



the
**NEW
MYANMAR**

20

SPRING ISSUE

16

every child has a story

FIRST WORD

In November, four members of the Partners team received visas to enter Myanmar (Burma) for an unusual journey. We entered the country at Tachilek and rode motorcycles nearly 2000 miles through Shan, Karenni, and Karen States, ending up at the Myawaddy Bridge to cross back into Thailand. A couple of years ago, this would not have been allowed or possible.

We travelled this long distance through "secure," approved lanes of asphalt or gravel, while at the same time, on either side of the road, ongoing military offensives resulted in 10,000 new displaced refugees in Shan State alone.

While we heard reports and directly experienced the brutal reality of Myanmar's continuing fascism, we also saw unprecedented opportunities.

When we stopped for coffee, even at tiny villages nestled in the remotest spots of Shan State, the buzz was how the upcoming elections may change everything. One tea shop owner told us, "If Aung San Suu Kyi gets the vote, there is hope for our country!"

On election day we were in a town on the border of Karen State. While we ate our savory bread with murky sweet coffee we noticed that everyone had purple pinky fingers. I asked the shop owner what it was for, and he stuck his finger in the air, broke into a big proud smile, and said one thing: "NLD!" Like the majority of voters, he had put his hope in the National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi's political party, and dipped his finger in violet ink to show he had cast his vote.

With a government minder's approval, we crossed a river on our bikes that marked the end of relative safety

and the beginning of a "black" zone, under martial law. We rode to a church where about 300 Karen villagers were gathered for worship. Our government-assigned "tour operator" snapped a few pictures of us seated in the church, then left saying, "We will meet you in the next town southward."

The only way to get to this place a few years ago involved a lot of danger and a month-long walk from Thailand. Now one can hop in a car and drive there. Nobody can say that things aren't changing in Myanmar. The decrease in violence presents unprecedented opportunities for us to help the children and families who have lived amid conflict for as long as they can remember.

However, while we are finding our way into new places, ongoing fighting in Shan and Kachin States means that civilian populations continue to be displaced and face the brutal realities of hunger, fear, and physical deprivation. In Rakhine State, one million Rohingya Muslim people are in concentration camps for the fourth year, facing two equally appalling choices. Either they slowly waste away or they try to catch a ride on a ship, thinking they have a job at the next port, only to find out that they are the cargo of human traffickers and the nightmare just got worse.

In this mixed landscape of sprouting reform and longstanding misery, Partners Relief & Development and people like you who support this work continue to help communities stay together, grow food to provide for themselves, and get their kids back into school.

For the children,

Steve Gumaer

Founder and International CEO

DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS (?)*

On November 8, 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD,) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in Myanmar. As promising as this seems after 50+ years of military rule, what does the victory actually mean for the people of Myanmar?

* (But how democratic is it really?)



On election day, The NLD took almost 80% of available seats, sweeping aside other parties, included the army's political wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)

ELECTION RESULTS:

- NLD (60%)
- Army (25%)
- Others (9%)
- USDP (6%)

IS THIS SEAT TAKEN?


Prior to the election, in an effort to maintain a presence in the government, the military set aside **25%** of the parliamentary seats for their own appointments. So while the **NLD** won the vast majority of available seats, a quarter of the parliamentary positions were not included in the election.



75%

Percentage of parliamentary votes needed to amend the constitution.*

*A rule imposed by the military before they gave up power, guaranteeing them veto ability over any attempted changes to the constitution by the NLD.



NLD party leader **Aung San Suu Kyi** is ineligible to become president of Myanmar because of a **constitutional clause** denying anyone with children who hold international passports. This rule, implemented by the military specifically to block Suu Kyi, cannot be amended as long as the military continues to veto.

So while the recent elections were a step forward, there is still a long way to go, and the question remains:

WITH THE MILITARY RULES IN PLACE HOW MUCH CAN CHANGE?

A young boy with dark hair, wearing a light blue school uniform, is shown in profile, focused on writing in a notebook. The notebook is open, and his hand is visible as he writes. The background is softly blurred, suggesting a classroom setting. Overlaid on the image is the title 'Current Education, FUTURE CHANGE' in a white, hand-drawn, chalk-like font. Below the title, the name 'ODDNY GUMAER' is written in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

Current Education, FUTURE CHANGE

ODDNY GUMAER

“Before we met Partners, I didn’t think change was possible. The situation was what it was and we couldn’t do anything about it. Now, with the opportunities Partners has given us, I have understood that I can actually make a difference in our village. You have made it possible to do what I thought was impossible. What we want to do now is to expand our school so that children from other villages also can come here and go to school.”

The man saying this was the leader of the education committee in the village we were visiting. He was from a village where there used to be no school at all. They are from the Shan ethnic group, and therefore not a high priority for the government. If the government sees fit to support a village school in Shan State, they provide teachers who don't speak the Shan language so the children don't understand what is being taught anyway.

The story we heard gave reason to hope. When Partners heard of the village's need for a school, we wanted to help. They became a part of our Sustainable Schools project, which meant that we gave them money to start a business to in turn fund the school. In that way the school is sustainable, and the village is not dependent on Partners. The village started a micro bank and now gives loans to the villagers at an affordable interest rate of three per cent. With the money they earn in interest they are able to finance the school.

"One hundred per cent of the borrowers pay us back," the villagers told us. "Why wouldn't they? The school provides education for their own children. It is in their best interest to keep the bank going."

We looked around. The land reminded me of the past, of a less complicated time. The streets had occasional cars, but there were more bicycles and even horses with carriages. The houses were simple structures and the villages bore witness to close-knit communities. Surrounding the villages were fields of tall sugar cane reeds, making us all feel like Alice in Wonderland. It was beautiful and pure. A place I could imagine living.

It appeared hotel owners from all over the world had similar thoughts. In the area where we were, 60 hotels were being built.

"Sixty hotels? That is a lot of land and space," we commented. "From whom did the hotel moguls get all that land?"

"They bought it from the government, who forcibly relocated the villagers who originally lived there," we were told.

"They were forced to leave and they weren't compensated?"

"Yes, and no. They got a little bit of money for their land, but only a symbolic sum. In Myanmar the poor people have no land deeds, so they can't prove that the land they and their forefathers lived on is actually theirs."

"So what do they end up doing when they can't work the land?"

"They become day laborers in Thailand, and sometimes here in Myanmar. They have no rights."

I was reminded of the brothels filled with young Burmese girls. I wondered if any of them came from these villages that no longer existed. Could they have lived on Novotel land?

The importance of what we at Partners are doing suddenly became so clear. To stop the abuse, the oppression and the cycle of poverty that the Shan and other ethnic groups were in, education was the only solution. Only by teaching them to read and write could they learn what their rights were and gain skills that would allow them a better life than migrant workers in dark and dangerous factories, or as prostitutes in a luxury hotel.






DYING TO LIVE

BRAD HAZLETT

THE FIRST TIME I MET BITANI BAGUM I couldn't help but wonder how many months she had endured her suffering. A large infected abscess in her cheek, caused by growing mouth cancer, had left a gaping hole where there was once healthy tissue.

The living conditions in the camp in western Myanmar are hardly ideal for the healthy, let alone those left without medical care. I wasn't prepared for what I saw on my most recent trip. The gangrenous infection had now taken much of the left side of her face. I hoped my expression didn't reveal shocking disbelief at her deteriorated condition.

There we stood completely helpless. No amount of the pain medication we had with us would bring relief. Too weak to walk, she now spends her days sitting in a chair, waiting for the inevitable. She has been stripped of her ability to survive. Her 27-year frame is now reduced to that of a 12-year-old.



As if holding dignity in her hand, she covers her face with a dirty rag in an attempt to hide her embarrassment from the grotesque disfigurement. Our small team said a prayer and gave her the only tangible hope we knew. But what could a handful of pain pills do for someone unable to swallow? I know my next visit will be different. I won't find Bitani Bagum sitting in that same chair, waiting.

Sunday, November 8, was a huge day in Myanmar. You may have read about it as the people of Myanmar went to the polls. The National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won in a landslide victory. The only real surprise was that they did better than predicted throughout the country and in all of the ethnic areas.

We were in a remote town on the day of what was promised to be a fair election. A democratic election is what most of the world takes for granted but is an elusive foreign concept in Myanmar, where the military has had complete and unrestricted control over the government and its people. On this day, the atmosphere was filled with the hope and excitement of eager voters. It was as if their ink-marked fingers proved their vote would guarantee a win for their party of choice, the NLD, and make a difference for their lives in Burma.

My most recent trip to visit Bitani in the camps in western Myanmar was my first since the exhilaration brought on by the election. The response to the election in the camps was a stark contrast to the enthusiasm shown throughout the rest of the country. Stripped of all rights, those in the camps are unable to vote and so they face their future with skepticism of any hope for change.

You can hardly blame the Rohingya for their feelings of desperation when those in power refuse to acknowledge their existence. Even Aung San Suu Kyi, a victim of military maltreatment herself, has taken the same approach as the rest of the country, choosing silence over action. After all, her popularity would be adversely affected if she were to mention the ongoing human rights abuses against the Rohingya.

Even so, there is continued optimism that the election results will bring positive change as the transition of power takes place in the next two months. Following the transition, perhaps with increased international awareness and pressure, there is the possibility that new leaders will begin advocating for the Rohingya.

Without changes in policies targeting the Rohingya, our friends in the camps will continue to pursue their only other option, to get on boats and risk their lives at the hands of human traffickers. On this most recent trip we were told that more will try to escape the horrors of the camps by risking their lives at sea. This continues to be the only option open to those with the means to pursue it. However, the going rate of extortion by traffickers of more than USD 2,000 is more than most struggling in the camps can afford. For them, their only other option is to endure their hardships and hope for change.

So for Bitani, and for thousands of others, there are no alternatives. The possibility of finding freedom at the hands of human traffickers is beyond their reach, and the prospect of the government changing its policy is also unlikely. And so they become just another casualty in the systematic oppression of their people. For them, it's just too late.

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5 EXCELLENT REASONS TO VOLUNTEER WITH PARTNERS

BFF's (Best Friends for Life)

9 out of 10 volunteers agree: Partners friendships are forever. (1 out of 10 said "Can you repeat the question?" and wasn't counted, but we're pretty sure they agree too.)

The Food!

Thai food is world renowned for its deliciousness and spice, and your time with Partners in Thailand and Myanmar may be the best eating of your life!

Cultural Experiences

Golden temples, elephants, village life, foreign languages (with many hand gestures for clarification), amazing scenery, and the sweetest smiles you'll find anywhere. You'll experience this part of the world like never before.

Personal Growth

Experiencing new ways of life brings understanding; trying to speak another language teaches patience. Contact with the needs of others brings thankfulness and motivation to live with more love and intentionality. Your time at Partners offers this, and more.

Making a Difference

Last, but definitely not least, you'll have the chance to bring hope to those affected by conflict and oppression, and personally be changed in the process.

WE WANT YOU! FOR MORE INFO, CHECK OUT
▶ [PARTNERS.NGO/JOIN-OUR-TEAM](https://partners.ngo/join-our-team)

SHORT ON CHANGE

Craig Garrison

IT USED TO BE that any news coming out of Myanmar was almost universally bad. Fighting in ethnic regions, drug and human trafficking, horrific crimes against humanity, to name a few. However, it appears that this may be changing.

With the elections that took place in November 2015, there is clearly a sense of hope and a possibility of change in many parts of the country that hasn't been seen or felt in a generation or two. The National League for Democracy party (NLD), led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won a resounding victory, winning 77 per cent of contested seats, and the new parliament will be seated in early February. This new parliament will then elect the new president and two vice-presidents for the next five-year term. However, the next president will not be Aung San Suu Kyi. Under Article 59(f) of the current constitution, she is barred from sitting as president as she has sons who are foreign citizens. She has made it clear, however, that she will be calling

the shots, that she will be "above the President." We'll see.

While many are hopeful that the elections will finally bring real change to Myanmar, it's important to note what the election results will not change. I've already mentioned that the current Myanmar constitution prevents Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president. Much more troubling, however, is the strong control Myanmar's military will continue to have in the country. For starters, the 2008 military-drafted constitution guarantees that 25 per cent of the parliament will consist of unelected military representatives and, unsurprisingly, requires more than a 75 per cent majority to make any changes to the constitution. Further, the constitution stipulates that important security ministries in the government (defense, home affairs and border affairs) are selected by the head of Tatmadaw (military), not the president or parliament. It is clear that the former



generals have set up the military as a formidable political force for the foreseeable future.

So, what do the historic election results mean? For one, the resounding victory of the NLD in the recent elections is a clear mandate for democratic change after decades of military rule. However, as the Transnational Institute warns, “unless the NLD pioneers a political breakthrough, conflict and the marginalization of minority peoples will continue. The perception is widespread that the present structures of national politics and Myanmar’s “first-past-the-post” electoral system do not guarantee the equitable representation of all nationality groups.”

For years, our work at Partners Relief & Development has centered on assisting ethnic minority groups in the eastern conflict zones of Myanmar. That continues to be the case, but we

also now practically help the Rohingya minority population in the western part of the country as well as the Kachin in the northeast. For these, and many other ethnic minority groups, our work hasn’t ended and may not for many years. Tens of thousands of Rohingya continue to be imprisoned in concentration camp-like facilities in Arakan State and more than 100,000 Kachin people have been displaced by the military and are holed up in IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camps—many near their own farms and homes.

It’s early, and the new parliament hasn’t even been seated yet. From our perspective the NLD-led government has its hands full. Pressing issues include much needed political reform and comprehensive cease-fire agreements across the country. It may very well be the case that getting elected was the easy part. Governing will be much harder.



Claire Gibbons

HOPE

IN THE MIDST

"I WOULD HAVE BEEN WITHOUT HOPE IF I HAD NOT BELIEVED THAT I WOULD

SEE THE LOVING-KINDNESS OF THE LORD IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING"

Psalms 27:13

“MY NAME IS NAW LAW SHEL. I live in Taw Lo Dun village, but now I am a student. I live in Hit Khee La boarding home (Beautiful Home). When I am in my village I live with my family. I have seven siblings, six girls and one boy. My mother passed away many years ago. Only two people among of my siblings have studied. Now my younger sisters want to study, but they can't because my father can't send them to school. It is a blessing for me to study. As I come to do sewing training I have a goal for my village. My teachers and my leaders also have a plan and know that our boarding home will have to stand by itself in the future.”

Naw Law Shel lives in Karen State, Myanmar. Before her, only two of the eight children in her family had the opportunity to go to school, but because of Partners' Sustainable Agriculture For Education (SAFE) program, Naw Law Shel goes to school now too.

She lives at Beautiful Home, a community-run home supported by Partners, where her education is partly funded by sustainable agriculture initiatives in the community. In her spare time, she is also learning to sew; so she has another skill to support herself and her family once she finishes school.

In the midst of the many, many challenges that Myanmar faces, we must and we can have hope. For every story we share of heartache, exploitation and the challenges the political process still has to resolve, there are stories like Naw Law Shel's – threads of hope and transformation as whole families and villages are impacted by a generation of children being nurtured and educated.

When our team visited Shan State at the end of last year, they were thrilled to meet Lung Sai, who had attended a Partners training seminar for the System of Rice

Intensification (SRI). Joy spread across his face when he shared how learning sustainable rice production methods from our team had radically improved his rice production. As he jumped around pointing and gesturing with a huge smile he said, "This year I'm harvesting 10 cups of rice per square meter and the rest of the valley got only four." His harvest more than doubled the first year he applied the SRI technique and now he can better feed his children and have spare funds to improve their lives

Though there is far to go, the improved democracy in Myanmar has already brought new opportunities for Partners to make a difference.

We have been given more freedom to partner with community-based organizations in Karen State and Kachin State. Together we have been able to start education, community care and health programs that will help thousands of people in impoverished villages and 'temporary' displaced people camps in government-controlled areas.

This also means that our local staff have more freedom to travel in Myanmar than ever before. Instead of spending a week walking to some projects, our local staff can now get there on the back of a motorcycle in a day. What a difference this makes! Our staff can now reach even more communities that need assistance and have more time to get the work done.

These stories give just a glimpse of the hope that we carry together, that one day, the children of Myanmar will all experience free, full lives. It is in our partnership together with dedicated locals, generous supporters, and vocal advocates that change will come despite the ongoing challenges this fragile nation continues to face.

HELLO'S & GOODBYES



KERRINE

Kerrine has been with Partners for over seven years! We have had the pleasure of seeing her grow in her role as manager of our Childcare Projects at our Mae Sot field office. She has a heart of gold and there will definitely be a Kerrine-sized hole left in her absence. We wish her the very best of blessings as she enters into a new season of life and into the wonderful land that is marriage! She will be missed.



SACHA

Sacha spent six great years with Partners. She served as Partners' graphic designer and was also a driving force in our weaving brand, *Intertwine*. Sacha has a knack for all things fabulous including, but not limited to: red lipstick, throwing fun theme parties, and contagiously laughing. When she's not spontaneously breaking out in song and dance, she has a passion for leading others in musical worship. We wish her the best of luck as she focuses on this in New Zealand.



KHUP

Khup joined Partners in 2012. Since then he has served chiefly as our Teams and Volunteers Coordinator. He also spent time at SEED Learning Center as the Head English Teacher. Khup has a particular gift of planning, and more uniquely, loving it. His talent for always having a Plan B, C or Q has served Partners (and its volunteers) well. He is a professional traveller and knows all the best restaurants in Chiang Mai and pretty much every other city in Thailand. Khup, you added a tremendous amount to our team and we will miss you.



MATT & THALIA

Matt and Thalia have joined the Partners team in the Chiang Mai office to work with our health projects (Matt) and communications (Thalia). Strongly committed to pursuing social justice wherever they can be of use, Matt is a British doctor who specializes in urgent care and medical administration, and Thalia is a former Baptist pastor, now writer and blogger, from New Zealand. They and their two children, James and Hazel, are settling in well to Thai life and looking forward to helping bring free, full lives to children and families in Myanmar and beyond.



RIDE FOR REFUGE

October 1st, 2016

Happening in cities all across Canada, Ride For Refuge is a fun bike-a-thon raising support for the displaced, vulnerable, & exploited. Your participation in this ride will help us deliver emergency relief, healthcare, access to education and sustainable development training for families and communities.

SIGN UP AND RIDE FOR PARTNERS!

www.partners.ngo/ca/ride-for-refuge



CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENT

JUNE 16

SPRINGBANK LINKS - CALGARY

Enjoy a round of golf and know that your generous contribution will directly help the children and suffering communities of Myanmar/Burma. Your participation and gift is a blessing. So take a day, swing a club and come alongside us to make a significant difference in this world.

GET MORE INFO AND SIGN UP!

www.partners.ngo/ca/charity-golf-tournament



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