

BURMA ELECTIONS Ashley South INDEPENDENT ANALYST, WORKING ON POLITICS AND HUMANITARIAN
ISSUES IN BURMA/MYANMAR AND SOUTHEAST ASIA WWW.ASHLEYSOUTH.CO.UK.



Voting, But Not As We Know It

On November 7 Burma goes to the polls, for the first time in twenty years. The elections will be neither free nor fair, and are likely to result in military-dominated national and provincial administrations. However, a large number of independent parties will participate, hoping that this imperfect process will at least bring some change, slowly opening up accountability and political debate in a country dominated by the military for half a century. Will the polls have the minimal credibility for them to be endorsed by western countries? China, India and other regional powers are likely to have fewer scruples.

THE 1990 ELECTIONS IN BURMA – OR Myanmar, as the country is now officially called – were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), with two thirds of the vote, under its charismatic General Secretary, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. However, the military regime, which has run the country since 1962, refused to hand over power, and has ruled by decree ever since.

The past two decades have seen economic stagnation, widespread corruption and mis-governance, systematic human rights abuses by the military against ethnic nationalist insurgents in the borderlands and the often brutal suppression of urban dissent.

ISOLATION & SANCTIONS

Three years ago last September, the military regime cracked-down against civilian protesters, led by revered Buddhist monks, demonstrating against the social and economic malaise. The

“saffron revolution” illustrated the deep-seated and widespread unpopularity of the regime; its suppression showed that the generals were still willing to use lethal force to maintain their rule, and could get away with it.

Just as after the 1988 ‘democracy uprising’, and the military’s failure to recognise the 1990 election results, the suppression of the saffron revolution generated international outrage, at least among those western – primarily European and North American – states which enjoy the luxury of not sharing Burma’s strategically important neighbourhood.

Since 1988, in an effort to promote democratisation and respect for human rights, western nations have sponsored sanctions against, and international isolation of, the military government. Despite its symbolic power however, this policy has pushed Burma further into the Chinese sphere of influence, and consolidated the position of hardliners.

Meanwhile, Burma’s other giant neighbour, India, has chosen to engage and compete with China to gain access to Burma’s extensive natural resources: gas and hydropower, as well as timber. The government has been able to play off these two emerging superpowers, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, (ASEAN) regional grouping, making the sanctions largely ineffective.

HAND OF FRIENDSHIP

Given the hand of friendship extended to other ‘rogue states’ by United States President Barack Obama’s administration, it was not surprising that last year Washington sought to engage Burma. However, vociferous pro-sanctions lobbies in western countries – particularly the US and Britain – are highly sceptical of this approach. Although they lack much traction back home, Burmese politicians in exile and their support networks have been able to ‘capture’ western policy. They are likely to fight hard to frame the forthcoming elections as entirely illegitimate, thereby resisting any change in the regime’s international pariah status.

In this context, US State Department and British Foreign Office officials are asking whether the elections will have a minimal degree of credibility, producing a Burmese government with which they can do business, despite the bluster of opposition groups.

Whatever government emerges, it will continue to be dominated by the military. It should be noted that the 2008 constitution – passed by an improbably large majority, in a referendum conducted shortly after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis – provides for a presidential system. Citizens will not be voting directly for an executive, but rather for quasi-legislative national and provincial bodies.

In the best-case, able and independent individuals elected to these positions may be able to hold the executive to

account, on at least some aspects of governance. For ethnic nationality communities in particular, the elections open up the prospect of levels of government closer to the ground than the current junta, with the possibility of elected officials needing to pay closer attention to local needs.

Nationally, the two main pro-regime parties enjoy huge advantage over their opponents in access to financial and human resources, and the media, and also because independent parties remain subject to sometimes quite heavy-handed surveillance and suppression.

Indeed, the top leaders of the Union Solidarity Development Party are mostly recently retired generals. Some are reportedly not pleased to have been required to take off their uniforms to promote the grand plan of junta supremo, Senior General Than Shwe.

Some observers look – more in hope than realistic expectation – for divisions in the military to provide an avenue for political transition. Others argue that it is important for pro-regime parties to do well, so the military accepts the results, and the generals feel secure enough to allow independent parties some operating space in post-election politics.

About two thirds of the 37 parties competing in the elections are either fully or somewhat independent from the government. They are not so naive as to expect that the elections will introduce anything approaching democracy, even in a limited sense. It seems probable that – unlike in 1990 –

the military regime will be able to control the process without resorting to clumsy ballot stuffing, or other electoral fraud.

Already, some opposition parties have been refused permission to register; most notably, the main ethnic-nationalist party in the northern Kachin State. Those still in the race have been restricted by hefty candidate registration fees, and ongoing state-suppression, as well as limited human resources.

Nevertheless, some parties expect significant numbers of votes. Ethnic nationalist parties, associated particularly with the Shan, Mon and Karen communities, anticipate doing well, if given half a chance. Most are concentrating on the provincial assemblies.

For ethnic nationality communities – including hundreds of thousands of displaced people – one of the key post-election issues will be the relationship between the government and a variety of non-state armed groups. Most of these agreed ceasefires with the government in the 1990s. However, over the past year-and-a-half, the military has sought to bring non-state armed ceasefire groups directly under Burma army control.

While several of the less powerful ceasefire groups have complied, three of the strongest are refusing. Will a future government be satisfied with the current, tense status quo, or seek to persuade the remaining groups to become

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government-controlled militias, or perhaps use its consolidated position to launch military campaigns against non-compliant armed groups?

ELECTION BY PROXY

Nationally, several non-government parties are hoping for protest votes. Among these, most notable is the National Democratic Force (NDF), made up of ex-NLD members, who – unlike Aung San Suu Kyi – are willing to make the most of a deeply flawed electoral process. Reflecting the fractious and polarised nature of politics, NDF and independent ethnic nationality parties have been criticised in opposition circles for their supposed collaboration with a ‘sham election’.

Such criticisms help explain why many politicians are not directly contesting the polls, but rather seeking to mobilise others to do so in their place. This may be an ‘election by proxy’.

Given such complexities, it may be several months before observers – or those involved – can make sound judgements about any electoral changes in the balance of power. In the meantime, exiled and other opposition figures will no doubt continue to criticise the polls, and any resulting administration – and also probably castigate those who participate.

Serious disturbances around the elections seem unlikely, given the weakness of opposition groups and the entrenched power of the military. However, popular protests cannot be entirely ruled out, as the regime is deeply unpopular in most circles, reflected in widespread participation in the 2007 saffron revolution.

Barring such unforeseen developments however, the

credibility benchmark has been set very low. It seems highly likely that China, India and most – but perhaps not all – ASEAN states will accept the outcome, and regard the resulting government as legitimate. Opposition activists will no doubt protest strongly at this. It remains to be seen whether the US and other western governments will, at least implicitly, endorse the process, by seeking to do business with the new regime.

RIGHTS AND WRONGS

A precedent was established elsewhere earlier this year in relation to Sudan, when shortly after very problematic elections, the US accepted the reality of the Khartoum government. The indictment by the International Criminal Court of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir provides another parallel with Burma.

Over the past two years, international human rights organisations and exiled opposition and activist groups have called for a commission of inquiry into alleged crimes against humanity in Burma, a move which gained added momentum with recent White House endorsement.

Such a commission could only be established by the United Nations’ Security Council in the unlikely event of China not exercising its veto. Otherwise, the most that can realistically be expected is a symbolic, and ultimately powerless, body convened by the UN General Assembly, or possibly the Human Rights Council. This would no doubt inconvenience a new government, whilst discouraging progressives and empowering anti-western hardliners.

One of the most encouraging recent developments has been the re-emergence of widespread civil society networks, both in government-controlled and conflict affected areas. However, armed, exiled and domestic opposition groups have declined in influence at the same time.

Given the lack of viable alternatives, it seems likely that regional powers - China, India and ASEAN – will endorse the polls. In the case of China, not least to avoid its client state moving closer to America.

Independent candidates and parties are hoping to produce at least some limited space as a result of their participation. Western governments may also act pragmatically, or feel obliged to maintain an isolation-and-sanctions policy which has done very little to promote democratisation in this troubled country.

Chatham House Events November

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Henry Bellingham MP,

Minister for Africa, Mark Canning, Ambassador to Zimbabwe

NOVEMBER 10 United States in Europe: A New Era of Engagement

Dr Philip Gordon, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs

NOVEMBER 17 International Relations After The Global Economic Crisis

Gideon Rachman, Financial Times

NOVEMBER 18 Global Futures: The Annual Members’ Conference

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