

Opportunities, challenges and above all hope as parliamentary democracy is revived in Myanmar.

Story: Andres Lomp

Seven years ago Myanmar started to build a new capital city half way between the old Burmese capital of Rangoon and the former royal capital of Mandalay. Now the nation is building a new democracy, moving beyond the five decades of military rule that have kept one of Southeast Asia's biggest countries largely isolated from the rest of the world.

One of the most impressive structures in Nay Pyi Taw is the new parliament building, although the term building hardly describes the vast complex standing as a symbol for a democracy still rising from its newly laid foundations.

A 20-lane highway leads to the parliament but for now the road is empty of the cars, buses and trucks you would expect to see on a major thoroughfare.

For now, only parliamentarians, officials and invited guests are allowed to enter the parliament. Public access is only through media coverage of the sittings. When asked why, one parliamentarian simply states: "Not yet."

While change has happened fast and there is a great expectation of more change to come, it's clear the country's transition will take time.

The leap to establish a new parliament has happened. The many steps needed to

make it a fully functioning legislature still lie ahead.

As part of its reengagement with the international community, Myanmar has been readmitted to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the global network that links 162 parliaments and encourages their democratic development.

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Following a request from the Myanmar parliament for assistance in developing its parliamentary capacity, the IPU sent a team to undertake a needs assessment as the first step in a longer-term support project.

IT'S A FIVE-HOUR DRIVE OR A short flight from Yangon (Rangoon) to Nay Pyi Taw and the IPU is not alone in making the journey.

International agencies of every description are now joining countries from around the world on the road to Nay Pyi Taw as the global community

rewards the reform process in Myanmar with recognition and offers of support.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon became the first foreign dignitary to address the new parliament, just two days before democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi was sworn in as an MP along with other members of the National League for Democracy. In his speech to a joint parliamentary sitting, Ban Ki-moon pledged full UN support for Myanmar's development.



Road to Nay Pyi Taw



DEMOCRATIC
JOURNEY:
Election day in Myanmar;
(inset) President Thein
Sein introduced reforms

Ironically, one of the biggest challenges for the country and its new parliament is not to be overwhelmed by the wave of goodwill now sweeping towards it.

Parliamentarians are new to their jobs and are finding their way through the procedural and legislative maze as they settle in to their second year of parliamentary work. Adding to their workload is the time needed to meet with the growing list of international delegations that are visiting the parliament.

Many parliamentarians stress that Myanmar's people need to take responsibility for their democracy. They are happy to receive advice and guidance, but ultimately want to make the decisions themselves.



“This time the world needs to get it right.”

The MPs are supported by a small group of officials who have been transferred to the fledgling parliament from government departments and the military. They have no prior experience of parliamentary processes.

Good practice is a phrase used in many of the conversations at the parliament. There is an eagerness to learn alongside recognition of how much there is to learn.

But there is no corporate memory on which to draw because parliament has not existed for such a long time.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the parliament already has displayed its tenacity for getting on with the job. It boasts a significant legislative record including

consideration of new labour, foreign investment and anti-corruption laws.

In the first year 53 pieces of legislation were reviewed by one of the key committees established to scrutinise bills, although detailed analysis of bills remains a work in progress.

Much of the new legislation is focused on economic development, with a strong recognition and desire among MPs to meet international standards to attract the investment needed to boost living standards throughout the country.

With government ministers all outside the parliament, oversight is becoming an important focus of the parliament's work as MPs get the opportunity to ask questions and seek information through a comprehensive system of parliamentary committees and commissions.

These provide the potential for stronger accountability with MPs already submitting a steady flow of questions to government. How the MPs make use of the information to hold the government to account will be an ongoing measure of the parliament's effectiveness.

Parliamentary accountability will be critical to ensure the economic, political and social transformation of the country is managed efficiently and reaches all of the groups that make up this vast land.

IN THE PARLIAMENT ITSELF THE DIVERSITY OF Myanmar is on full display as parliamentarians don traditional garb to wear into the sittings.

Much international focus has been directed to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. But there are a number of other political parties in the new parliament.

Many of these smaller parties represent the variety of ethnic groups that make up the complex tapestry of Myanmar. They are eager for advice on what they need to do to ensure their voice is heard in a parliamentary chamber dominated by the governing party and with 25 per cent of seats reserved for the military.

Myanmar's geographic spread presents a particular challenge for the new parliament. Connecting with people outside of the capital, particularly in the distant towns and villages, will be difficult but necessary if all the people of Myanmar are to feel part of the democratic revival.

With parliamentary sessions lasting for two to three months, and little opportunity during that time for MPs to return to their constituencies, parliamentarians will need to find ways they can stay in touch with the people who have elected them so that parliament does not remain remote.

As there are only 30 women among the 664 parliamentarians, gender equity also looms large as an issue for the parliament and the political parties. Aung San Suu Kyi's entry to the parliament certainly provides a significant role model for the future.

The three-month parliamentary session that commenced in July will give a first insight into the new dynamics of the parliament following the arrival of the MPs from the National League for Democracy. How they engage with the other parliamentarians and the role they seek to play will help to shape the directions the parliament will take, particularly in its relations with the government.

AS IT EXPLORES ITS MANDATE, THE NEEDS OF the new parliament are great, just as the needs of the country are great.



AAP

DIVERSITY ON DISPLAY:
Ethnic groups are represented in the new parliament

Skills development is high on the agenda. As well as improving their knowledge of parliamentary operations, MPs and officials alike are keen to improve their English language and IT skills. Reconnected with the world they want to be in the best position to take advantage of the opportunities coming their way.

Information is the lifeblood of any parliament and the lack of a library in Myanmar's new parliament complex makes it difficult for the MPs to adequately access the resources they need to properly undertake their duties. The request for



LOOKING FORWARD:

(Left) Aung San Suu Kyi sworn in at the new parliament building (pictured above)

parliament the support it needs to develop into a modern democracy, the words of a diplomat attending Aung San Suu Kyi's parliamentary debut ring true: "This time the world needs to get it right." •

An IPU team undertook a parliamentary needs assessment in Myanmar from late April to early May 2012. The team comprised Norah Babic (IPU secretariat Geneva), Supasinee Khamasundara (Thailand Parliament), Peter Lilienfeld (formerly of the South African Parliament) and Andres Lomp (Australian Parliament).

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a library has featured in the IPU's assessment report because improved access to information and research will help reinforce the role of parliamentarians and the independence of parliament from government.

The ongoing development of the parliamentary committee system will also be critical. In a parliament with more than 600 members, the committees and commissions that have been established will need to become the engine rooms for the detailed scrutiny and deliberative work of the parliament. Here international guidance can play a role to help MPs get the good practice examples they are after.

And in a country that has not experienced democracy in 50 years, much effort will need to be devoted to educating and informing the community about the way parliament works and how the public can engage with their new representatives. This is a job that needs to be shared between the MPs themselves and the parliamentary administration.

As Nay Pyi Taw's newly built hotels continue to fill with the international experts arriving to give Myanmar and its

Naming rights

In 1989, Burmese authorities changed the official name of the country in English from Burma to Myanmar (in full, the Union of Myanmar). In 2010 the Union of Myanmar became the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. A number of Burmese opposition political parties and groups do not recognise the changes and continue to refer to the country in English as Burma.

Myanmar is used by international organisations of which it is a member, such as the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the World Trade Organization and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Practice by countries varies.

The Australian government refers to the country as Burma, but uses Myanmar when communicating directly with Burmese officials and in multilateral contexts, as appropriate.

Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade