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THE ROTARY CLUB OF BANGKOK SOUTH



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12.15 pm.

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Deon Seals Working with Nelson Mandela

No 2478

15 March 2013

Gwen Robinson Myanmar Plans its own 'mini Singapore'

First I should explain the title of my talk as focusing on Myanmar's ambitions as a "mini-Singapore". The term came up during a visit to Kyaukphyu, on Myanmar's west coast, the site of the new Chinese oil and gas pipelines and the Shwe gas project led by South Korea's Daewoo International.

These projects have given impetus to the government to pursue another ambitious Special Economic Zone development, after Thilawa near Yangon and Dawei.

Officials bill the Kyaukphyu SEZ plan as a potential "mini-Singapore" – and while the plans are still taking shape, the project in many respects has more likelihood of succeeding than Dawei in the foreseeable future, not least due to its highly strategic position with shipping routes straight into the Indian Ocean, offering China the opportunity to bypass the Malacca Straits and transport goods across Myanmar to and from Yunnan.

As for the future of Myanmar, there are so many stories and people who

illustrate the radical changes that have taken place in the past two years, starting with the best-known Burmese, Aung San Suu Kyi, whose journey from an Oxford housewife to opposition icon and Nobel prize winner, and President Thein Sein, who began his career in the military fighting ethnic rebels and has ended up in the presidential palace.

But there are other stories to remind you of the extraordinary change – for example, the five young friends, all in their 20s and educated in Singapore, who returned 18 months ago to set up businesses and as a sideline, opened a bar in central Yangon. It was an instant success – in a place that not long ago was dark and quiet at night under curfews and with bans on public gatherings.

The young friends have set up companies ranging from pharmaceutical distribution to beverages and rep offices for foreign schools. They didn't have to return to Myanmar, they told me, but decided to try when they real-



ised the reforms were genuine.

The most telling story – and my favourite – is about Zeyar Thaw, the young rapper, who founded Generation Wave, an underground protest movement for artists, and was imprisoned for years. He was released in 2011, joined Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party and in last April's by-elections, ran for and won a parliamentary seat. Not only that, the seat was in the constituency of the hard-

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Etihad Airways, the national airline of the United Arab Emirates, has in just eight years established itself as the world's leading airline.

“Etihad” is the Arabic word for “union”.

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Kirk Albrow, GM of Etihad Airways Thailand, came to the club on Friday to present Rtn Adrian with his Etihad ticket to Europe.



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line former vice president, Tin Aung Myint Oo, in Naypyitaw – a constituency full of military personnel. To everybody's surprise he won and has now become a serious young MP.

Every day you also come across stories of ordinary people whose lives have transformed in the last two years. A taxi driver, Mike, who left Myanmar years ago and worked in oil services in the Middle East. He returned last year with just enough savings to buy a shiny taxi, a new breed that is replacing the rusting hulks that rattle around the city. He said he came back because he wanted to be part of the reform process – and I'm sure he'll own a fleet of cars before long.

Beyond people is the physical changes in the country – it is hard to imagine today that people were being locked up not so long ago for merely displaying an NLD poster or Aung San Suu Kyi's photo. Travel was severely restricted, media was heavily censored.

Today, "Daw Suu" T-shirts are sold on virtually every street, new bars and restaurants every week, gleaming new cars on the streets and a vibrant media reporting every move of parliament and government as well as stories critical of officials.

People still ask today, how and why did Myanmar get to this point?

I would say it is a combination of the impact of the Cyclone Nargis disaster in 2008. The outside world barely noticed the scale of the tragedy, in which more than 140,000 people died. That is partly because the isolationist military regime ruling the

country had been so secretive.

But in the aftermath of Nargis there was a pervasive sense that the country had hit rock bottom. President Thein Sein was then prime minister; he had travelled in a limited way, within the region, but he had seen enough to know how far Myanmar had fallen behind. When I interviewed him last year he spoke of his long-held desire to tackle the grinding poverty of Myanmar's people and he seemed totally genuine.

Nargis essentially prompted the regime to open up, and accept help from foreign governments and aid agencies. Thein Sein was a low-key but key player in all that. But the crucial factor, say many, was the decision by Than Shwe, the former dictator, to retire and anoint Thein Sein as successor. More vital was his decision some years earlier in 2004 to draw up a constitution, plan national elections and set up parliament.

The resulting constitution is problematic – especially for ASSK in its ban on people who married foreigners from becoming president, and its allocation of one quarter of all seats to the military. But it gives considerable powers parliament, agree western constitutional law experts.

This was seen in the recent threats to impeach the president, and growing tensions between the legislative and executive branches.

The most striking trend now is the astonishing speed of reform. Like the proverbial snowball, reforms appear to have acquired momentum of their own – huge bits of legislation from foreign investment law to financial reform and political reforms have been undertaken.

The main concern is that not only the government but many sectors are trying to do too much too quickly – from drafting key legislation to overhauling the bureaucracy.

This is also reflected in the scarcity of human resources and capacity – a crippling lack of trained professionals, including lawyers and bureaucrats. Help is at hand, with every friendly government and international and non-government organisation wanting to implement aid programmes and assistance.

And at the heart of it all are seething ethnic issues – including conflicts such as in Kachin, which if unresolved could undo much of the international goodwill towards the government.

Another big rush is foreign investment. While the amount of actual deals is tiny the sheer volume of business missions and proposed deals is huge and growing.

Where is all this leading?

All eyes are on the 2015 election. President Thein Sein has said he won't run again. Everyone expects the NLD to win a landslide, and Aung San Suu Kyi to at least lead the party into the election and possibly attempt to reform the constitution to enable her to eventually take over as president.

The actual outcome is anyone's guess because – as many people will say: "This is Myanmar and anything can happen".

This article has been kindly provided by Gwen Robinson.



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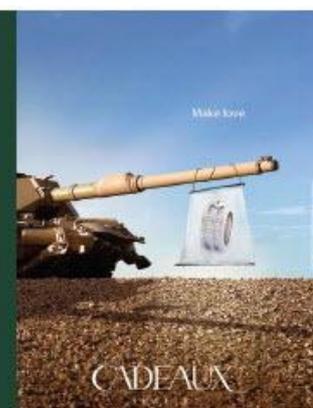


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Khun Khob's Club Almanac # 2478– 15 March 2013

Happy Birthdays

Gerard Geraets	March 17
PP Ole Madsen	March 18
Chip Bowness	March 21

Wedding Anniversary Greetings

Prasob Snongjati	March 15
Gerard Geraets	March 16
Benjamin Ferguson	March 18
Elmar Lins	March 21

Attendance for 8 March 2013: 64%

Present 39, Make-up 9, Absent 27, Exemption 28, Total 103

Resignation

John Watson

Visiting on 8 March 2013

From Local Club	
RC Bangkok	Dr Eugene Chen, Nathalie Post
Patong Beach, Phuket	Richard Jones

From Abroad

Akile Ifeanyi	RC Amuwo, Nigeria
John Chirgwin	RC Martha's Vineyard, USA

Invited Guests

Francis Liem	Introduced by
Jan Akerman	Tim Cornwall
Kirk Albrow	Stuart Lucani
Sievert Larson	PP Ole Madsen
	Adrian Topham

Recent Makeups

Royal Hua Hin, 1/03/13: PP Mark Butters
 Bangkok, 7/03/13: PP John Quarmby, PP Narinder Sachdev

Make-up Credits

Golf, 28/02/13: Adrian Topham, Alastair Timblich, AG Andrew MacPherson, Benjamin Ferguson, Chip Bowness, Dana Edward Caron, PP Don Lavoie, Douglas Riach, Elmar Lins, Gerard Geraets, PP Ian Morris, Juergen Bernholt, Leo Alexandersen, Marcel Dubbelman, Marco Casanova, Mark Shaw, Michael Ellis, Morgan Perkins, PP Narinder Sachdev, Nathan Christoff, PP Ole Madsen, Prasert Mangkornkarn, Rakesh Sodhia, Ravi Sehgal, Rod Vergara, Ron Livingston, Stuart Lucani, Tim Cornwall, Tyrone Jenkins, Vichai Tantratitvud, Vince Shueh, William Fantozzi

Duck Race, 4/03/12: AG Andrew MacPherson, Dana Edward Caron, Dean Outerson, PP Don Lavoie, Douglas Riach, Ken Hoon, PP Nigel Hardy, Tim Cornwall

Membership, 6/03/13: AG Andrew MacPherson, PP Mark Butters, PN Michael Doyle, PE Mike Schulz, PP Niti Meyer, PP Ole Madsen, PDG Praphan Hutasingh, Rui Belo, PP Vichai Tantratitvud



Club Calendar

Friday, 22 March

David Lyman
D.L.'s Ideal Woman

Friday, 29 March

Dr Ian Fenwick
Rtn Dean Outerson
Death in the Time of Social Media

Friday, 5 April

Doug Rhein
Women incarcerated in Thailand

Friday, 12 April

Fellowship - Pre Songkran Holiday

Friday, 19 April

Craig Craft
Asia Injury Prevention Foundation

For Bangkok South Events

[rotarybangkoksouth.org/
calendar-of-events](http://rotarybangkoksouth.org/calendar-of-events)

Important Dates to

Remember

Thursday, 21 March 2013
Kids Day Out

Friday, 22 March to
Sunday, 24 March 2013
District Conference
Nakhon Nayok



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