



Elections in Myanmar offer hope of change

Myanmar is preparing to hold its first national elections in 20 years. Although no date has been set as yet, the educated guess among Burmese is that they will take place in the last quarter of 2010. The military junta – which is holding the elections primarily to ensure its own survival in the face of widespread and long-running popular dissent, as well as international opprobrium – has passed election laws which have been heavily criticised internationally. Nevertheless, they still offer some hope for change from the current system.

In 2003 the regime announced a 'seven-step roadmap to democracy'. Step four consisted of a controversial referendum on a new constitution, staged shortly after Cyclone Nargis devastated much of the country in 2008, and the holding of elections represents the fifth stage of that plan. The election will be to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly) which is made up of two houses of parliament – the Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Assembly/lower house) and the Amyotha Hluttaw (National Assembly/upper house). The new constitution allows for a limited level of local autonomy through 14 regional legislatures for the seven regions in which ethnic Burmese are in the majority and the seven states which are dominated by ethnic minorities. But the constitution also ensures that 25% of seats at both national and local level are held by the army, prompting international protests.

The motivations of the regime are chiefly to be able to control what comes next. Senior General Than Shwe does not see the elections as a means to improve Myanmar's relations with the United States and other Western powers or as a step towards the lifting of international sanctions. Rather he is motivated by a need to secure a favourable succession, ensuring that he and his family are safe within the new system. Not holding elections could leave him vulnerable to another military coup and with it a loss of control, wealth and security.

NLD opts not to run

On 29 March the National League for Democracy (NLD), the main opposition party, said it would not take part in the elections because of the 'unjust' election laws. Its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi was reported by her lawyer as saying that she would 'never dream of registering the party under such unfair laws'. Though the NLD easily won the 1990 elections, they were never allowed to take power. Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, has been under house arrest for 14 of the past 20 years.

The election laws bar anyone currently serving a prison sentence from being a member of a political party, and require parties with disqualified members to expel them or face dissolution. Though most of the NLD leadership and students who took part in a wave of protests against the regime in 1988 have completed their sentences, many ethnic-minority opposition leaders are still in detention. According to the NLD's interpretation of the laws, it would have to throw out Aung San Suu Kyi, as she remains under house arrest. It is possible, however, that the Election Commission might have decided, as it did in 1990, that house arrest was not the same as a prison sentence, thus allowing her to remain head of the NLD and stand for election.

The boycott was not surprising given the NLD's so-called 'Shwegondaing Declaration' in April 2009, which called for a review of the new constitution. However, the effect of the decision is that a large part of the population, who would have wished to vote for what is seen as Myanmar's only genuine opposition party, will now have to decide whether to vote for another party or to abstain. Because it is not registering for the election, the NLD will cease to exist as a political organisation and its offices around the country – which have just reopened – will close once again.

While the decision was presented as unanimous, there were dissenting voices within the NLD, but they did not want to be seen to oppose their leader. Pragmatists had argued that it should take part in the elections in order to offer voters real choice, and this group has now announced that it has applied to register itself as a new party. It is also possible that some of them will stand as independent candidates. NLD youth leaders have meanwhile been travelling around the country explaining that while the NLD will cease to be recognised as political party, it will continue to exist through its social work.

Other political parties

Thirty-nine political parties have applied to register, and all applications have been approved so far, though the total is smaller than in 1990. Of these 39 parties, only about 15 are national parties (with more than 1,000 members), the rest are regional parties only (with around 500 members). Five out of the ten

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Shangri-La Dialogue 2010



The IISS is delighted to announce that HE Mr Lee Myung-bak, President of the Republic of Korea, will deliver the Keynote Address at the 9th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue on the evening of 4 June 2010 in Singapore. President Lee Myung-bak will set the scene for the summit by speaking on topics relating to the future of Asian security.

Since its inauguration

previously existing parties have been accepted for re-registration. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), the regime's social organisation of which all civil servants are mandatory members, will be fielding candidates under its new political branch, the Union Solidarity and Development Party. Its list of candidates is already publicly available on the Internet and includes many current government ministers, who are resigning from their military posts in preparation for the election. These candidates will, therefore, count as civilians despite their military background, greatly increasing the military's influence beyond the 25% of seats automatically allocated to it.

The National Unity Party (NUP), successor to the Burma Socialist Programme Party led by General Ne Win, has been accepted for registration while other smaller parties have also applied for registration. These include seven ethnic-minority parties such as the Pa-O National Organisation, the Kayin People's party and the Chin National Party. The minority parties are running in the hope of bringing about changes at a regional level, such as the introduction of minority languages in schools and perhaps gaining a greater say over the natural resources located in their areas. However, many groups are wary of legitimising an electoral process which they see as consolidating military rule.

The situation in the ethnic-minority states

Out of a total population of 53 million, around two-thirds are Bamar (ethnic Burmese) and the remainder comprises the ethnic minorities. Ethnic-minority groups are mainly based in Myanmar's border regions. Since independence from British rule in 1948, these groups, as well as different elite groupings within ethnic communities, have had distinct conceptions of what kind of nation Myanmar was to become, especially in relation to the division of power between centre and region. The colonial legacy of divide-and-rule had entrenched differences between the Bamar majority and other ethnic-minority groups. The diverse minority groups have challenged the state since its inception, some asking for greater autonomy and some for outright independence. The army justifies its position in power by arguing that it is the only institution which can guarantee the unity of the country. While the most publicised conflict is that against the Karen, the Tatmadaw (Burmese military) has been at war with many other groups for between 40 and 60 years. Over the course of the last 20 years ceasefires have been agreed with 18 groups including the large armies of the Kachin (such as the Kachin Independence Army, or KIA), the Wa and some of the Shan groups.

A smooth election will depend on the regime's relations with ethnic minorities, which remain highly volatile, and any resumption of conflict could throw a spanner in the works. The seven-step roadmap had envisioned that ethnic militias who were party to ceasefire agreements with the government would be transformed into border guards under Burmese military command. This process was to have been completed before the announcement of the election.

Seventeen armed ethnic groups have accepted some form of government proposals. Those that have been formally inducted into the Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions include the New Democratic Army (Kachin), the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front, and the Kokang. Others have been allowed to form semi-autonomous local militias, like the Kachin Defence Army in Northern Shan State and the La Sang Awng Wa Group in Kachin State.

In autumn 2009 the Kokang's refusal to join the BGF led to conflict on the border with China. Both Myanmar Chinese and illegal ethnic-Chinese migrants fled into China, causing damage to Chinese property on both sides of the border. The Kokang were beaten and agreed to become border guards. This outcome is, however, not to be expected with larger, more powerful groups. After the passing of several deadlines, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the New Mon State Party, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Shan State Army-North and the Karen Peace Council have all rejected the regime's advances and are actively rearming. The KIO proposed to convert the KIA – its military wing – into a 'Union Defence Force' but not under the terms of the BGF, and retaining its command over any new force. This led to a stalemate between the regime and the KIO leadership. However, the government is understood to be considering a KIO proposal to form a committee, composed of representatives from both sides, as well as mediators or respected community leaders, to consider the transformation of the KIO and the KIA.

Following the passing of the latest deadline on 28 April for the assimilation of ethnic militias into border guards, the government's next steps are unclear. Ethnic groups had been warned that if they continued to oppose the regime's offer their ceasefire status would be revoked and that they would be declared illegal organisations. Clashes between government troops and UWSA units occurred on 23 and 24 April 2010, though the army maintains this was an error as it believed it was fighting another group. If groups do not comply and conflict resumes, it is likely that a state of emergency will be declared in conflict-affected regions and that citizens there will not be allowed to stand or vote. In areas in Shan and Karen states where no ceasefire is in place, voters are unlikely to be allowed to go to the polls as the election laws stipulate that elections can only be held in the absence of conflict. In light of the NLD's decision not to

in 2002, the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue has become the principal vehicle for informal defence diplomacy among the states of the Asia-Pacific region. [Read More](#)

Bahrain Global Forum



The [Bahrain Global Forum](#) has successfully concluded in Manama. The Forum brought key delegates from some 50 countries across the globe to the Kingdom of Bahrain from 14 to 16 May 2010 to debate current geo-economic trends and encourage a global perspective in new centres of economic power.

The [Keynote Address](#) was given by [Montek Singh Ahluwalia](#), Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission of India. On Sunday 16 May [Pascal Lamy](#), Director-General, World Trade Organisation gave a [Special Address](#) to the Forum.

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stand, the absence of adequate ethnic representation and ethnic opposition parties would further put the legitimacy of the elections in doubt.

Less rigid control

Since Cyclone Nargis devastated southern regions of Myanmar in 2008, the atmosphere in Yangon, the country's largest city, has changed. Censorship has been relaxed and articles critical of the government have been published. There is a limited but noticeable level of public debate regarding the election, and people in Yangon teashops talk about the possible changes that the elections could bring. In spite of the stark division between government and opposition, there is a growing number of individuals – not necessarily connected with each other – who believe that however flawed and faulty the constitution and the election process, it is the only way to bring about some measure of change.

Such individuals work through civil-society organisations, which in turn are active in the health and education sectors throughout the country. There is also a small but growing urban middle class whose wealth allows them to 'buy out' of the state sector and who educate their children privately – there has been a steep rise in private schools, which were legalised in December 2009. At the same time, international organisations have become far more involved since the cyclone, with some taking over entire floors of hotels. Their work is still difficult as they need official permission to travel and implement programmes, but their presence is a big change from the days when there were hardly any foreign faces in Yangon. The International Labour Organisation in particular has been able to work quietly but successfully towards the reduction of forced and child labour.

Meanwhile, the government has undertaken a privatisation drive resulting in the sell-off of large numbers of public assets, including prime modern real estate, as well as old colonial buildings including old ministries in Yangon following the move of the capital to Nay Pyi Taw in 2005. This has raised money for the regime and has entrenched economic power with some of the regime's cronies. The USDA has embarked on social projects which include the development of roads, schools and clinics, as well as providing financial loans to some townships in what is seen as a move to guarantee votes.

Much still remains to be known about the precise organisation of the elections and the limits that may surround them – for example, which parties will have their application for registration approved, and which will not. Largely this election will be carried out by 'proxy', as many central figures will not be standing but are nevertheless encouraging others to stand. A bomb attack in April during the water festival on one of Yangon's busiest streets, as well as smaller-scale attacks at the Myitsone dam project, Kachin State, and at the Thaukyegat hydropower plant under construction in Bago Division suggest that regardless of how it is organised, the election process is unlikely to be smooth.

No matter how restrictive the process and the ultimate results, these elections do offer hope for change. They have resulted in an increase in political and social discussion, and there is optimism in some quarters that this will be maintained when the elections are over. They may be the first step in a very long process.

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