

## **DICTATOR WATCH**

### **BURMA ELECTION SCENARIOS**

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#### **NCA negotiations**

The senior negotiation team for Burma's Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) has begun its talks with the country's military dictatorship. While the team has said that it is prospectively willing to sign a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement before the election announced for November 8, this position needs to be viewed in practical terms. This is a political stance, to show the world that the ethnic nationalities are trying. However, until the dictatorship agrees to include all armed organizations in the NCA; to stop its attacks against them (which continue on a daily basis); and to accept the EAOs' amendments to the current draft, no deal is possible.

It is important to understand that the real EAO goal is freedom, not "peace." If peace means no freedom, then there should never be a deal. The question is, who would benefit from such a peace? The answer: a large mafia of criminals against humanity, as well as their cronies both inside Burma and among international diplomats and corporations.

The only peace worth pursuing is peace on the ground, starting with peace of mind, for the ethnic nationality peoples. The only way in turn that this peace can be achieved is for the dictatorship to be removed from power, and for the Burma Army to be sanitized of its criminals and put under the control of a truly democratic and federal government.

The question, then, is does the upcoming election offer the possibility of such a transition? After all, the last thing that the EAOs want is to sign a false peace and then watch the dictatorship steal the election. They would then have participated in legitimizing military rule forever. Instead, the only logical course is for the EAOs to postpone signing anything until after the election, to see what happens, although they can of course continue to talk.

#### **Election scenarios**

To consider the election, it is essential to realize that what is happening in Burma is unprecedented. A totalitarian regime, and which maintains control through violent repression and a constitution that it imposed after a fraudulent referendum, is supposedly going to allow a democratic vote. This is unheard of. Dictatorships hold elections all the time, but they are never free and fair, just staged exercises to give their regimes a veneer of legitimacy. Examples of these include the periodic votes in China and North Korea, and the Zimbabwe election in 2013.

Somehow, though, it is supposed to be different in Burma.

There are six basic scenarios for the upcoming election, as follows:

**One.** The regime postpones the election or cancels it altogether. While the ethnic nationalities are concerned about this, fearing that the excuse of continuing civil war will be used, in view of the preparations that are underway it seems unlikely. Indeed, the 2010 election as well as the national census were held under these conditions, with war. Given the regime's past behavior, it is not a servicable excuse.

**Two.** The second scenario was that the NLD would boycott the vote, which it had threatened to do, and which would have completely undermined the election's legitimacy. Of course, the NLD did boycott in 2010, and the election was held anyway, but in any case this is no longer an issue. Aung San Suu Kyi, ruler of the NLD, has decided that it will participate.

**Three.** The third option is that the election is held, with vote rigging by the regime - a variety of dirty tricks - in different areas. Through this the USDP would retain some if not many seats in Parliament.

The likelihood of this scenario rests on its relationship to the dictatorship's only real objective, which is to stay in power. This would be a lukewarm approach - something Burma's generals are not know for - and which would bring a large number of real democrats to Parliament. Although in some ways it seems the most plausible outcome, the generals are unlikely to pursue it, to forestall such political certification of their opponents.

**Four.** A much higher probability is that the regime will steal the election outright. It would simply substitute votes or just lie about the counts, repeating what it did with the constitutional referendum. Then it would announce that it won, and that Burma is now fully democratic. The NLD and other parties competed, and lost.

Many people believe that this is unlikely: that it would be too bold a move and that it would have many negative consequences for the regime. But, is that really so?

### **Renewed sanctions?**

One possible consequence is that the West, particularly the United States, would reject a stolen vote and reimpose sanctions. This is extremely improbable. The U.S. is having a presidential election next year, and Hillary Clinton is the leading candidate. Neither she nor President Obama will reverse course on Burma now, and publicly admit that their policy change is a failure. It simply won't happen. Also, the dictatorship's new lobbying firm in Washington, Podesta Group, and which is close to Clinton, together with U.S. businesses, would do everything in their power to block any resumption of sanctions. Finally, while a rigged election might well lead to statements of Administration displeasure, it is also important to remember that the U.S. did

nothing after Robert Mugabe stole the 2013 election in Zimbabwe. The same thing would happen with Burma.

Burma's generals know all of this. They understand that the U.S. and Europe would complain, but that business would continue as usual and after a while the election theft would be accepted.

### **A new uprising?**

The other potential consequence of course is that the people of Burma would rise up and protest the theft of their votes. This, unfortunately as well, is also very unlikely. There are five main components of any potential uprising: Suu Kyi and the NLD, student activists, Buddhist monks, the general Burman public, and the EAOs. The dictatorship has effectively neutralized them all.

Suu Kyi has been part of the regime for some years now, through being an MP. Her fondness for the military as well as her dislike of demonstrations are also well known (e.g., the failure of her commission to punish police use of incendiary devices in Letpadaung). Further, she has purged the top leadership of the NLD of dissenting voices (an outcome that also followed from the death of Win Tin), and has refused to groom a new generation of leaders. While it is certainly the case that many younger NLD members would openly criticize a stolen vote, and be more than willing to take to the streets, the fact that Suu Kyi would prohibit this, privately if not publicly, would prevent the formation of a large and determined NLD turnout. Once again, the consequences of her volte-face are undermining the quest for freedom in Burma.

For the students, there are now two distinct groups, the 88 Generation remnants and younger activists who are presently at university. For the first, it is difficult to say what would happen. Min Ko Naing and his colleagues would certainly be outraged by a stolen vote, but given how much suffering they have endured as political prisoners, it is an open question if they would protest publicly again. Their contribution to Burma has already been so great, perhaps it is even appropriate that others take up the torch of freedom. This clearly falls to the current generation of students, and who have been holding protests already most notably for education reform. However, many of the most active students were arrested by the dictatorship at Letpadan, starting with the leaders of ABFSU. This has been an obvious attempt by the generals to decapitate a new student movement, by blocking the participation of the most courageous individuals. There's lots of students in Burma, though, so a new popular revolution is not impossible, particularly if some 88 Generation members do become involved.

For the monks, who played a critical role in the 2007 Saffron Uprising (after student leaders including Min Ko Naing as well as young NLD members were arrested), they too have been pacified. This time, though, it has not been through imprisonment. Rather, in a variation of the divide and conquer tactic employed against the EAOs, they have been split into two groups, nationalist Buddhists determined to cleanse Burma of Muslims, and who now openly support the regime (which is orchestrating the cleansing), and everyone else. It is important to recognize that the two different groups do exist - not every Buddhist monk in Burma is an extremist. However,

given the heated and even genocidal rhetoric employed by the first group, the second has chosen to be silent. The consequence of this is that the Buddhist monk community is riven, and hence very unlikely to participate in a new pro-democracy uprising, at least in a large and systematic way.

For the general Burman population, it is worth remembering that it did not back up the students and monks in 2007, at least in massive numbers. The protests reached one hundred thousand, not one million. Therefore, since such leadership is unlikely now, for the reasons just described, its participation in public demonstrations is even less probable. To this we can add the effects of the dictatorship's "reform." As yet another variation on divide and conquer, the generals have allowed new (but limited) economic opportunities for Burmans living in the country's towns and cities, while continuing to repress harshly the ethnic nationalities. Burmans are being ruled with what you might term "dictatorship-lite." This in turn follows the example set by China, where the public has been redirected to a potential, but for the vast majority false, economic freedom, and with harsh repression restricted to anyone who continues to demand democracy, as well as the Muslim Uyghurs from East Turkestan - the new "common enemy" (which established the model for Burma's destruction of the Rohingya).

Finally, while the EAOs retain their arms, and - hopefully - will continue to oppose, with force if necessary, large exploitation projects in their homelands, they too have been pacified to some degree. One consequence of the never-ending ceasefire negotiations is that the EAO leaders have said again and again that they do not want to fight, that they prefer a political solution, even when there is none. Such a stance, so often repeated, has set a precedent that will make truly unified and offensive action very difficult to initiate. The need for a real armed revolution to protect their peoples and to defeat the dictatorship, which so many military analysts view as essential if the country is ever to be free, is now farther from realization than at any time since 1962 and the seizing of power by Ne Win, the first modern age Burman dictator.

With all of this in mind, it is therefore clear that public revolt, either in the streets or in the mountains, and which many people assume would follow a stolen election, is actually quite far-fetched.

**Five.** The next election scenario is that the vote will be free and fair, and Parliament will be populated by a completely new group of MPs and who are legitimately pro-democracy. Moreover, this seems to be the outcome on which so many people, starting with Suu Kyi, have based their hopes.

The problem with this, though, is that it conflicts with the objective of Burma's supreme leader, Senior General Than Shwe, who retains absolute power behind the scenes. Than Shwe fancies himself a new Burman emperor. He even built a royal city, Naypyidaw, and where Parliament is based. It is unimaginable that he would permit a large collection of democrats to pollute his imperial dream. Of course, he could allow a democratic vote, and attempt to maintain control over the new Parliament through the military's representatives. However, this position, over

time, would be untenable - having a democratic Parliament clashing again and again with the dictatorship. This illustrates, once again, that Burma's election is unprecedented. The idea that a democratic Parliament can be formed, and draft one reasonable law after another - on freedom of expression and association and the press, on ethnic rights and federalism, on land thefts and sustainable development, etc., only to see all such laws opposed and in all likelihood blocked, is unthinkable.

**Six.** The final scenario is a military coup, under the terms of the current constitution, whereby the dictatorship seizes renewed, overt control of Burma, using as its excuse the need to preserve the country's integrity - to prevent widespread unrest from popular protests or civil war. In fact, the real decision that Than Shwe faces right now is whether to steal the election outright, or launch such a coup - either before the vote or shortly after. One imagines, again, that he will let the vote proceed, because of the preparations already underway. The choice then becomes to steal the vote outright, or have a limited set of dirty tricks and then wait to see how many seats the USDP secures. If it is less than a dominating majority, the result will be abandoned (as in 1990), and the military - under Min Aung Hlaing - will take control.

An open question is if there would then be a counter-coup by officers who are secret democracy sympathizers. More likely, though, is that Than Shwe would launch a North Korean style purge of any officers deemed suspect.

## **Conclusion**

I argued in the article, *Subvert Burma's Election!*, in January 2014, that the best course of action was to prevent the vote. Democracy isn't achieved this way, so why bother going through and thereby supporting the dictatorship's propaganda charade. Much better would be to grasp the problem at hand, how to overthrow the regime, which isn't as difficult as it seems since the Burma Army has been seriously weakened by years of fighting with the EAOs.

Unfortunately, again due to Suu Kyi's leadership, this course was not taken. Whatever scenario plays out, it is certain that the ultimate result will be a disappointed and angry general public, an even larger increase in political prisoners, and yet more conflict between the Burma Army and the EAOs. The "reform" will also stop completely. (It already has.) And, the task of defeating the dictators will remain as pressing as ever.

What Burma's pro-democracy movement needs are new and determined leaders, such as the student leaders now under arrest and the younger officers now rising through the ranks of the EAOs. The current leadership has failed. It has been too timid. This isn't to say that many current leaders aren't excellent, such as the members of the EAO senior delegation. They are. But, they need to make room for younger individuals, and to redirect their goal to real peace, freedom and democratic change, not the false peace and false reform that they have been outmaneuvered - by both the generals and the U.S. - to accept.

Fortunately, one other outcome of the election, once it does not turn out the way she expected, will be a further reduction in the reverence for Suu Kyi and her credibility. She has been the principal barrier to a real pro-democracy movement for more than two decades, going back to her unwillingness in 1990 to ask Burma Army soldiers to join the movement, and her objection ever since to working with the ethnic armies. The election outcome will once and for all reveal the naivete - the stupidity - of her strategy, which all but her most brainwashed disciples will be forced to accept. Then, with her influence destroyed, many new avenues for resistance should quickly become apparent.