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Myanmar Elections 2010: Civilianising the Military Government?

By Alistair D. B. Cook

Synopsis

The Myanmar military government has announced the holding of national elections on 7 November 2010. What does this signal for the people in Myanmar? Will these elections matter to them? What are countries in the region saying about this?

Commentary

THE MILITARY regime of Myanmar sees the upcoming elections as signalling the achievement of political strength: an essential prong of their notion of a secure nation. While the move towards a representative electoral system is a positive development, there remain many significant hurdles to consolidating a democratic system and ensuring civilian protection in Myanmar.

How have people in Myanmar responded? As the international community has noted, the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) has decided not to participate in the elections. However, even though the NLD did not register as a political party, some members chose to go it alone and establish their own political parties within the framework of the new electoral laws, most notably the National Democratic Force. As a result of this and the registering of thirty-seven political parties, it remains unclear how people in Myanmar will respond to these polls.

Internal Dynamics

Under the 2008 constitution, these forthcoming elections will elect three quarters of the national parliament, with the remaining one quarter of seats reserved for military officials. In addition to the national parliament, elections are also scheduled for the fourteen regional/state parliaments as well.

Even though many procedural questions remain, such as how much say individual MPs will have, the social and ethnic groups are responding differently to the upcoming elections. The ethnic nationalities are undecided about whether they should participate. Many of them voiced grievances that their compromises with the military government in the past have not been reciprocated. Within the ethnic nationalities there are many sub-groups often with clashing interests. Many of these sub-groups have organised community-led efforts which have given rise to registered political parties, such as the Kayan National Party and the Kayin People's Party.

It is significant that these efforts are community-led rather than representing the ceasefire groups because it

could give rise to new personalities. These ceasefire groups are the ethnic nationalities' armed groups, such as the Kachin Independence Army, which have reached shaky peace agreements with the military. The military regime has stipulated that for ceasefire groups to participate in the elections they must be under the command of the Tatmadaw (armed forces) – a point which continues to be in dispute – thus ruling out the formal participation of most ceasefire groups.

Along with these community-led efforts is a need to further improve coordination and collaboration between the various ethnic nationalities if they decide and are able to fully participate in these elections. Indeed, while the preparations are underway for the elections, there continues to be instability in the border regions which in turn pose significant human security concerns for people on the ground. As a result of this instability, voting in certain ethnic nationalities' areas has been ruled out.

Political Participation

While there are clear costs and benefits to the participation of the ethnic nationalities in the elections, power is heavily weighted in favour of the national government. Indeed the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) has transformed itself into a political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), that will contest all seats in the national elections.

Across Myanmar there are also different social groups which will question whether or not to vote in the upcoming elections. There are significant differences between the urban-educated and rural populations. However, as political parties need to raise their own funds domestically, they will have to rely on the support of various business, community-led and government groups for financial backing -- which amounts to a significant challenge.

While the ability of political parties to field candidates is constrained by the US\$500 deposit for each candidate to be on the ballot paper, there are also several emerging campaign issues. These issues include post-election economic and development opportunities and much needed reform; the removal of domestic travel barriers; equal employment opportunities in the public service; language education in the ethnic nationalities' areas; personal security; and access to water, food, shelter and electricity.

International Reaction

What do Myanmar's neighbours and the United States have to say about the elections? Myanmar's ASEAN partners have expressed qualified support for the elections. Several of the heads of state and foreign ministers who met at the 16th annual ASEAN Summit on 8-9 April 2010, and the subsequent 43rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting on 19-20 July, called on the Myanmar regime to hold free, fair and all-inclusive elections. However, ASEAN shied away from any concrete action to assist the regime with the elections but an ASEAN observer role in the polls has been mooted. ASEAN members prefer to keep the association's focus on being a platform for engagement and support but only when asked by individual member states.

The US has, however, expressed disappointment with the election setup. Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, warned that without tangible progress the US would review its current level of engagement with the Myanmar regime. However, the other major players, China and India, have been more encouraging in responding to the announced elections.

Many in the region see the forthcoming elections in Myanmar as a fresh starting point. However this recognition is qualified. The greatest challenges for Myanmar lie ahead in forming a civilian government that is representative of the population and responsive to the needs of the people and the issues that matter to them. This will be no easy feat for a military regime even though most of its leading members have doffed their uniforms for civilian dress to become politicians.

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