

The Evolution of Burma

BY MAY MON POST

A few years ago, my husband and I took a trip to Burma (Myanmar) to visit my native country and pay a visit to my aging grandmother. Our trip coincided with the start of my husband's first year of law school. He was toting around a casebook and reading the small print on our airline tickets as if he might be able to apply what he had learned from reading *Hadley v. Baxendale*, that famous English contract case. Ah, the 1L experience. Billable hours, appeasing clients, partners, insurance companies, and judges (not necessarily in that order), the whole "grinding wheel" of the profession – like the consequences of failing to return Mr. Hadley's crankshaft in a timely manner – not yet foreseeable.

Our flight touched down in Rangoon, and, after checking our bags at our hotel, we met up with our tour guide. This was about a year-and-a-half before what some writers have called the "Burmese Spring." The junta – the ruling generals – had not yet loosened their iron grasp on the country. Aung San Suu Kyi was still under house arrest. The generals purportedly were still sending many of their most promising sons to North Korea for military training. Tour guides, at the time of our visit, were noticeably suspicious that their movements and conversations were being observed and evaluated by government "spies." A slip of the tongue could result in prison, or worse. Or so we were told.

For the first few days of our adventure, our tour guide was tight-lipped and stuck to the script for the most part. He told us about this country of mythical landscapes, ancient treasures and some of the friendliest people in the world. Together, we ventured around Rangoon and explored the many golden-gilded pagodas and their surrounding shrines that shimmered and sparkled under the blazing sun, turning everything around into a beautiful, yellowish glow. We spent mornings sipping too-sweet tea at Rangoon's colorful bazaars, where worlds seemed to collide between wealthy drug dealers' wives releasing yellow crested sparrows for a dollar each, street children with torn clothes playing soccer in bare feet, and tourists discreetly exchanging crisp \$100 bills to get a better exchange rate on the black market.

We were amazed by the architecture and infrastructure, if you could call it that, which appeared to be equal parts British colonial, Burmese and Buddhist traditional – Baroque and Beaux Arts-style buildings on the verge of collapse, gold-domed pagodas with their telltale spires rising triumphantly above trees and buildings, and jungle. Traveling by "cab" around the tight

city blocks, and looking up, you would not be surprised to see trees and weeds and flowers growing out of the sides and tops of occupied buildings that are remnants of the colonial rule. Looking down, you might catch a glimpse of the passing road through a hole in the cab floor. Though the British have long gone and the country is experiencing pockets of modernization and is opening its doors wider to tourists, there is a spirit and feel about the place that is closer to the times of George Orwell (circa 1925) than to the glossy modern look of Singapore, Burma's rich neighbor to the southeast.

As the days went by, our tour guide began to open up to us and whispered to us about the hundreds of political detainees and censorship in the country. He told us about a comedian who was banned indefinitely from performing publicly for his puns against the military junta and then sentenced to 59 years in prison because he spoke to the foreign media about the situation of homeless people after a cyclone. He told us about the landmine use by the Burmese army to block supply routes for ethnic opposition, and even worse, the army's use of villagers as human minesweepers to send ahead of the troops to detonate mines. My husband, still knee-deep in his 1L experience, was quick to point out various torts and other violations of constitutional proportions.

It was incredible to see our tour guide opening up and telling us about the political situation in Burma on the condition that we would never mention his name. When we gave him some books on Burma and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* we brought with us, he was grateful. Burmese newspapers, mostly government-run, were quick to tout government achievements

and simultaneously warn people of the dangers of democracy and the influence of foreign "infidels." Turn on the TV during the news hour and we were sure to catch a glimpse of a general in front of some public works project, though you'd be hard-pressed to stumble across a gleaming public project on your daily travels.

Burma pulls at the heartstrings. The country is beautiful and alive with tranquility and promise. Perhaps it is the peaceful and dignified way that the saffron-robed monks wind their way through town at mealtime, and into your consciousness. Perhaps it is the colorful sarongs (wrap-around full-body skirts) that women and men don alike in just about all contexts of play and work. The grey-blue blur of Wall Street business attire is virtually nonexistent, even in Burma's largest cities. If you want to see the gentle, colorful, vibrant pulse of the city, attend a pagoda at prayer time. Perhaps it is the ubiquitous smiles of



the people, hard at work, even under crushing poverty. Day laborers, including throngs of women, carry rocks the size of Timberland shoeboxes atop their heads, road construction providing steady (if paltry) pay. Consider a grin as wide as a Cheshire cat from a man literally riding a water buffalo with a long stick as a whip or guiding tool. Thwap! Around every turn, in Burma, you are greeted with a scene that just does not appear in any western land.

Burma is evolving and seems to be teetering on the verge of more openness and perhaps even genuine democratic elections. Since our visit, Burma has freed hundreds of political prisoners, including the comedian who was sentenced to 59 years for “public order offenses” as part of a mass amnesty by

the government. In fact, in July, Burma’s President said during his first official visit to the U.K. that Burma will release all political prisoners “by the end of the year.” And, in September, Duane Morris, LLP became the first U.S. law firm to launch an office in Burma. Progress is possible. Poor Hadley never recovered the losses flowing from the tardy return of his crankshaft. But Hadley’s successors – indeed the whole universe of law – benefits through evolution. My husband has just graduated from law school and no longer speaks like a 1L. Now, that is progress. ■

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