

16th August 2015



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

Minister of State

Rona Fairhead CBE
Chairwoman, BBC Trust
BBC Trust Unit
180 Great Portland Street
London
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Dear Ms Fairhead,

Having just returned from my third visit to Burma, it is clear that the country is at a critical turning point. The signs are hopeful, though by no means guaranteed, that the election in November will deliver a more civilian, democratic and accountable government than Burma has seen in the last 50 years. While the transition continues, progress has been marred by a shrinking of democratic space and increased human rights restrictions over the last year. The elections will be vital to cementing the reforms made to date. The visit left me more convinced than ever that we all (Western governments as well as responsible international organisations such as yours) need to do whatever we can to nurture and support the emergence of democracy in Burma.

In this context I do think it is important that we are careful in how we refer to the country. The firm position of successive British Governments has been that we refer to the country as Burma. We have taken this principled stand because the decision to change the name was made by an unelected and undemocratic military government in 1989, without any reference to the wishes of the people of Burma. In reality, the change was made to distract attention from the violent crushing of a popular democratic uprising in 1988. Since we did not recognise the legitimacy of the Burmese military regime, we did not acknowledge the military-led name change of the country from Burma to Myanmar. Burma's democracy movement (including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) also prefers the form 'Burma' for the same reasons. My view is that we should keep this position until such time as there is a more democratic process for a name change.

I am aware that the BBC, in its reporting of Burmese stories, has evolved its nomenclature over the last few years, from using "Burma" up until around 2013 to a formula of "Myanmar, also known as Burma,...", and most recently usage of simply "Myanmar". While I am fully conscious of the BBC's independence, and that this is

Please see overleaf

an editorial decision for your organisation alone, I am appealing to you to review your position on this point. To use the term 'Burma' would, I believe, be more in keeping with British and BBC values in supporting nascent democracy in a country where this has long been suppressed.

I would be very happy to discuss this with you further if that would be helpful.

*Yours sincerely,
Hugo Swire*

THE RT HON HUGO SWIRE MP
Minister of State