

August 4, Independent Mon News Agency
Electoral dilemmas – Ashley South

With the referendum process now completed, the Burmese military government is preparing for elections in 2010. The obviously manipulated nature of the referendum in May (according to which, over 92% of the population endorsed the military-drafted constitution) has led many observers and political actors to doubt whether the forthcoming elections are worth competing in. A number of opposition groups have condemned the whole process as a sham. Unfortunately however, they have not proposed any realistic alternatives to bring about sustainable and inclusive political change in Burma.

Many activists hope for some kind of external intervention. Although the US and some other governments may be prepared to keep up the sanctions regime, the international community's response to Cyclone Nargis (the failure to follow through on threats to mobilise the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine) indicate that Western powers are unlikely to offer more than limited and largely rhetorical support to the democracy movement in Burma.

Therefore, if change is going to come to the country, it will have to be driven by internal political dynamics. A popular uprising can never be ruled out, but the events of August and September last year illustrate the government's ability and willingness to suppress any mass protests. Therefore, two main approaches to political transition remain. As I have argued elsewhere, civil society networks within and between Burma's ethnic nationality communities play important roles in developing 'human capital', and promoting long-term processes of 'democracy from below'. However, this incremental approach to democratization will not achieve regime change in itself.

Elite-level transition is essential to address the country's diverse political, social and economic and cultural crises - which are primarily caused by the misgovernance of the military regime. It remains to be seen whether the government-controlled constitutional process will create any significant space within which elite-level political actors can operate. However, in the absence of alternative strategies, at least some ethnic nationality blocs are preparing to participate in the forthcoming elections. As they did during the drawn-out National Convention process, Kachin ceasefire and civil society groups are again taking the lead. The KIO, NDA-K and other Kachin groups have established a provisional political party to represent their interests; other ceasefire groups are likely to follow this model. Although they can expect to achieve relatively little in the short-term, their strategy assumes that a seat at the table is better than continued marginalisation within the restricted

field of Burmese politics. At a minimum, the election of ethnic nationality political parties will ensure that their communities' concerns continue to register on the national and international political stage. (Although the 1990 Parliament was never allowed to convene, ethnic nationality representatives elected to this body, such as Shan and Mon political parties, retain a high degree of visibility and legitimacy, due to their successful participation in the polls of nearly 20 years ago.)

The dilemma facing the NMSP and other ceasefire groups (and also the MNDF and other 'above ground' ethnic nationality political parties) is whether and how to compete in the forthcoming elections, given the government's likely continued suppression and manipulation. As an outsider, this is not my decision to make. Mon and other ethnic nationality communities will no doubt represent their interests and concerns to political leaders, who will make decisions based on a variety of strategic and tactical considerations. It seems unlikely that Mon and other ethnic leaders will be able to satisfy all of their supporters, regardless of what positions they adopt. Quite probably however, the military government will seek to exploit divisions within the ethnic nationality and broader opposition communities, in the run-up to the 2010 elections. Therefore, it is important that, whatever positions are adopted by the NMSP and other ceasefire groups, ethnic nationalist communities within Burma and beyond support these organisations, in their ongoing struggle for self-determination. Politics is 'the art of the possible', and in Burma today the options are sadly limited.

Ashley South's new book, 'Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict', was published by Routledge in June