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Post-election Politics in Burma—Glimmers of Hope?

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On Nov. 7, Burma went to the polls for the first time since May 1990. The previous elections were won by a landslide by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). However, the military regime, which has ruled the country in one form or another since 1962, refused to hand over power. The generals chose instead to initiate a drawn-out constitution-drafting process, which culminated in a charter consolidating the military's leading role in politics, and guaranteeing the army 25 percent of seats in parliament.

Unsurprisingly, many independent parties refused to contest the polls—a boycott which was led by the NLD and overseas-based activists. Nevertheless, 37 political parties did compete, including a handful of independent candidates and some two dozen non-government-aligned parties. These opposition parties were not so naive as to believe the polls would be free and fair, but they did hope that the military regime would be confident enough in controlling the overall outcome to allow some independent voices to be elected.

Non-government parties contesting the elections have a long-term strategy of slowly expanding the amount of space available to civilian political networks in order to incrementally change the balance of power in Burma. Many regarded the 2010 election as a 'dry run', in order to build capacities, and prepare for the next polls, due to be held sometime in 2015.

In the absence of the NLD, two main urban-based, national-level opposition parties sought to gain support among citizens opposed to continued military rule. In addition, some two dozen parties ran on behalf of the country's diverse ethnic minority communities, who make up about 30 percent of the population. Some of these parties sought to position themselves as members of a "third force," between the government and existing opposition groups, such as the NLD. They received a great deal of criticism for participating in the elections.

The turnout on Nov. 7 seems to have been somewhere between half and two-thirds of registered voters. It seemed by late that evening that many non-government parties had done remarkably well. However, in numerous instances, vote counting was interrupted once it became apparent that pro-government candidates were losing.

When the official results were announced over the following days, it became apparent that many non-government candidates had been beaten to the finish line by their pro-government opponents, largely due to a massive influx of "advanced votes" which were introduced late in the day. In some cases, the number of recorded votes exceeded the total population of registered

voters, indicating that election officials panicked when they realized that pro-military candidates were not about to win, and stuffed the ballot boxes.

In the week after the elections, many non-government candidates and their supporters were deeply frustrated. However, the post-election scenario is not entirely gloomy.

The pro-government Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) won 874 of the 1,140 seats declared by the end of November, giving them firm control of the two national-level assemblies. However, even after taking into account the 25 percent of seats reserved for the military, pro-government parties will not have a stranglehold on all of the ethnic State assemblies. In fact, a number of ethnic nationality parties did rather well in the elections. The party with the third-largest number of seats (57) is the Shan Nationalities Democracy Party, with Rakhine, Mon, Chin, Pa-O and Karen parties also doing well. In many cases, these small parties gained clusters of seats in their ethnic homelands, providing them with regional power bases.

It is yet to be seen how the dynamics of electoral power will be played out. Under the 2008 constitution, the two national and 14 State/ Regional assemblies elected in November will be convened in February, to choose a president under an electoral college system. Between now and then, those few independent candidates elected will have to choose their positions. Differences may yet emerge between semi-civilian USDP candidates, and the military blocs in each of the assemblies. In particular, there is likely to be jockeying for power among a number of recently retired senior military officers, not all of whom are comfortable with relinquishing their uniforms for the uncertainties of electoral politics.

The government has recently announced measures restricting certain freedoms of speech in parliament. Nevertheless, ethnic nationality parties in several of the State assemblies should be able to scrutinize, and sometimes even block, some legislation. Furthermore, in the ethnic States, many USDP candidates come from minority communities, and enjoy long-standing relationships with members of ethnic nationality parties. Therefore, some interesting cross-party alliances may emerge. Furthermore, the creation of greater political “space,” at least at the local level, is likely to facilitate the further development of civil society networks within and between ethnic nationality communities, the emergence of which over the past decade-plus has been one of the few positive stories in an otherwise bleak political scene in Burma.

An important indicator will be whether, and to what degree, ethnic nationality candidates will be pressured or co-opted into following the USDP/ military line, or whether in some cases they will use the space created by their election to give voice for their communities and to gain access to improved services for their electorates. Of course, such opportunities are not without their potential pitfalls: successful candidates are likely to be tempted by the fruits of office.

With the military continuing to dominate national-level politics, observers should therefore look to the ethnic nationality parties as agents of progressive—albeit, modest—change in Burma.

Whether they can succeed in this incremental approach will depend in large part on whether junta supremo Than Shwe feels confident enough in his control of the political process to allow some concessions.

The military's position will depend in large part on its success in dealing with Aung San Suu Kyi who was released from her most recent bout of house arrest just a few days after the elections. Although the NLD is a shadow of its former self, “The Lady” still enjoys enormous support and respect throughout Burma and beyond. It is yet to be seen whether she will make common cause with non-government candidates elected on Nov. 7. Also unsure is the degree of cooperation, if any, that can be expected between Suu Kyi and the military authorities.

Relationships between Suu Kyi and the government could become quite confrontational, quite quickly. In this case, the military is unlikely to allow even semi-independent voices in the elected assemblies to have much autonomy. Leaders of some ethnic nationality parties have already indicated their willingness to work with Suu Kyi, and even follow her leadership. If such alliances coalesce, this could lead to a new phase of zero-sum political conflict in Burma.

Another key factor is how relationships will play out between the government and Burma's several dozen armed ethnic groups. The Karen and other armed ethnic groups can play important roles as “spoilers,” undermining stability in the border areas. Their continued insurgency is testimony to widespread frustration regarding the lack of political progress in Burma, belts among (but not limited to) ethnic minority communities.

Border-based insurgency has been in decline for some years, with most armed ethnic groups being marginalized in relation to major developments in Burma over the past decade. Nevertheless, insurgency may be prolonged a while longer if some of those armed ethnic groups which agreed cease-fires with the government in the 1990s join forces with the remaining non-cease-fire groups. A recently announced military alliance between several of the main cease-fire and non-cease-fire groups sent an aggressive signal to the new government. The situation is very tense, and the current tense stand-off could escalate into all-out conflict at any time. Nevertheless, few of the cease-fire groups want to return to war, if they can avoid it—and the government is only likely to launch a direct attack on these militias if Snr-Gen Than Shwe feels he is losing control of the political process.

The multi-faceted political situation in Burma is at a particularly interesting and important juncture. However, that makes it awfully difficult to call the shots.

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