

THE FUTURE OF BURMA?

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Dictator Watch
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Burma's military dictatorship held a general election in 2010, but which the democratic opposition boycotted and hence which was irrelevant. This means that last week's vote was the first real general election in the country since 1990 - in twenty-five years.

The ruling regime denied millions of citizens the right to participate, including the entire Rohingya ethnic group; hundreds of thousands of residents living in the large areas of the ethnic nationality homelands where the vote was cancelled; hundreds of thousands of more people in these and other areas who are internally displaced persons, who because of Burma Army attacks on their villages have been unable to return to their homes; even more hundreds of thousands of people who have fled the conflict in Burma and become refugees in Thailand, China, Malaysia and Bangladesh; and finally, countless other citizens who have fled the country out of economic desperation, mainly to Thailand. It's not unlikely that the total disenfranchised group was 10% - 20% of the overall citizenry.

Fortunately, the turnout of the balance of the population was high. The people demanded an end to their suffering, and registered this by rejecting the USDP and instead voting for pro-democracy parties. The leading pro-democracy party, the NLD, secured a landslide victory, and which undoubtedly would have been even higher, certainly if everyone had been allowed to vote, but also because the reported cases of electoral manipulation, such as ballot-box stuffing (suspicious advance votes), appear to have been designed to ensure that specific USDP candidates won.

Congratulations to the people of Burma!

The most important reaction that we can have to the election is to congratulate the people of Burma. Well-done! You have been oppressed so severely and for so long, but have not given up hope. It is essential that this hope be rewarded. Everyone who has won office, and every party in the international community, needs to dedicate themselves to seeing that the country's democratic transition is completed.

Indeed, what has just happened in Burma is unprecedented. It is astonishing that a brutal military dictatorship would permit a free and fair vote. Clearly, the generals were afraid of a popular uprising if they openly stole the election, and which would have seen them not only expelled from power but arrested to face their crimes. So, they let the vote go ahead, and now hope to cling to their power, with their stolen riches, and without being prosecuted.

This, of course, is a very tenuous situation. What Burma is moving towards, a democratically-elected Parliament attempting to negotiate and somehow share power with a military mafia, is unsustainable. It cannot endure. No matter the current relation, the only pertinent question for the country - if it will continue to be a military dictatorship, or instead achieve real democracy - is as yet unanswered.

Real democracy

It's worth considering these alternatives.

1. When a popular revolution in a country succeeds, a number of steps normally follow:

- All regime attacks on the population cease and all political prisoners are released.
- The regime leaders are either killed, or arrested and prosecuted, and for the latter either domestically or in an international forum.
- Lower level soldiers and regime functionaries who have also committed egregious crimes are arrested and prosecuted.
- After the regime's security apparatus is purged of war criminals, it is restructured - combined in an appropriate manner - with the resistance forces.
- A democratic election is held.
- The entire government bureaucracy is similarly purged, new government ministers are chosen by the new President or Prime Minister, and new ministry officials are selected by them.
- A constitutional assembly is held and a new charter drafted, which is then put to the population in a referendum.
- The assets of the leaders and their cronies are seized, and their business contracts with international investors are repudiated.
- New laws and enforcement regulations are drafted, passed, and implemented, covering not only the national economy, including environmental and labor protection, trade, and commercial development projects, but also national infrastructure including roads, utilities, schools and healthcare.

In summary, a new - and free - process of nation-building begins.

2. The alternative is that autocratic social elements seize power and that the people's hopes are dashed. The country remains a dictatorship, and which if recent world history is a guide the International Community accepts. The people may then try to rise up once more, although this will likely be without international support.

Burma, in effect, is now stuck between these two poles. What is going to happen?

Who won the election?

A counterintuitive way to address this is to ask the question, for whom did the people vote? There is a distinction here that few probably recognize, but which will be crucial to the nation's future. Said another way, did the people vote for Aung San Suu Kyi; for the specific NLD candidates; or merely for an amorphous hope for a better future?

Suu Kyi commanded that the population vote for the second option, the party, but her other declarations suggest that she has conflated this with herself. Her statement that she will be above the new President is not only fundamentally un-democratic, it implies that she sees herself as essentially a feudal lord, to whom everyone owes allegiance. This, as has already been observed, will simply substitute a "democratic" dictatorship for a military regime.

Suu Kyi has achieved a deft substitution. Regardless of her actual actions and policy, which in most cases have been vague and a number of times openly objectionable, she has maintained the public perception that the NLD is the only alternative to the regime and that she, as Aung San's daughter, is the only legitimate NLD leader. If she can't be President under law, she'll be the absolute ruler outside of it.

However, what has really happened is that the NLD's landslide was a protest vote. It was a vote against the generals. It was only a vote for the NLD, first, in those cases where the public actually supported local NLD candidates (who, it has to be noted, in many cases were very deserving of the honor); and secondly, because there was no other option. Suu Kyi has cultivated a perception where she can claim legitimacy to do anything that she wants, when in fact the people have given her no such mandate.

She clearly intends to use the NLD MPs to push through changes that she and she alone believes are appropriate. This means that in its very first hour, the people in Burma's supposedly new democracy will still have no voice, including through their elected representatives.

How will Aung San Suu Kyi rule?

The reason this is significant is the aforementioned policy vagueness, and even more her objectionable positions. These include:

- Her opposition to public protest.
- Her fondness for the Tatmadaw: "her father's" Burma Army.
- Her downplaying of the crimes against humanity committed against the Rohingya.
- Her lack of concern for the regime's crimes against Burma's other ethnic nationalities.
- How she abandoned her natural allies, including both the ethnic resistance forces and also former and current political prisoners and student activists.

- How, where originally she opposed international investment in Burma, she now openly welcomes it, even when it leads to the theft of villager land and regime attacks on the same villagers when they protest.

There is no basis to think that she will alter her positions. But, when it became clear that Suu Kyi supported all of this, many people said that she was simply acting as a politician, for which it was necessary to shed her mantle of a Nobel Peace Prize winning human rights leader. The implication was that once she achieved power, she would return to doing the right thing.

This is a naive if not ludicrous belief. Whoever Suu Kyi may have been in 1989, she is clearly no longer that person. This means that the deal now being struck, between her and the regime (it is extremely significant that Than Shwe's puppets Min Aung Hlaing and Thein Sein immediately congratulated her), and with direct U.S. and European involvement, will in no way satisfy the people of Burma's aspirations. The above list of benchmarks for a true democratic transition will not be met. Instead, there will be half-hearted attempts at a few of these goals: to release the political prisoners, to change the constitution, and to negotiate a real nationwide peace.

What will the dictatorship do?

In writing so much about Suu Kyi, I don't want to ignore the other major institutional entity in Burma and which is now effectively her partner: the military regime. Many people were surprised that the vote was essentially fair. What is the dictatorship really up to? Is it truly satisfied just through having a veto from its control of the Constitution, the chief ministries, and the NDSC?

The regime's core strategy over the years has been to pursue two principal objectives: to divide the opposition, and to waste time - to push the real day of reckoning farther and farther into the future. The NCA negotiation, backed by international funding - effectively bribery (the West is the dictatorship's main ally, even more so than China), accomplished both, by splitting the ethnic resistance groups and preventing a unified armed revolution. This NCA exercise in turn mirrored the divide and conquer approach implemented in the 1990s, whereby the northern resistance groups were persuaded to sign ceasefires, leaving the southern groups exposed. Similarly, through continuous house arrest, the regime prevented Suu Kyi from becoming more actively involved with the ethnic resistance, had she been inclined to do so.

The strategy for the election was the same: to split the opposition and to delay real change. And, since Suu Kyi appears willing to play her part, it will probably succeed. After all, she can argue that if she pushes too hard for genuine democracy, the regime will reassert absolute power. It's better to adopt the Buddhist middle way and tolerate "disciplined democracy," even if, as she has already said - repeatedly, there will be no true freedom, including from fear, for a very long time.

What can the people do?

In the face of this deception, and which may well prove to be an outright betrayal, the people of Burma have no choice but to fulfill the entire set of responsibilities of the citizenry in a democracy, which extend well beyond the vote. Most importantly, the people need to acknowledge and accept that there is no easy path to freedom. Dictators do not willingly give up power. Instead, they fight back.

The people of the country should further understand that the governments of the United States and Europe are not their friends. They want a stable status quo, so their national interests, meaning the interests of their companies, are satisfied. Since a real democratic transition could lead to the nationalization of these corporate enterprises, they are against democracy for Burma. Far better is the regime's disciplined democracy, where the companies can continue to do deals with the generals and their cronies. Indeed, new deals are being launched every week. True democracy would shut this commercial development down in its tracks.

Finally, the people need to recognize that while they voted against the dictatorship, and for the local NLD candidates, Suu Kyi is interpreting this as granting her the privilege to do whatever she wants, as the public's sole decision-maker. Therefore, the people need to press their new representatives to insist on authentic democratic change, and protest if and when she agrees to lukewarm steps and says that that's the way it has to be.

In other words, the people should continue to push for freedom, democracy and justice - until they get it; and, if the regime does launch a coup, they should take to the streets in the millions, as they have just voted, and overthrow the generals once and for all.

Transition milestones

The coming transition in Burma - or lack of transition - is likely to be long and tortured. It may also be difficult to evaluate if progress is even being achieved. Indeed, many people will undoubtedly say that everything is going great, when in fact the opposite is true. To this end, a few unambiguous steps may serve as the initial milestones on the path to real democracy:

- The first new legislative action should be to officially rename the country as Burma, thereby rejecting the regime's inherently racist "Myanmar." (Please help publicize this idea.)
- There should be an instantaneous end to all regime perpetrated and organized attacks on any citizenry group.
- The Rohingya concentration camps should be emptied, and the detainees allowed to return to their villages and to rebuild. (If this step requires international peace monitors, so be it.)
- The Burma Army should withdraw from all front-line outposts in the ethnic areas.
- All political prisoners should be freed, including from the ethnic resistance groups and the Rohingya.
- All land confiscations should end.

If these milestones aren't met, Burma is not moving towards democracy.

Lastly, using the power of the Internet and social media, a new website should be created, and to which anyone can contribute, in any of the main languages for Burma, with descriptions and evidence of all the crimes perpetrated against them, their families and friends, by agents of the military dictatorship. Everyone talks about national reconciliation for Burma, but there can be no reconciliation without justice being served. This is in fact a straight-forward database project, where the manifold human rights abuse documentation efforts that have been conducted over the years, as well as the actual victims, can directly submit their stories to the website managers, who would then group the crimes by location, date, type of crime, and the names and positions of the perpetrators.

I can add, Europe, through the EuroBurma Office, and the United States, which no doubt funded the NLD election campaign, should back the project. Whatever the outcome of the election, their efforts to promote nationwide peace for Burma have been horribly misguided, nothing less than pro-regime, but they can make up for it with this. Indeed, I would be happy to help design the initiative, even with EBO's Harn Yawng hwe. Everyone should ask EBO and its European funders: Can't you spend your money on something useful for once?

We can begin with Nan Bway Pong, who in June 2002 was gang-raped by twenty Burma Army soldiers from LIB 349, Pah Klaw Hta Camp, Karen State. The first rapist was Captain Ye Htut, who ordered his soldiers to follow him or die. Nan Bway Pong was allowed to return home, and after telling her family what had been done to her, she committed suicide, saying: *"I am not willing to live in this world anymore."*

Aung San Suu Kyi, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Angela Merkel may not care about Nan Bway Pong, or have any desire to see Ye Htut tried and punished, but they are wrong. Had he committed his atrocity in the U.S. or Europe, he would have quickly been tracked down. It seems that for the West - and Suu Kyi, justice is not necessary for Burma. The people of the country, though, must demand that it is.