democracy transition.

Applying this system well the government is consolidating and enlisting the united strength of people as the main driving force behind all rapid changes and advancements in political, economic and social sectors and in implementing the discipline-flourishing democracy by seeking broader public opinions through all-inclusive talks, discussions and coordination based on mutual trust, understanding and respect.

As we are seeking public opinions in our efforts to reinforce the people-centred system for step by step implementation of democracy together with discipline as its guardian, people on their part can express their views, beliefs, complaints and also suggestions freely and orderly through formal procedures.

VIII. Social protection through people-centred system

With people-centred system at the heart of our reform process we are exploring more and more workable means in providing greater care for the people especially, the vulnerable, the disabled, the aged, children, women and kith and kin of remote border areas.

As the multiple care projects for our people call for wider activities and greater efforts, the government is striving utmost in implementing action plans covering poverty alleviation and rural development, comprehensive access to health, education and social security, microeconomic growth, border areas development drive and so on. Now, it has entered a new area which is called social protection that can contribute to fair growth, social stability, enhanced productivity and the people-centred system through effective work programs.

In this respect, our country saw the national level conference on social protection at which the President called for the adoption of a Myanmar Social Protection system based on requirements of multiple classes and sectors including social protection projects for children, the vulnerable, the aged, women and the disabled.

Generally, social protection is the work of preventing, managing, and overcoming situations that have adverse affect on the people's well being. Social protection consists of policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labor markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to manage economic and social risks, such as unemployment, exclusion, sickness, disability and old age.

In fact, social protection needs a great deal of financial resources apart from government goodwill. So, it is a huge challenge for a developing country like us.

As our people are also the members of global family, they too need social protection like others around the world. They should not be neglected by the international community for any reason as the country lacks social protection. Now the government has opened the door to international community and expecting the constructive cooperation from abroad apart from government and domestic contributions.

IX. Changes took place in accord with people's desire

As elected by the people, the government in office has been implementing in tandem three categories of reforms for actual changes in accord with public wish.

The first reform is the ending of half-a-century-old centralized system and gradual strengthening of democracy. In fact, the task of establishing a democratic nation is a major challenge for us as democratic practice has been absent from our country for many years. So the government is making essential reforms in executive, legislative and judiciary sectors. At the same time it has been in the process of amending, annulling or enacting laws as necessary in the service of new system.

As for national reconsolidation, the government has granted large-scale amnesties while relaxing regulations in various sectors for building a more open society. Moreover, the country now has laws that protect the fundamental rights of citizens involving freedom of assembly and freedom of speech and formation of labor organizations.

The second reform is the re-establishment of eternal peace in the whole country. In the previous year, the government adopted a more pragmatic approach and through fruitful dialogues it has signed ceasefire agreements with ten ethnic armed groups. It has also made necessary engagement with the KIO/KIA group as well for a lasting peace in the war-torn region.

The third reform is the opening of market-oriented economy while leaving the centralized system behind. The government's introduction of micro-economy covers the rural areas development and poverty alleviation. Besides, the government is seeking required cooperation from intelligentsia and experts inside and outside the country for sustainable microeconomic policy. And for the first time in her history, the country has adopted float exchange rate system for the benefit of national economy.

X. Conclusion

In order to take a glance at the present days of Myanmar and able to get a comprehensive view of its picture, it would be a better way to quote an address delivered by the President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar at the 67th United Nations General Assembly. Following is an excerpt of the address:

“After taking office about 18 months ago, the Parliament, the Judiciary, the Armed Forces, the national races, political parties, civil societies and the people at large have been taking tangible irreversible steps in the democratic transition and reform process. Leaving behind a system of authoritarian government wherein the executive, legislative and judicial powers were centralized, we have now been able to put in place a democratic government and a strong, viable parliament following a practice of check and balance.

Despite the challenges, we can now witness encouraging progress and significant developments in the country. They include granting of amnesties to prisoners; the coming back with dignity of the exiled political forces; the successful convening of 2012 by-elections in a free, fair and transparent manner, the abolition of censorship of media, the fourth estate; freedom of internet access; the establishment of workers’ and employers’ organizations and the increased participation of the people in the political process.

At the current stage of the political process, we can witness the emergence of democratic characteristics such as increasing of participation from different political forces and their mutual tolerance, the magnanimity, expansion of the scope of political participation of an representation and the accountability. Our government and other stakeholders have now been able to foster a new political culture of patience and dialogue.”