

# A SLIVER OF HOPE

Reforms have brought prosperity, and condo projects, to Burma, but poverty is still the reality for most

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CEDRIC ARNOLD/CAMERA PRESS/REDUX

In the centre of bustling Rangoon, Burma's capital, is a road that can tell the future. On one side of U Htun Nyein Street is an empty lot surrounded by a long, concrete wall. Plastered on that wall are massive, colourful posters showcasing the interiors and exteriors for a future condo development. Diamond Inya View Palace will be a high-end residential tower—at 34 storeys, the tallest in Burma—with units starting at \$500,000. The posters feature images of fancy living rooms and kitchens with granite countertops, sparkling lobbies, street-level shops, cafés and clean, landscaped streets. In other words, images not unlike those you might see for a condo development in Toronto or Vancouver.

But this is Burma, and it's hard to imagine just how long it will take for this street to resemble the images advertised on these walls. On the other side of U Htun Nyein Street are several multi-

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million-dollar monster homes encased in barbed wire, and running through it is a meandering, single-lane, half-dirt, half-paved road with giant potholes, bumper to bumper traffic and ramshackle bamboo stalls selling tea and noodles. Monks walk barefoot in saffron robes, passing vendors who carry yokes and spit deep red betel juice onto the ground.

What's happening on U Htun Nyein Street is a direct result of the sudden democratization of a country that was for more than 50 years isolated and oppressed by a brutal and violent military dictatorship. A little more than two years ago, the country's opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was released from house arrest and soon after elected to a seat in the military-dominated parliament. President Thein Sein, a former junta member, appears to be working toward strengthening the rule of law, opening up the economy and developing a national infrastructure.

Many Burmese are now finally coming home, returning from decades of political exile and from jobs abroad, many from Dubai, to find careers in the burgeoning tourism and business sectors. Aye Nu Nu Aung is now a guest services manager at the exclusive Amata resort on Ngapali beach. Ngapali is the No. 1 beach destination for tourists to Burma and she is thrilled to be back home after many years in Dubai. Her husband is still there, working as a bartender, but she hopes he will move back to Burma this year.

"Things are very good now," she says. "There are a lot of opportunities for local people to make money from tourism. They have a new chance."

Fishermen from the local village, she says, are now selling to restaurants and making a good price, and the hotels are constantly hiring more staff—gardeners, housekeepers, waiters—who get to meet tourists, learn English and get tips on top of their salary. For her part, Nu Aung hopes to start her own hotel, bungalows for the lower-budget traveller. She has already purchased some land and is saving to buy more. "These dreams of mine wouldn't have been possible a few years ago," she says. "It's really exciting."

But with the dizzying pace of change, it's easy to lose sight of some major potential problems. Human rights groups continue to urge caution to those wholeheartedly embracing the changes in Burma, pointing to continued violent unrest in regions such as Rahkine state, home to Ngapali beach, where up to 100,000 people have been displaced and homes set on fire. In January, unrest escalated in northeast Kachin state between ethnic rebels and the Burmese

military. Renewed peace talks in China this month mean fighting has come to a temporary halt, but UN official Tomás Ojea Quintana said the Burmese military is still using arbitrary arrests and torture in its conflict with the Kachin rebels. And last week more sectarian violence erupted between Buddhists and Muslims, leaving at least 32 dead in Meikhtila.

Despite ongoing ethnic strife, political progress and hope continue to bring exiles back home, businessmen and entrepreneurs in their wake. The world's political leaders are watching this political progress closely. In the first-ever visit by a U.S. president to Burma in November, Barack Obama congratulated the nation's move to civilian rule, the release of hundreds of political prisoners and the loosening of media restrictions.

According to Daniel Gelfer, a Canadian political and business consultant for Vriens and Partners, who has lived in Rangoon for five years, the recent changes have been "unprecedented, dramatic and incredible to watch. The type of openness in political meetings is off-the-charts different than before," he said.

"Parliament is writing new important laws every day and there is real, meaningful conversation happening. People can talk about anything openly for the first time and suddenly things that were not possible before—public gatherings and protests—are happening every day. People are out protesting against electricity cuts and for women's rights and better public transport. But the average Burmese person is losing patience waiting for their lives to change along with the political system and you can't blame them. It will take a long time for the transition to come through to the level of the people."

It will probably take just as long for U Htun Nyein Street to resemble the pretty pictures in the posters. The disparity on this street between rich and poor, past and present symbolizes how quickly this country is transforming, how caught it is between old and new. But even if this particular street ends up actually looking like those images in the posters, for most Burmese, this is not the Rangoon they will inherit. This is the future Rangoon only for the rich and for foreigners who are arriving en masse for tourism and business.

For the average Burmese person, life today remains much the same. Nearly 70 per cent of the population lives in rural areas where extreme poverty remains the biggest issue, where the effects of being isolated, under-educated and ruled with an iron fist for half a century won't be erased overnight. Those feeling the effects of change tend to live in the big cities—Rangoon and

Mandalay, or in the major tourist destinations like Ngapali beach, Bagan and Inle Lake.

“Nothing much has changed for me personally,” says Win Naing, a 61-year-old monk who resides in a monastery 35 km from Rangoon. “I pray every day, the same as always. But where I live, there are a few new, big factories offering jobs so people in the area are making better money. Embassies are opening. A lot of people are coming to do business. But it will take years to get to the level of roads and infrastructure you see in Thailand.”

He doesn't mind waiting. “I can't grumble,” he says smiling, revealing a mouth with only a few teeth. “After so many years of suffering, it is exciting to watch Burma go the right way, toward democracy.”

May Yu Hlaing, a 30-year-old teacher at the Pyay Technological University just outside Rangoon, isn't as thrilled with her country's political reforms. “The president says we have a democracy now,” she says. “But it's not a real democracy. We still live in a closed box.”

Hlaing is also dismayed by what she sees in her young twentysomething students. They are, she says, more interested in video games and cellphones than in politics or education. Their English is weak but the school can't afford books and the education system is stuck in the old-school way of learning by rote.

She is dismayed that the new generation isn't ready or eager to be handed the reins to a new future. They are focused on the latest gadgets and fashions and most have no idea what's going on politically. Without the benefit of a decent education system, Hlaing feels there are very few young people actually equipped for the challenge of change ahead. They are disengaged, disinterested and politically uninformed. “It's sad,” she says.

“Aung San Suu Kyi cannot help the people of Burma,” she says. “She can't make big changes, just little ones. She says education is really important in her speeches but education in this country is not changing. Even easy things—like cleaning the streets—aren't being done. Imagine changing education. It's far from happening.”

Gelfer, who is working with multinational companies to help them understand the political climate in Burma and guide their investment strategy, believes there is cause for optimism. A recent, violent crackdown against local protesters against a copper mine in Monywa led to the president calling for an investigation

commission, headed by Suu Kyi. Its report, released March 12, didn't recommend shutting down the mine but instead called for mining firms to offer fair land compensation in the future. Still, journalists noted it was the first time villagers rose up in anger, signing petitions against the violence and getting politically involved.

"Everyday, normal people are now getting political, accessing these new freedoms," said Gelfer.

And starting April 1, a handful of private daily newspapers will hit the streets. The government ended media censorship last year, but the new dailies must be licensed. This means not only passing government-imposed regulatory hurdles, but also finding creative ways to publish papers in a country that still has unreliable electricity and very little experience with journalism or news delivery.

When asked about the recent political changes to his country, 28-year-old Saw Thein Dan grins broadly. From the front seat of his taxi, he navigates through heavy traffic, swerving into lanes that don't exist.

"I am happy," he says, his bare foot pushing the brake to avoid hitting a rickshaw. He explains that he has just returned from Dubai where he spent two years working in construction. There, he made about \$300 a month. Now, he can make that driving a taxi in his own country. But he admits he has to work a lot harder for that \$300. With so many taxis on the road and so much competition, he has to work at least 12 hours a day, every day. Brutal traffic in the city means it takes longer to earn as many fares, and he worries about the constantly increasing cost of living in Rangoon.

Still, he is relieved to be home, no longer forced to live overseas, suffering from homesickness, just to make a living. "I am hopeful for the future of this country," he says. "But we can't rely on Aung San Suu Kyi for everything. I am happy with the changes. At least now, you can complain. It doesn't mean the government will do anything about it, but we are free to complain. Free."