The elements of surprise: assessing Burma’s double-edged détente

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Abstract: If anything is more surprising than Burma’s recent adoption of democratic reforms, it is that military rule lasted so long without such reforms in the first place. This article considers this paradox from both a country-specific and comparative-theoretical perspective, and argues that both perspectives are essential for analysing Burma’s uncertain reform process as it unfolds or unravels. It portrays the top-down reform process as one of double-edged détente between the ruling Tatmadaw and its internal rivals as well as its external critics. This détente is inherently fragile because it rests on the current regime’s confidence that democratization will produce neither serious instability nor even its own decisive defeat. Events that shake the Tatmadaw’s ‘victory confidence’ and ‘stability confidence’ should thus pose the greatest risk that reforms will be stalled or reversed.

Keywords: authoritarianism; military rule; democratization; reforms; Burma/Myanmar

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‘How ridiculous and how strange to be surprised at anything which happens in life.’ (Marcus Aurelius)

It is a central paradox of contemporary democratization that the endurance and demise of authoritarian regimes seem surprising in equal measure. Whenever a dictatorship endures, scholars, journalists and policy makers alike puzzle over how a country has managed to continue swimming against the global democratic tide. In this ‘age of democratization’ why would we ever expect authoritarianism to endure? By the same token, our deeply cynical notions about authoritarian rulers make us equally surprised whenever a dictatorship permits some measure of democratic reform. If all politicians want to stay in power, and dictators are the most desperate of all to retain power, why would we ever expect a brutal regime to loosen its iron grip with little advance warning?

Nowhere is this paradox more acute than in present-day Burma. With only a small handful of conceivable exceptions, no other regime on earth has been so intransigently authoritarian in the face of highly intense and persistent internal and external pressures for political change. Hence, when newly inaugurated

1 Browalee, 2007.
2 While Cuba’s and North Korea’s communist rulers have confronted greater external pressures for reform, they have not faced the kind of mobilized local opposition that Burma’s Tatmadaw has. Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF has probably come closest to Burma in the combination of internal and external pressure it has faced, but it also enjoys reservoirs of public support deriving from its revolutionary history that appear to be absent in Burma. In sum, it does not seem a stretch to call Burma’s pre-reform Tatmadaw regime the most friendless dictatorship on earth.

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President Thein Sein commenced what I depict below as a ‘double-edged détente’ with his military regime’s internal rivals and external critics in March 2011, Burma watchers could hardly believe their eyes. Country experts have valuably responded by peering deeply into the Burmese regime’s highly opaque decision-making processes, trying to divine the reasons for this seemingly sudden and shocking shift.

Yet the paradox is this: why is Burma’s sudden transformation considered so surprising, when the regime’s enduring intransigence was also considered so surprising to begin with? This article aims to shed light on this paradox – and on Burma’s fragile reform experiment itself – by exploring how country-specific analysis generates different expectations, and hence different surprises, from comparative-theoretical analysis. The country-specific perspective on Burma clearly remains as indispensable as ever, because it has always illuminated the country’s extraordinary bout of long-lasting military rule in a way that leading comparative-theoretical perspectives never could. Yet the comparative-theoretical perspective is essential as well, because it helps make sense of recent events in a manner that country-specific arguments currently struggle to match.

Looking forward, a comparative-theoretical perspective generally provides welcome grounds for cautious optimism about Burma’s reform trajectory. If reforms proceed smoothly, existing theories will probably prove very helpful for explaining why. Meanwhile, a country-specific perspective generally points towards more pessimistic conclusions. If Burma’s democratic experiment becomes derailed or simply stalls, we will probably gain more guidance from country-specific than from comparative-theoretical analyses. Combining these two perspectives should thus help activists and analysts to remain attentive to the elements of surprise that accompany any ongoing reform process. It will also aid us in tracking ongoing events in Burma in the spirit that Gramsci once so poignantly advised: with an optimistic will, but a pessimistic intellect.

The country-specific perspective

It was from a Burma-specific perspective that Thein Sein’s recent liberalizing reforms came as the biggest surprise. There can be no gainsaying the Tatmadaw’s historical willingness to use overwhelming coercive force against anyone who takes to the streets or takes up arms to challenge its rule. Nor, just as importantly, is it largely the opacity of internal authoritarian practices that leads analysts to portray recent reforms in highly personalized terms: that is, as ‘Thein Sein’s reforms’. Yet for such reforms to have progressed as far as they have, Thein Sein must have had a support coalition at his disposal. On how opacity complicates assessments of authoritarian dynamics, not only for those outside a regime but for those within it, see Schedler (2013).

To depict recent changes in Burma as democratic reforms is not to argue that Burma either has already become or is necessarily in the process of becoming a democratic regime. Far too many features of the Burmese polity remain authoritarian for the country to qualify as even minimally procedurally democratic (see Lintner, 2013).

By ‘perspective’, I mean an angle from which an observer generally analyses a political process, not a specific opinion or argument regarding that process. Analysts who adopt a common country-specific perspective naturally can and do hold very different opinions about Burma’s unfolding reforms.

Footnotes:
3 In journalistic and policy-making circles, the reaction to Burma’s reforms was nicely summarized as one of ‘happy disbelief’ (Keller, 2012). Academic reactions have generally exhibited less exuberance but similar surprise.
4 It is largely the opacity of internal authoritarian practices that leads analysts to portray recent reforms in highly personalized terms: that is, as ‘Thein Sein’s reforms’. Yet for such reforms to have progressed as far as they have, Thein Sein must have had a support coalition at his disposal. On how opacity complicates assessments of authoritarian dynamics, not only for those outside a regime but for those within it, see Schedler (2013).
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can anyone underestimate the Burmese military’s ability to remain cohesive and unified while doing so. The central lesson of 1988, 1990 and 2007 is not simply that this is a regime that refuses to go down without a fight – it is that even a fight is not enough to make this regime go down. Any political scientist who believed that Burma was poised for democratization upon Thein Sein’s inauguration in March 2011, based on any prior theoretical assumptions whatsoever, would rightly have been mocked by any experienced Burma observer as historically naive. No theory can possibly serve as a better guide to ongoing and future developments in Burma than Burma’s own distinctively tragic political history.

Yet, while country-specific analysis has truly indispensable value, it also has clear limits. The key limitation is that it is difficult to disentangle the many possible reasons for the Burmese thaw. It is certainly helpful to commence one’s inquiry by accumulating every factor that seemed to contribute in some way to the surprising shift in Burma’s political regime. The problem is that an accumulation of contributory factors alone provides little guidance as to what might reverse the reform process or, contrarily, give it extra momentum. If Burma watchers were so surprised by Thein Sein’s reforms to begin with, it is surely worth wondering whether a Burma-specific perspective will suffice for analysts to remain fully cognizant of the elements of surprise in the reform process as it unfolds.

The litany of particular factors that have been invoked to explain Burma’s surprising political spring is extensive and, by now, familiar. For starters, it has been widely argued that international factors loomed extremely large. The military regime was eager to have Western sanctions lifted or at least eased, and to attract increased Western investment. Overcoming pariah status would also allow Burma to normalize its position in ASEAN, reducing controversy over its scheduled stint as the organization’s chair in 2014. Liberalization also promised to reduce Burma’s growing diplomatic and economic dependence on China, in what might be seen as a historical return to its ‘non-aligned’ (if this time clearly not isolationist) tendency. Further afield, the sudden eruption of the ‘Arab Spring’ in early 2011 inevitably resonated in Naypyidaw, as a vivid reminder that even the longest-ruling authoritarian regimes cannot take the placidity of their repressed populations for granted.

Besides these international factors, analysts have pointed to factors in Burma’s domestic context that seemingly helped drive new reforms as well. After the natural and man-made devastation that attended Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the need for economic and political reforms simply became too manifest for Burma’s rulers to ignore or postpone. Political reforms have ostensibly proved useful for Thein Sein’s faction in the Tatmadaw to sideline former ruler Than Shwe’s in an ongoing internal power struggle. Thein Sein himself has more of a bureaucratic than a warrior background, and his long career is in its final stages, presumably making him especially predisposed towards a more proactive and less paranoid style of engagement with his regime’s internal and external detractors.

Regardless of subjective motivations to initiate reforms, the progression of reforms has objectively yielded fruit for the Thein Sein regime. To begin with, reforms have allowed the regime to forge increasingly cordial relations with Aung San

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7 For a helpful discussion of Burma’s distinctiveness among South East Asian militaries for its ability to stay unified after using overwhelming force against democratic protesters, see McCoy, 1997.
Suu Kyi, Burma’s living nationalist icon nonpareil. This allows the regime to gain a much-needed whiff of legitimacy and secure a more reliable measure of public acquiescence, improving prospects for political stability while traversing the rocky shoals of economic reform. Persuading the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) to buy into the Tatmadaw’s project of installing ‘disciplined democracy’ from above, despite the deeply autocratic character of Burma’s 2008 constitution, must be counted as a remarkable achievement for Thein Sein’s civilianizing (if still far from truly civilian) regime as well. Political liberalization also makes the climate more conducive for Burma’s rulers to negotiate peace agreements with rebellious ethnic groups that are amenable, and – it must be added – to give it a freer hand to clobber those insurgents most resistant to negotiating on the regime’s terms, most notably the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

There is no adequate way to interpret Burma’s recent reforms without keeping this wide array of contributing factors – internal as well as international – in mind. At one level, Burma is sui generis, like all countries, and its reform process cannot be naively equated with experiences in neighbouring regimes. Yet the mere fact that Burma seems to have been so blindsided by Thein Sein’s reforms should open the door for us to conduct a wider, comparative-theoretical analysis. If recent liberalization were seen by Burma experts as unsurprising, or as a natural outgrowth of long-term political trends in the country, there might be no need to ponder what theoretically minded comparisons could contribute to the conversation. The fact that Burma’s incipient democratization process is almost as unsurprising in comparative-theoretical terms as it is surprising in country-specific terms suggests that existing theories and novel comparisons might shed new light on these unexpected developments, and how they might unfold over time.

The comparative-theoretical perspective

If there is any point on which theoretical and colloquial understandings of authoritarian regimes dramatically diverge, it is on the will to power of military rulers. In the popular imagination, tyrants in uniform are the most imposing and terrifying of all. Burma’s half-century of iron-fisted dictatorship-in-fatigues fits this popular image perfectly. This surely helps explain why Thein Sein’s reforms were seen in journalistic and policy circles as well as academic ones as such an inexplicable break from form.

Yet from a comparative-theoretical perspective, military rulers are the most likely to concede democracy under intense domestic and international pressures. This has long been a point of theoretical consensus in American political science, which, drawing much more heavily on Latin American than Asian examples, has painted a relatively rosy picture of military regimes’ prospects for democratization. The intuition, as most recently formalized by Barbara Geddes, is relatively straightforward and generally persuasive. Even when they are not holding formal political

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8 On the autocratic character of Burma’s Tatmadaw-imposed constitutions and specific suggestions for necessary amendments, see Diamond, 2012, p 142.

9 For a nice overview and analysis of the leading Burmese oppositionists’ calculations in embracing Thein Sein’s partial reforms, see Caryl, 2012.

10 For an excellent overview of the dynamics and implications of recent reforms on ethnic politics and conflict in Burma, see Farrelly (this issue). On the violent breakdown in the 17-year ceasefire between the Burmese military and the KIA more specifically, see Seng Maw Lahpai (2014).

positions, military officers have ongoing operational roles to play, both in democracies and dictatorships. (Lest one doubt that a military can manage to maintain whopping budgets and unrivalled public adoration under democratic conditions, look no further than the USA.) When the politics gets messy, as it inevitably does, a retreat from everyday ruling can quickly appear more appealing to many military officers than the endless headaches of governing directly. This is especially true if soldiers begin to disagree over whether the military’s proper place is in the barracks or on the throne. When a military loses cohesion, the results tend to be debilitating for the institution, and at times even life-threatening for the individuals involved. Militaries are rarely unitary actors, and they are typically populated by at least some actors who would prefer to eschew the troubles of governing directly, especially if democratic concessions allow them to ‘rule without governing’ from backstage. This is why pressuring a military regime to hand over formal powers to civilians, even through democratic elections, can at times look surprisingly like pushing on an open door.

Needless to say, Burma has never even remotely resembled this conventional wisdom. This is why, from a theoretical perspective, it is the endurance and not the sudden fragility of military rule that makes Burma such an enormous surprise.

How, then, might we understand Burma’s exceptionalism? In my own comparative-theoretical reflections on Burma, which owe a huge and explicit debt to the work of Mary Callahan, I have argued that patterns of violent conflict preceding the Tatmadaw’s definitive destruction of democracy in 1962 offer the best comparative explanation for Burma’s long-lasting military rule. Put most simply, rebellions that seek to escape a state have systematically different political repercussions from rebellions seeking to overthrow a particular government. Whereas military and civilian elites tend to be brought together by radical movements aiming to topple and displace them both, regional rebellions tend to drive a wedge between military officers – who tend to consider such peripheral conflicts the most important threat the country faces – and elected leaders, who typically worry more about catering to their own constituents closer to the political centre. This suggests that it is the relative intensity and intractability of separatist insurgencies that Burma confronted between 1948 and 1962 that best explain why the Tatmadaw has exhibited so much more unity and so much greater will to power than its counterparts in South East Asia and beyond.

A benefit of this approach, despite its obvious vulnerability to charges of reductionism, is that it offers an account of why the Burmese military’s will to power might wax and wane over time, or even expire entirely. If the only factors motivating the regime to cling to power were corruption and greed, it is hard to imagine why liberalization would ever occur from above. Indeed, if this were the primary factor shaping military behaviour, the world would still be riddled with military regimes, which it clearly is not. Yet if durable military rule depends on the perceived endemic character of violent threats, and the collective calculation that ongoing authoritarianism offers the best chance of bridling those threats, then one can better apprehend shifts in military intransigence over time. It is indeed noteworthy that Thein Sein pursued peace along Burma’s restive ethnic periphery

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with one hand while offering his olive branch to the NLD-led opposition with the other. This suggests that Burma’s separatism-driven ‘protection pact’ might be expiring in much the same manner that Indonesia’s communism-driven protection pact expired by the 1990s, facilitating the retreat of a military-backed regime and the emergence of relatively stable democratic politics.\textsuperscript{14} To the extent that authoritarianism becomes perceived as an accelerant rather than a retardant of ethnic insurgencies, prospects for democratic reform should improve in turn.

A limitation of this approach when applied to a single case such as Burma, however, is that it fails to integrate international with domestic factors effectively. What might existing theories have to tell us about the external dimension of Burma’s current liberalization process? The best starting point is Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way’s influential hypothesis that democratization since the Cold War has been profoundly shaped and frequently facilitated by \textit{Western linkage and leverage}.\textsuperscript{15} Although their theory is focused on ‘competitive authoritarian’ regimes, which Burma may be in the process of becoming, but certainly was not when Thein Sein’s reforms commenced, questions of external linkage and leverage clearly loom large in the Burmese case.

For Levitsky and Way, tight diplomatic and economic links to the West have made post-Cold War democratization virtually inevitable. In countries with much weaker Western linkages and with weak political institutions, such as Burma, Western leverage can push countries to hold elections and generate a facade of democracy; but fully fledged democratization (even in its minimalist, Schumpeterian sense) remains an unlikely outcome. Rather, such weakly linked and weakly institutionalized regimes are highly prone to flounder in an unstable and uncertain limbo between hegemonic authoritarianism and regularized modes of democratic competition. And where countries have especially strong ties to what Levitsky and Way call ‘black knights’ – major authoritarian powers such as China – even minor liberalizing reforms can remain off the political agenda in virtual perpetuity.

The implications of this theoretical framework for Burma are intriguing. For starters, Burma’s extreme historical separation from Western powers has indeed proved conducive to open-ended authoritarian rule. The \textit{Tatmadaw}’s strategic cosying up to China after the 1988–1990 crackdown also accords nicely with Levitsky and Way’s internationalist arguments. Combined with the obvious weakness of its domestic political institutions, Burma’s external profile points towards a shaky transition to a loosened form of authoritarianism at best, and an outright reversal of the current reform momentum at worst.

Where Levitsky and Way’s framework proves more limited for present purposes, however, is in its inattention to agency and change. In their theory, external linkage and leverage are fixed parameters, exogenous to political calculations. Authoritarian regimes do not change their linkage strategies with an eye on limiting their vulnerability to external pressures and interventions. Yet this is precisely what seems to be occurring in Thein Sein’s Burma. Excessive dependence on a ‘black knight’ such as China does not necessarily counsel authoritarian entrenchment (China has good relations with democracies as well as dictatorships, after all), but can incite new strategies to mitigate that very external dependence. If

\textsuperscript{14} On the concept of ‘protection pacts’, see Slater, 2010.
\textsuperscript{15} Levitsky and Way, 2010.
Burma can balance its linkages among a wider array of external powers, it will be less amenable to leverage from any one of them. Since China’s primary interest in Burma lies in economic and geopolitical access rather than regime isomorphism, political reforms are currently allowing Burma to cosy up to Western ‘white knights’ without jettisoning its friendly relations with the world’s biggest ‘black knight’.

This kind of geopolitical strategy should be readily familiar from both a country-specific and a comparative-theoretical perspective. Historically speaking, Burma’s principled non-alignment and subsequent turn towards isolationism suggest that its recent drift into China’s exclusive sphere of influence has been a striking departure from form. Like many postcolonial countries, Burma appears to have chafed under excessive dependence on a singular superpower, and to be pursuing a strategy that one scholar has dubbed ‘omnibalancing’. In essence, this strategy entails shifting and balancing linkages among multiple external powers to ensure that no single outsider can interfere with a regime’s strategies for preserving domestic power. As in Robert Putnam’s famous notion of ‘double-edged diplomacy’, internal and external considerations become essentially inseparable under conditions of omnibalancing. The goal is not to forego external alliances, but to manage them and, in many cases, to multiply them, to avoid losing control over critical political events on the home front. While China has long been a useful counterweight to excessive Western (especially American) influence, Burma’s dependence on China had become so extreme that the West must have begun to look like a useful counterweight against China.

Thus far, this article has tried to bring a judicious combination of country-specific and comparative-theoretical insights to bear in considering the dynamics of Burma’s recent reforms. Without denying the element of surprise in any such process, the goal has been to demystify recent events and offer several analytical tools for making better systematic sense of them. Substantively, the key claims have been that (1) the fate of democratic reforms fundamentally depends upon their compatibility with preserving what the incumbent regime defines as political order, and that (2) the domestic and international spheres should somehow be analytically integrated rather than separated. In what follows, I try to push these insights several steps further, arguing that Burma’s incipient liberalization can be usefully conceptualized as a *double-edged détente*, and that its onset and future trajectory can be fruitfully analysed as a complex, multifaceted confidence game between the incumbent regime and its internal and external rivals.

### Political reforms as a complex confidence game

Authoritarian regimes can go down easily, go down hard, or not go down at all. Although it is obviously much too soon to tell what will come of Burma’s post-2011 reforms, it is equally obvious that the *Tatmadaw* has no intention of going down hard. Indeed, it is often the fear that any removal from power will be a nasty one, as much as any innate desperation to cling to office for office’s sake, which prevents authoritarian regimes from negotiating a political transition (that is, going down easily). For such a negotiation process to begin and ultimately succeed, the incumbent regime must play a complex confidence game with those who wish

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to see the regime democratize.\textsuperscript{18} As I argue in a new collaborative research project, three distinctive types of confidence are especially relevant for the fate of preemptive reforms from above: (1) immunity confidence, (2) stability confidence, and (3) victory confidence.\textsuperscript{19}

When a regime possesses victory confidence, it believes that it can continue to win power through elections, even under fully democratic conditions. This type of regime confidence facilitated peaceful democratic transitions in Taiwan and South Korea in the 1980s, and could well help induce deeper democratization in Malaysia and, especially, Singapore in the years to come.\textsuperscript{20} The case of Indonesia’s Golkar suggests that even a substantially weaker ruling party than the Kuomintang (KMT) or People’s Action Party (PAP) can help make ruling elites confident that democratic elections might not mean their own removal from office (that is, democratization can mean not going down at all, rather than going down easily).

This may shed some new light on why Burma’s leaders loosened their grip when and how they did. It may seem puzzling that reforms began when active domestic opposition was in abeyance, rather than during a moment of upheaval such as the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007. (And it should certainly seem puzzling to political scientists who argue that dictatorships only accept democracy in desperation, to stave off revolutionary threats.) Yet by devoting an extra four years to building up the regime’s civilian strengths, both by forcing through the 2010 constitution and by investing new resources and authority into the pro-Tatmadaw Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the regime gave itself a chance to bolster its victory confidence before testing the electoral waters in April 2012. As Morten Pedersen rightly puts it, the Burmese military embarked on reform when ‘it was in a stronger position than ever before’.\textsuperscript{21} Or as Min Zin and Brian Joseph summarize: ‘Despite retaining a firm hold on power and facing no urgent domestic or international threats, the military began to shift course’.\textsuperscript{22}

To be sure, the USDP cannot give Burma’s military the kind of victory confidence that old ruling parties offered in cases such as Taiwan, South Korea, or even Indonesia. The landslide win for the NLD in the 2012 vote should have made it abundantly clear to all parties concerned that the USDP has little chance of beating it in the first scheduled national elections in 2015. Yet it is possible that, if economic reforms begin bearing fruit, if the military retains its guaranteed seats in parliament, and if the regime pursues even mild practices of malapportionment,\textsuperscript{23} the USDP/military alliance might constitute a genuine parliamentary rival to the NLD in an inchoate two-party system. In much the same

\textsuperscript{18} The term ‘confidence game’ should be taken in its literal, not its usual colloquial sense as a ‘con game’. A confidence game may or may not end with one side tricking or swindling the other. It is the uncertain possibility that the game could or could not go wrong that makes it a game in the first place, rather than a ‘confidence trick’.

\textsuperscript{19} Slater and Wong, 2013.

\textsuperscript{20} Slater, 2012.

\textsuperscript{21} Public remarks at the Myanmar/Burma Update 2013, Australian National University, Canberra, March 2013.

\textsuperscript{22} Min Zin and Joseph, 2012, p 104.

\textsuperscript{23} Lest one doubt the importance of malapportionment in making elections palatable to an authoritarian regime, consider that in the recent Malaysian elections of April 2013, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) was able to secure nearly 60% of all parliamentary seats despite losing the popular vote outright to the opposition. In Indonesia in 1999, both pro-Golkar malapportionment and reserved military seats helped assure ‘New Order’ incumbents that they would not lose too much too fast.
way that dominant authoritarian parties in cases ranging from Poland to Mexico exited office after losing inaugural democratic elections, only to be returned to power in subsequent contests, it is not unthinkable that the USDP might have a better shot at beating the NLD in 2020 than in 2015. And to the extent that a rosy long-term scenario for the USDP is not unthinkable, it bodes well for the chances that regime stalwarts might be willing to see the current reforms continue and even deepen. On the other hand, if Burma’s 2015 elections look too much like its 1990 elections, the military’s reaction might look frighteningly like its 1990 reaction to elections as well.

Victory confidence is thus the most powerful but also the most fragile source of momentum for Burma’s current reform agenda. It is especially powerful because, where it exists, regime leaders need not worry too terribly about the other two types of confidence I mentioned earlier: stability confidence (that is, their expectation that political stability will be preserved under democratic conditions) or immunity confidence (their expectation that a removal from office would not be met by harsh retribution for their authoritarian abuses). So long as a regime can stay in power through the ballot box, it can take the measures it perceives as necessary to maintain social stability, and it need not fear transitional justice from opponents who have not even managed to topple them.24

However, given the significant social instability that has coincided with political reforms in some parts of Burma – most horrifically in the mass killings of Muslim minorities in and around Rakhine state – it might seem counterintuitive that a loss of stability confidence is less likely than a loss of victory confidence to undermine the Burmese thaw. The critical issue is not how much instability erupts in a raw quantitative sense, though, but the perceived political meaning of that violence25 and its effects on relations between the government and the NLD. On the latter point, it is vital to recognize that Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi have struck similar tones in their responses to violent outbreaks in Rakhine state and elsewhere. It is deeply regrettable from a human-rights perspective, to be sure, that Burma’s revered opposition leader has adopted the Tatmadaw’s language on the importance of the ‘rule of law’ before Burma’s legal and policing systems have been even minimally reformed.26 Yet it must also be recognized that for Thein Sein’s partial reforms to maintain their momentum, a broad consensus between himself and Aung San Suu Kyi needs to be sustained as to what violent outbreaks mean in the context of Burma’s ongoing and uncertain reforms. If the NLD were (quite reasonably) to blame violent outbreaks on the Tatmadaw’s many unreformed authoritarian practices, it would surely invite critics of Thein Sein’s reforms (quite plausibly) to blame democratic reforms themselves for sparking new patterns of violence. Unless and until either of the two key partners in Burma’s reform process begin to paint bouts of instability as laden with meaning for either democratic or authoritarian politics, it is relatively unlikely that a lack of stability confidence will be responsible for derailing Burma’s incipient democratization.

24 On the emergent politics of transitional justice in Burma, see Holliday (this issue).
25 On integrating considerations of meaning and meaning-making into causal analysis in political science, see Wedeen, 2002. On the importance of analysing types of conflict more than levels of conflict in apprehending the political consequences of violence, see Slater, 2010.
26 On the persistence of authoritarian-style ‘rule of law’ thinking in reform-era Burma, see Cheesman (this issue).
Current relations between the Tatmadaw and NLD thus give reason for hope that stability confidence (if not always actual stability) can be preserved in a manner that advances the reform process. Yet victory confidence is a very different story, for two main reasons. First, the incumbent regime simply does not have the kind of strong party-state institutions or enviable record of developmental success that have made ‘democracy through strength’ such a viable strategy in developmental Asian cases such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and, perhaps in the near future, Singapore, Malaysia, China and Vietnam.\textsuperscript{27} Even Indonesia, the weakest such case, represents a very optimistic comparative scenario for Burma’s current rulers to try to mimic. And second, when it comes to elections, it takes two to tango, as the old expression goes. Based on the April 2012 results, it makes great sense for the NLD to have plenty of victory confidence in its own right, and hence to keep playing along with the reform agenda in the hope of securing a thumping national victory in 2015. The more victory confidence the NLD gains, however, the less the USDP is likely to possess. This puts Burma in a situation where the NLD can opt out of the confidence game if the regime puts too many restrictions on the 2015 vote, but the USDP and the Tatmadaw can opt out if the election looks likely to favour the NLD too heavily.

**Burma’s double-edged détente**

This analysis helps illuminate why reforms may very well maintain their momentum through the 2015 vote, but they also very well might not. Whether we will look back on the post-2011 reforms as a stage of liberalization leading up to fuller democratization remains unknowable; but understanding Burmese reform politics as a complex confidence game gives us new tools for gauging whether momentum is likely to be gained or lost. Since reforms remain so uncertain, we would be well served to consider a concept that avoids the teleological ring of liberalization or incipient democratization. Considering how much control the military and its surrogates still maintain over the political process, it should be evident that Burma is still a very long way from being a democracy in even a minimal, proceduralist sense. The point is not that terms such as liberalization and incipient democratization are inaccurate – I have been using both terms myself, after all – but that they are a bit too imprecise and might prove a bit premature.

For this reason, I propose the concept of *double-edged détente* as a novel way to depict Burma’s recent reform process, and to track its next stages. A first virtue of this concept is that it captures both domestic and international players and factors (that is, it is ‘double-edged’ in Putnam’s classic sense). Reforms not only represent the regime’s détente with the NLD-led opposition, and with at least some groups that have long combated the Tatmadaw along Burma’s periphery. They also represent a cautious process of détente between the regime and its external critics. Like any détente, there is no assumption of forward momentum. Any détente is a tenuous process of testing the waters and of building new trust where before there was little or none. Events can intercede in a way that deepens détente, or abruptly ends it.

By thinking of Burma’s reforms as double-edged détente, we force ourselves to

\textsuperscript{27} Slater and Wong, 2013.
remain attentive to events both inside and outside Burma’s borders that could affect the victory confidence of the main players in decisive ways. Beyond victory confidence, events that diminish the incumbent regime’s stability confidence, such as further outbreaks of violence that can in some clear way be connected to the liberalization process itself, and not to the historically endemic tensions that preceded it, should capture our attention as well. Last but not least, the delicate politics of transitional justice has enormous implications not only for what would follow a regime transition, but whether such a transition will happen at all. If opposition leaders or their Western backers call the regime’s immunity confidence into question with intimations of punitive post-transition consequences for past human-rights abuses, this too could destabilize the complex confidence game that is Burma’s current double-edged détente. By the same token, blanket immunity could alienate the NLD and its supporters, with similarly destabilizing consequences for Burma’s delicate confidence game.

Specifics aside, the preceding analysis has hopefully displayed the potential virtues of approaching recent events in Burma with the combined theoretical and area-sensitive tools of ‘doubly engaged social science’. Burma’s sudden liberalization might seem stunning from a country-specific perspective, but from a more comparative-theoretical perspective, it is the regime’s duration and not its fragility which serves as the big surprise. Looking forward, each perspective remains both essential and limited. The comparative-theoretical approach has long failed to make sense of Burma’s authoritarian duration, while country-specific analysis struggles to explain recent events systematically. Yet country-specific analysis remains as indispensable as ever, alerting us to the wide array of reasons why Burma’s historically embedded democratic experiment remains frighteningly fragile and utterly reversible.

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