THE BLOG MYANMAR ROHINGYA RAKHINE STATE

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YANGON -- Measuring around 17 centimeters in length and weighing about 1 ounce, the Jerdon's babbler of Mayanmar is a small brown bird that is similar in appearance to a common house sparrow. Discovered by pioneering British botanist Thomas C. Jerdon in 1862, the Jerdon's babbler is best known for its caramel-colored plumage, for its distinct song, and, since 1941, for being extinct -- that is, until last May, when a team of naturalists was shocked to encounter the chirpy little chap darting around the central grasslands of this

southeast Asian nation. Announced in a scientific journal this month, the resuscitated creature was found with other feathered friends of the same genus.

During the 73 years of the babbler's Rip Van Winkle-like absence, its home country saw many changes. Its colonial British government fell when Japan invaded in 1942. Japan was then defeated by the Allied powers. Independence was declared. The country's founding father was assassinated. Democratic self-rule took root for 14 years. And finally, a military coup plunged the country into darkness for half a century, punctuated by the world's longest-running civil war, between ethnic Burmans and the country's ethnic minorities. Starting in 2011, democracy re-emerged, babbler-like, as generals traded uniforms for business clothes, declared elections, restored some basic rights and began opening Myanmar to the world.

Over the past few months, some fear that the journey has gotten sidetracked, as Myanmar's government seemingly violated four of the five freedoms the West generally ascribes to democracy. First up was the freedom to peaceably assemble, as riot police beat and arrested more than 100 students this month for protesting a new education bill. Then came freedom of the press, as several journalists were jailed and allegedly beaten by police while covering those student protests. Then came the freedom of expression, as three men were sentenced to prison for posting an online image of the Buddha wearing headphones to promote a bar. Meanwhile, freedom of religion is assaulted daily by the ongoing violence against more than 1 million Muslims at the hands of the Buddhist majority in western Rakhine State. It's not for nothing that a United Nations official this month found "worrying signs of backtracking, and in some areas, backtracking has gained momentum."

But local citizens and high-ranking Western and Asian officials I spoke with here remain much more optimistic, arguing that for every step the country takes backward, it takes two steps forward. After all, no country in history has gone cleanly from dictatorship to a perfectly functioning democracy in just four years, and the world shouldn't expect Myanmar to be the first. Across this region alone, Indonesia has taken 15 years to get to a similar point. Neighboring Thailand, which U.S. President Barack Obama has called "America's oldest friend in Asia," is living through its 12th successful coup since 1932 and its third overthrow of a democratically elected president in less than a decade. And Hong Kong, as a local businessman tells me, "was so corrupt in 1973 that if you had a fire, the fire chief would come to your door and negotiate a price. If you couldn't agree, the fire truck would leave. Today, it's finally clean."

"The big problem," a well-known European ambassador tells me, "is that most foreign observers look at Myanmar with a magnifying glass on a daily basis and they don't look at the overall curve. There are dips in the curve, yes. But there has been four years of progress, and we in the West couldn't do better."

As someone who has traveled to this country every year for more than a decade, it is progress that I see and feel personally. In fact, for the first time, I feel freer in Myanmar than in Thailand.

Visible signs of change are everywhere. Western brands are increasingly sold by Yangon's street vendors. Streets that were long empty now burgeon with traffic, creating a new problem of gridlock. As recently as two years ago, there were countless Chinese ads in cities like Mandalay. Now they are largely gone. It's a stark difference for a country that opened to the world in large part to blunt the growing influence of China and finds, as a top advisor to President Thein Sein tells me, that "the Chinese reputation in Myanmar is not good now."

With Japan and other Asian and Western nations pumping more than $5 billion into Myanmar's economy to fill China's falling influence, decades of stagnant growth gave way last year to an 8.3-percent growth rate and a projected 7.8-percent rate this year. Imports, jobs, construction projects, bank accounts and incomes are all up. Blackouts, child labor, and arrests are down. Rock concerts attract large crowds and foreign bands, who are able to sing free of the kind of censorship for which other countries in the region -- like Vietnam -- are known. Closed borders have given way to healthy tourism that expects to see 3 million visitors this year. Rule of law is on the rise: The Myanmar military recently stopped 500 trucks carrying illegal logs into China, unheard of in the past.

And then there is the press. The reason that the alleged arrests of journalists at this month's student rally was such a surprise is that press freedom has flowered here. Not only is the press free, but "it is freer, in fact, than the rest of the region," says a well-known European ambassador. A nation that had no newspapers and a censorship board four years ago now has both dailies and weeklies on newsstands, with surprising content. "There are cartoons in the media that even attack the president and other officials," a long-time activist tells me, an act that would have resulted in imprisonment or worse less than half a decade ago.

Of course, for a country where very few citizens have any memory of what it's like to live in a free-market economy, there is still much work to do. While the government has given universities more autonomy, "the staff doesn't use it," says a long-time Western ambassador, "because the culture here is not to make decisions ... but to just wait for orders, like East Germany used to be." Parliament has invested more in health care, but there aren't enough trained staff yet to take advantage of it. While 70 percent of the population depends on farming to make a living, there are few policy ideas in motion to increase quantity and quality of crops. A former high-level advisor to the opposition leader tells me that what the country really needs is "more technocrats."

As for the long-running civil war, fighting between the Burman army and ethnic minorities in northern Kachin State has intensified, but many of the 135 ethnic minorities across the country are hopeful that a peace agreement will be signed in early 2016, after parliamentary elections are held later this year. While the idea of federalism has been viewed skeptically since 2011 -- largely because, as a local businessman tells me, "neither the government nor ethnic tribes really understood what that meant" -- discussions about local control within a federalist structure are underway. There are even conversations about whether the army -- which now holds a mandated 25 percent of parliamentary seats -- will gradually go the way of Indonesia and see troops return to the barracks.

While the biggest open sore remains the mistreatment of local Muslims, known as the Rohingya -- a conflict between Buddhists and Muslims that reaches back more than a century -- it shouldn't blind the West to the advancements being made here. "The Rohingya situation is complicated and regretful, and the government handles it badly," says a long-time venture capitalist. "But judging Myanmar by

based Business Executives for National Security, has been widely published on domestic and international issues for three decades.

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