On October 25, 2011, the University of Michigan Wallenberg Committee awarded Aung San Suu Kyi (Daw Suu) the 21st Raoul Wallenberg Medal in absentia for her non-violent struggle on behalf of democracy and human rights in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma—in 1989, the government changed the official English-language name “Burma” to “Myanmar”—Myanmar appears rather than Burma throughout this article). Myanmar’s military rulers had kept Daw Suu under house arrest for much of the past 24 years and only released her on November 13, 2010. Ironically, by the time I delivered the medal to her in Yangon last December, the government had inched towards Daw Suu’s vision of greater freedom and democracy.

The Wallenberg Committee didn’t predict—indeed couldn’t have expected—these developments when selecting Aung San Suu Kyi for the award. Since 1988, the military had ruled Myanmar directly. The junta announced elections for 1990, but reneged when Daw Suu’s National League for Democracy (NLD) won over 80% of the seats. Instead, the junta formed its own national convention to draft a new constitution that guaranteed the military 25% of legislative seats. The constitution was approved via referendum in May 2008 with a suspiciously high 93.82% approval.

**Transformations**

Given the skepticism surrounding the transition to what the new constitution called a “discipline-flourishing democracy,” the NLD boycotted the November 2010 elections. The junta’s favored party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), won just under 80% of the contested seats in the new legislature (the Hluttaw). While the former military chief, Senior General Than Shwe, officially retired when the new government was inaugurated last March, the political leadership largely hails from the military, many from the upper echelons of the former junta.

Despite the fears of many observers, Myanmar’s elites did not simply trade in their military uniforms for business suits, but rather took genuine if gradual steps towards reform. President Thein Sein has legalized trade unions, relaxed censorship, pursued currency reform, released hundreds of political prisoners, and suspended construction of the unpopular Myitsone Dam. Under Speaker Thura Shwe Mann’s leadership the lower chamber of the legislature (Pyithu Hluttaw) has become much more than a rubber-stamp for the military’s agenda. Shwe Mann has even formed oversight committees and encouraged the opposition to propose bills. The military itself has largely stayed out of politics and military MPs vote with their legislative leaders, not as a unified bloc.

Even more remarkable is the change in the political atmosphere. One can now hear citizens in teashops discussing politics...
without fear. The local media—including the government-owned New Light of Myanmar—report on Daw Suu's every move, often quite favorably. Street vendors now sell posters and calendars with Daw Suu's photos on them (fashion models must be concerned that a 67-year-old politician has taken their place on the 2012 calendar). Perhaps most dramatically, where billboards in downtown Yangon once proclaimed the “People’s Desires” (see photo) they now feature Aung San Suu Kyi’s profile and ads for an NLD education benefit concert.

Aung San Suu Kyi herself has begun the transformation from resistance leader to politician. After meeting with President Thein Sein in August, Daw Suu and the NLD decided to participate in the political process. On April 1, the NLD ran candidates in 44 by-elections and won 43 seats, compared to the USDP’s one. Even more surprising, it won all four constituencies in Naypyitaw, which is dominated by military and civil service personnel. Daw Suu herself won a seat from Kawhmu district with an estimated 70-80% of the vote.

The Challenges

Ironically, over the next few months the greatest threat to democratization might come from infighting amongst reformers. The new system of checks and balances in Naypyitaw, which is dominated by military and civil service personnel. Daw Suu herself won a seat from Kawhmu district with an estimated 70-80% of the vote. As president, Thein Sein must manage a divided cabinet, where only a handful of ministers fully support the reform agenda. By contrast, Shwe Mann is focused on consolidating his support amongst MPs so that the Pyithu Hluttaw nominates him for president in 2015. The two branches constantly fight over the limits of their institutional powers, most recently in March when Shwe Mann forced through a bill to raise the salaries of civil servants in order to combat corruption. Ironically, this might be just what Senior General Than Shwe had hoped for before he retired; by fighting amongst themselves, the reformers would not be able to unite and arrest him.

Myanmar has a single-member district plurality voting system, which should lead to a two-party system. Yet, the political party system remains desperately fractured. Overall, the military and USDP combined control around 80% of the seats, while the opposition consists of over a dozen parties. Even the NLD, which is set to become the largest opposition party, controls just under 7% of the total. Moreover, many of the splinter parties stem from deep personality rather than ideological differences. When the NLD had decided to boycott the 2010 elections, a group of Young Turks split off to form the National Democratic Force. After the elections, a dispute regarding financial records in the NDF led several key members to form the New National League for Democracy. While Daw Suu herself is universally respected, some of the smaller parties also resent the NLD’s star power. The new government must find a more equitable and permanent distribution of power and resources with the country’s ethnic minorities. The country’s largest ethnic majority group, the Burmans, comprise two-thirds of the population and occupy the central part of the country, while the Shan (approximately 10% of the population), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), and Kachin (1%) populate the borders. Since Myanmar’s independence, many of the minorities have sought greater autonomy or even independence from the union government, leading to dozens of insurgencies and low-level civil wars. During the 1990s, the junta reached ceasefires with 17 of the ethnic militias, but these agreements tended to dispense spoils to local elites rather than address their deeper demands. The new constitution created state-level legislatures in ethnic-dominated regions, although the union government still possesses exclusive jurisdiction over education, natural resources, and other key issues.

Unfortunately, if anything, relations between the minorities and the national government have only deteriorated since the elections. The government has tried—largely unsuccessfully—to co-opt ethnic militias into the Border Guard Forces. Even more troubling, last summer, skirmishes broke out between the military and the Kachin Independence Army. In addition to leaving 45,000 internally displaced and hundreds dead, the fighting has also eroded the little trust that had developed. In December, 2011, President Thein Sein ordered a halt to the offensive, but the
army pressed on, prompting Kachin leaders to question his authority.

These divisions threaten not only the pace of reform, but also its survival. Myanmar’s glasnost is not yet irreversible. The military, which originally came to power in 1962 citing political fractionalization and ethnic separatism, remains the country’s most powerful institution. While the competition between Thein Sein and Shwe Mann might pale next to Washington, D.C., politics, to the military it might evoke the “chaos” of the 1950s. USDP hardliners privately invoke the specter of Senior General Than Shwe in order to dampen the pace of reform. Moreover, the reforms have not yet directly threatened the military’s privileges and power. If they do so, or if the NLD wins a majority in the 2015 general elections, it is far from clear that the military would remain as passive as it has these past few months.

The Opportunity
With this mix of grave challenges and high expectations, 2012 will be critical for Myanmar’s political development. It is also arguably the first time when the United States is in a position to provide constructive assistance. Both sides hailed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit in early December as the beginning of a new era in U.S.-Myanmar relations. While there, she announced a major concession: the U.S. would no longer veto World Bank development projects for Myanmar. USAID is also considering restarting aid to Myanmar, which could unleash a flood of development activity. Already, one can find more Western expats in the country’s hotels.

There is also a unique opportunity for American universities to engage with Myanmar. Fifty years of military rule have devastated the education system with a focus on quantity rather than quality. The U.S. Information Center and local NGOs regularly invite foreign experts to discuss constitutional law and democratic politics. However, some Myanmar intellectuals already worry about the dominance of a “Boston mafia” and hope to develop a broader relationship with American educational institutions.

In awarding Aung San Suu Kyi the Wallenberg Medal, the University of Michigan has already taken a step towards promoting democracy and human dignity in Myanmar (and incidentally associated itself with the country’s most popular figure). The university boasts top experts across the natural and social sciences, as well as the means to share that knowledge with Myanmar. There is precedent for such a relationship; many of the Philippines’ current political leaders and judges received training at the University of Michigan.

When I met with Aung San Suu Kyi, she expressed her desire that one day—when Myanmar becomes a democracy and she can leave the country freely—she could visit Ann Arbor to thank us personally for our support. Hopefully, we can speed that day along by sharing our expertise with her country.

About the Author
Dominic Nardi is a Ph.D. student at the University of Michigan in the Political Science Department. He is interested in judicial politics in developing countries, particularly Burma, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. He has also worked for legal organizations in Indonesia and the Philippines and has published articles about judicial politics in Southeast Asia both in law reviews and popular media. He travelled to Burma in December, 2011 on a special mission for U-M to deliver the Wallenberg Medal to Aung San Suu Kyi. The humanitarian award is named after a U-M alumnus who saved tens of thousands of Jews near the end of World War II. Past recipients include the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. When Suu Kyi was given the Wallenberg last year, she could not attend the ceremony in Ann Arbor because she feared if she left Burma, the government would not allow her to return.