



BURMA REPORT

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Free all political prisoners, free Burma.

<Zin Linn <zinlinn@cscoms.com> - [NLDmembersnSupportersofCRPPnNLDnDASSK] News & Articles on Burma
The Globe and Mail

The Lady from Burma - Karen Connelly

From Wednesday's Globe and Mail Published Wednesday, Nov. 17, 2010 4:23AM EST
<<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/opinion/the-lady-from-burma/article1801657/>>

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Like millions of others around the world, I felt jubilation as I watched newly released Aung San Suu Kyi greet thousands of her supporters. But I also felt a grim sense of déjà vu.

In 1996, I watched Ms. Suu Kyi speak to an impassioned crowd in the same place where she addressed them last Saturday, from behind the gate of her house in Rangoon. Months later, the military regime banned her public talks, rearrested her and confined her once again. But, for a brief period, she was allowed to do what she does brilliantly: talk and listen to her people.

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It sounds like such a simple thing, but even Canadians know how difficult it is to produce a politician who inspires trust and a deep sense of civic duty. Somehow, against all odds, Burma has produced Ms. Suu Kyi, a gifted, galvanizing stateswoman. It would be tragic if the Burmese generals do not recognize what she offers them in terms of peacemaking and face-saving. In a country engaged in civil war with ethnic groups already calling for talks with her, Ms. Suu Kyi's participation in politics could save Burma billions of dollars and thousands of lives, and win the country new respect – and a lot more business – from the international community.

But it's hard for the generals to see the situation in such constructive terms, because they specialize in dismantling civil society wherever they can find it – in schools, universities, unions, the media, the health-care system, even the Buddhist monkhood. In Burma, to be an involved citizen means being brave – which is another one of Ms. Suu Kyi's talents: She makes ordinary people feel courageous.

Fourteen years ago, when she stood before the crowd, the immense wave of sound – the shouting, in perfect unison, of her name – was unlike anything I had heard before. When the roar hushed, she began to talk. I had expected her to be stern and forceful; instead, she was funny, eloquent and capable of making 3,000 individuals feel as though she had addressed each of them personally. For weeks afterward, during my travels in Burma, as people whispered her name and showed me their secret photos of her, I witnessed how one small, harassed woman and her political party were a unifying force in a country that has been violently divided since colonial times.

When I interviewed her just before I left, she repeatedly used the word “unity” and talked about the student dissidents, as well as the many ethnic groups battling against the junta from the Thai and Chinese borders. Surprisingly, she spoke warmly of Burma's military – not of the generals, per se, but of the army. I knew that her father, Aung San, had believed in the importance of military action against the British Empire. He was also a remarkable statesman: He had secured Burma's independence from the British while retaining them as allies against the Japanese during the Second World War.

But I was still shocked to hear Ms. Suu Kyi talk about how Burmese people, herself included, had traditionally loved their soldiers and respected the military. At that time, I enjoyed moral polarities, a good “us” against a bad “them.” This was an indulgence that Ms. Suu Kyi, in half an hour of conversation, helped cure me of. She neither hated nor feared the men who had imprisoned her. She did not dramatize her house arrest; instead, then as now, she minimized the injustices she

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suffered and talked about the political prisoners who were (and are) suffering harsh sentences in prisons without adequate food, water and medical care.

In the days since her release, she has shown the same absence of rancour and renewed her call for genuine dialogue with the junta. Some political commentators have suggested that Ms. Suu Kyi's long isolation has left her woefully out of touch with her people and the world. But her critics underestimate both the quickness of her mind and the longevity of Burmese collective memory.

Certainly, no one has forgotten her, least of all the intransigent bevy of military men led by General Than Shwe. She is not afraid of him, but there is no doubt that he fears the change she represents. This is the woman who, hours after being released from seven years of house arrest, greeted thousands of people and spoke to them with feeling about the importance of the rule of law. "The rulers must be under the control of the people," she said. "I also wish to be controlled. That is how democracy works."

Karen Connelly's latest book, [Burmese Lessons: A Love Story](#), was a finalist for the 2010 Governor-General's Award for non-fiction.

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<http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2010/11/21/Suu-Kyi-visit-dooms-Myanmar-AIDS-clinic/UPI-63321290354422/>

Suu Kyi visit dooms Myanmar AIDS clinic

Published: Nov. 21, 2010 at 10:47 AM

YANGON, Myanmar, Nov. 21 (UPI) -- The director of an AIDS clinic in Myanmar says the military government has been leaning on him ever since a visit by dissident leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Yazar, who uses only one name, told CNN Sunday that shortly after Suu Kyi's visit on Wednesday, the government told him to move out by Nov. 25.

"We have received this kind of threat before, but this time the warning is rude, much stronger and seems to be very serious," Yazar said.

Suu Kyi, who received the Nobel Peace Prize for her pro-democracy activism, was freed from a long-running house arrest earlier this month. She made Yazar's clinic one of her first public appearances.

Yazar said Suu Kyi chose the clinic in the suburbs of Yangon because she wanted to meet people who were in the direst need of help.

CNN said the government claimed it was shutting the clinic down due to complaints from neighbors.

The Irrawaddy Today's Newsletter for Wednesday, November 24, 2010 – news@irrawaddy.org, <<http://www.irrawaddy.org/>>

The Irrawaddy - <http://www.irrawaddy.org/highlight.php?art_id=20167>

Suu Kyi and her Son Visit Shwedagon Pagoda

By BA KAUNG

Wednesday, November 24, 2010

Aung San Suu Kyi and her son Kim Aris visited Burma's holiest shrine, Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda, early on Wednesday.

Suu Kyi once rallied political supporters there before she was consigned by the authorities to a total of 15 years' house arrest.

Her father, Burma's independence hero Aung San, also spoke to supporters at the pagoda, which became a focus of opposition sentiment as well as a hallowed religious monument. Protesting monks massed there during the 2007 uprising.

Freed political prisoners made it a custom to visit the pagoda after their release. Suu Kyi was freed from her current term of house arrest on November 13, but reportedly delayed her visit until after the arrival in Burma of her youngest son, who was granted a one-month visa to enable him to see his mother for the first time in 10 years.

"Mother, please take good care of your health," cried one of several Suu Kyi supporters who gathered at the pagoda to see her and Kim Aris arrive there at 7 a.m. Rangoon reporters said plainclothes security men also mingled with the crowd.

Suu Kyi and her son paid homage at a planetary post at a corner of the pagoda. Planetary posts mark the days of birth of Buddhist worshippers.

A devout Buddhist, Suu Kyi will arrange for the ordination of Kim into the monkhood for a short period, a widely practiced ritual among Burmese Buddhist families.

She held a novitiation ceremony for Kim and his elder brother Alexander several years ago while their father, British scholar Michael Aris, was still alive. Aris, a respected scholar on Tibetan Buddhism, died in 1999.
Rangoon correspondents contributed to this story.



Aung San Suu Kyi is accompanied by her son Kim Aris as they visit the Shwedagon Pagoda on Wednesday morning.

(Photo: Reuters)

The Irrawaddy - http://www.irrawaddy.org/highlight.php?art_id=20092 - <http://www.irrawaddy.org/>

Suu Kyi Willing to Work with USDP

By WAI MOE

Tuesday, November 16, 2010 -

Burma's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi told party colleagues she is even ready to work for democracy with the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) though the party was allegedly involved in an attempt on her life seven years ago.

Suu Kyi's comment on the USDP came during a two-hour meeting from 1 p.m. On Monday with leaders of her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), from divisions and states of Burma.

Answering a question about cooperating with other parties that participated in the Nov. 7 elections, Suu Kyi said she is willing to work with any party that shows goodwill towards the country and that she wanted to work with the USDP if it was willing to work with her, according to Aung Kyi Nyunt, who attended the meeting.

Chaired by Prime Minister Thein Sein, the USDP was directly transformed from the junta-backed "mass organization", the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), in April in order to participate as a political party in the elections. State media claimed throughout the week that the USDP won the elections in a landslide victory.

Suu Kyi and hundreds of her supporters were brutally ambushed by USDA thugs in Depayin, Sagaing Division in northern Burma in May 2003. Suu Kyi narrowly escaped but about 100 of her supporters were reportedly killed and she was put under detention.

Monday's meeting was her first with about 100 party key members across the country following her release from detention on Saturday.

"Like twenty years ago, she is still very dynamic although she is 65," said Aung Kyi Nyunt, who won an NLD seat in Mon State in the 1990 election.

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Aung San Suu Kyi speaks at a meeting with members at her National League for Democracy's party headquarters in Rangoon on November 15. (Photo: Reuters)

"When Daw Aung San Suu Kyi arrived at the meeting, she told us she wanted to listen to party delegations rather than talk herself but she still replied to issues raised by delegates point by point," he said.

The highlight of the meeting was her statement that she is willing to cooperate with anyone for the good of the nation, he said.

NLD sources said party delegates also discussed vote cheating during the elections, the NLD's legal status, national reconciliation and the plan to hold a multi-ethnic conference for national reconciliation.

"It was quite an open discussion between Daw Suu and us," said one attendant. "She answered every question."

In response to issues raised by delegates involved in human rights advocacy including coordination with the International Labor Organization over child soldiers and forced labor issues, Suu Kyi said she will help with facilitating "systematic" reports, saying all cases have to be according to "laws, justice and the truth."

Regarding the junta's detention of about 2200 political prisoners, Suu Kyi said she will "seriously" focus on gaining freedom for those behind bars soon and that all cases must be dealt with through truth and justice.

According to NLD sources, Suu Kyi met some diplomats in the morning at party headquarters and then held a personal meeting with the owner of the property used as party headquarters.

"She expressed her gratitude to the owner for providing the compound and house free of charge for more than 20 years despite threats of a jail-term," said Yar Zar, an NLD member speaking from party headquarters.

Later on Monday, Suu Kyi visited a monastery in Rangoon.

Meanwhile, the National Democratic Force, which split from the NLD in favor of participating in the election, issued a statement on Monday offering "cognitive support" for Suu Kyi's stated intention of cooperating with all pro-democracy forces for national reconciliation.

ThaungN@aol.com - Fri, 26. Nov 2010

Associated Press - <<http://asiancorrespondent.com/breakingnews/un-official-to-meet-burma-s-suu-kyi.htm>

Diplomats: UN official to meet Burma's Suu Kyi

A senior United Nations official will visit Burma this weekend to meet the country's military rulers and recently released democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, diplomats said Friday.



Vijay Nambiar, chief of staff for U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, was probably coming to "feel the temperature" in the country following the first election in 20 years and Suu Kyi's release from more than seven years of house arrest, one diplomat said on condition of anonymity because of diplomatic protocol.

Nambiar is due to arrive in the main city Yangon on Saturday, they said.

Since her release Nov. 7, Suu Kyi has been busy meeting diplomats, U.N. representatives, politicians and international agencies.

The 65-year-old Nobel Peace Prize laureate has made it clear she plans to pursue her goal of a democratic Burma but has been careful not to verbally challenge the junta.

The ruling generals and their longtime archrival have had no contact since Suu Kyi was freed from detention. She has called for face-to-face reconciliation talks with junta leader Gen. Than Shwe.

A long line of U.N. officials, including Ban, have attempted to broker talks between the opposing sides, but despite numerous claims of "breakthroughs" have failed to bring them together.

Suu Kyi's political party swept the 1990 elections but was never allowed to take power. A pro-regime party overwhelmingly won this month's elections amid widespread claims the balloting was rigged.

The junta regards Suu Kyi and her nonviolent struggle for democracy as a threat to its power. She has been detained for 15 of the past 21 years.

Associated Press

The Irrawaddy - <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=20077>.

Assassination Haunts Suu Kyi's Security

By HTET AUNG

Sunday, November 14, 2010



Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi speaks with supporters outside her home, where she was previously placed under house arrest in Rangoon on November 13. (Photo: Reuters)

The security of Burma's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is a serious concern, but she says she wants to listen to the voice of the people and will resume tours across the country, according to leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

In answer to a reporter's question at a press conference on Sunday afternoon, she said her personal security like any other citizen of the country will depend on the authorities. Since she was released, she said she hasn't thought about her personal security.

However, NLD leaders said Suu Kyi's security will be a serious concern as she tries to reach out to the grassroots people.

"Before the Depayin incident in 2003, there wasn't a state of mind in the military or other forces to assassinate her though she faced a series of verbal harassment," said Win Tin, one of the party's founders and secretary of the NLD. "But after the Depayin incident, we saw that there had been a state of mind to assassinate her."

"What Daw Aung San Suu Kyi emphasized in her speech to the people yesterday and will do today, is that she wants to listen to the people's voice and follow what they truly desire," said Win Tin. "She plans to travel, but I can't tell in detail about when and where she will travel."

Citing the assassination of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto as an example, Win Tin said: "As a political leader who always deals with the people, she can be assassinated by a killer who is hiding in the crowd at any time."

Since her involvement in Burmese politics in 1988, Suu Kyi has faced a number of threats on her life.

The first incident occurred in April 1989 when she toured Irrawaddy Division, and she was in a situation in which an army captain was about to shoot her as she passed through an army blockade in Danubyu Township.

The second incident occurred in November 1996 when her motorcade was attacked by a group of thugs with sticks and bricks on Kabaraye Pagoda Road in Rangoon.

The third incident occurred on May 30, 2003, when her motorcade was attacked by a large mob systemically organized by the junta and its civilian wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), which has now been transformed into a political party which won the election unfairly with widespread vote rigging.

Her security has been a concern since 1988, but Win Tin said: "A political leader who the people love and rely on can't avoid such a risk. Without reaching out to the people and mobilizing their support, she couldn't have achieved her stature as a democratic leader."

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Burmacampaign - Anna Roberts <anna.roberts@burmacampaign.org.uk>

New Burma Government Does Not Have To Include Any Elected Mps - 07 Nov 2010

As Burma's generals today hold fake elections, Burma Campaign UK publishes a new briefing detailing how Burma's generals have brought in a new constitution which sidelines Parliament and makes it impossible for MPs in the new Parliament to introduce any genuine democratic reforms.

- There is no requirement for a single member of Burma's new government to be elected in elections on 7th November.
- There will be a Presidential, not Parliamentary form of government.
- The President must come from the military, either a former or serving soldier.
- The President is not accountable to Parliament.
- Government ministers are not accountable to Parliament.
- Real democratic reforms require constitutional reform, which is impossible without the military agreeing to it.

The new briefing is available at: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/burmas-fake-election>

Real power will lie not with Parliament and MPs, but rather with the President, Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services, and a new National Defense and Security Council (NDSC). Eight of the eleven positions will be either serving or former military men, or chosen by the military. Two more will be chosen by a Parliament controlled by the military, and the final position chosen by a serving or former soldier.

- The Military is not accountable to the President or the Parliament. It sets its own budget, and runs its own affairs independently.
- The Military decides who the Home Affairs Minister, Defense Minister, and Border Affairs Ministers are.
- The Military can take military action against civilians in Burma without approval of Parliament or the President. Current military attacks against ethnic civilians in Burma are so serious the United Nations Burma human rights expert has called for a UN inquiry into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Military has ensured it has multiple options for blocking any attempt by Parliament to introduce democratic reforms.

- Rigged elections with severe restrictions on political activities ensure pro-military parties have a majority in Parliament.
- 25% percent of seats in Parliament are reserved for the military, ensuring the required vote of over 75% of MPs for constitutional change is impossible without military consent.
- Even if all elected MPs and some soldiers did vote to change the constitution, the Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services can legally take control of the country and ignore the vote.

"Under Burma's new constitution it is impossible for there to be democratic change unless the military agree, which was the position before the elections," said Zoya Phan, International Coordinator at Burma Campaign UK. "The whole election is a giant con, a diversion from a new constitution legalising dictatorship."

It has been argued that while the current Parliament may be full of pro-regime parties and soldiers, in future elections over the next 5-15 years this may change. Even if one was to accept that that for 15 years or more the people of Burma can continue to suffer appalling human rights abuses, including rape, torture, arbitrary executions and other acts constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity, this argument still ignores the reality of the situation in Burma. The military have a constitutional veto over democratic reform, now and in 15 years time.

Even if by some miracle future elections in 2015 or 2020 elections were free and fair, and pro-regime parties lost all their seats, the military, by having 25 percent of seats in Parliament, still have a veto over constitutional democratic change.

Even if miracles became even more abundant, and a handful of soldiers were willing to vote with all the elected officials to reform the constitution, and those soldiers were not replaced by the military before the vote, the Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services can constitutionally take full control of the country if he decided such reforms are a threat to

national security or national solidarity.

Once these details of the constitution are examined, it becomes clear why the National League for Democracy has decided not to take part.

“Those arguing that over the long term Parliament could be a forum for political change are in fact depending on a single factor, that at some point the Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services will decide to hand over power,” said Zoya Phan. “A strategy that depends on crossing our fingers and wishing for a liberal in military clothing to somehow become Commander-in-Chief is simply not credible. We need to see a revived and high level effort by the United Nations to secure negotiations between the dictatorship, Burma’s democracy movement, and genuine ethnic representatives, which will lead to real change. The UN has said this is the way forward. It is time to make it happen.”

The new briefing is available at: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/burmas-fake-election>

Tin Kyi <mtinkyi7@yahoo.com> - NLDmembersnSupportersofCRPPnNLDnDASSK@yahoogroups.com, Burma Related News - Nov 01-02, 2010

The Malasian INSIDER - <<http://www.themalasianinsider.com/world/article/myanmar-junta-says-will-keep-power-if-voters-abstain/>>

Myanmar junta says will keep power if voters abstain

Reuters - November 01, 2010

YANGON, Nov 1 — Myanmar’s military rulers threatened today to cling to power if the public abstained from voting in Sunday’s long-awaited election and blamed foreign media for trying to derail the poll.

The military, which has run the country since a 1962 coup, said 13 foreign news organisations had colluded with opposition movements to discourage people from voting and create “great troubles” for the country.

“If the election is aborted (by voters) there will not be a government that’s elected by vote of the people,” all state-controlled newspapers, which serve as mouthpieces for the reclusive regime, said in a commentary.

“The ruling government would have no choice but to remain in charge of state security until it holds another election. If so, this will take a long time,” it said, adding that Myanmar’s plan to become a democracy took more than a decade to draft.

It was the first time the junta has made such a threat, or mentioned the possibility of a no-vote campaign ahead of the election, which critics say is a sham to cement the military’s iron-fisted grip on power.

In the absence of any real opposition to two big parties backed by the military, activists and analysts say a significant boycott by voters would be the only means of expressing public opposition to the election.

The commentary did not name the foreign news media it accused of trying to sabotage the poll. It said journalists were working closely with organisations that were “no longer political parties”, a veiled reference to the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), which has boycotted the poll.

“Their intent is nothing more than to get the nation and the people into great troubles,” the commentary said.

The NLD, led by detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won the country’s last election, in 1990, in a landslide, but the generals ignored the result.

The NLD, which was dissolved because of its boycott of this month’s vote, says this election is “unfair and unjust” because of the detention of Suu Kyi and more than 2,100 other political prisoners, hundreds of whom are party members. — Reuters

The Irrawaddy Today's Newsletter - Helga Yan <helga.yan@web.de>

The Irrawaddy – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/>, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=20005>

Mae Sot Burdened by Thousands of Burmese Refugee

By WAI MOE

Monday, November 8, 2010

MAE SOT—The ongoing armed conflict between Burmese government troops and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Brigade 5 has sent thousands of refugees fleeing across the border to Mae Sot, Thailand.

Thai officials in Mae Sot estimated that more than 10,000 refugees entered Thailand on Monday after fighting broke out in the early morning—one day after Burma held its first election in 20 years. Other sources estimate that the number of refugees may now be as high as 30,000.

Refugees from in and around Myawaddy—Burma's border town across the river from Mae Sot— included months-old infants and the elderly, who were carried on the backs of family members. Most refugees fled with few possessions, crossing the Moei River group by group with the sound of gunfire and explosions coming from behind.

“My family members and I ran away from the battle in the town, taking whatever stuff we had in hand,” said a 50-year old housewife from Myawaddy. “I do not know when we can go back home.”

She said that Thai security forces and volunteers first took them to a building under construction at a monastery near the river. They were then taken, along with other refugees, by pickup truck to a Thai army compound opposite the Mae Sot airport.

The Thai authorities placed thousands of Burmese refugees on a football ground in the army compound, where the authorities pitched temporary tents. Shortly after the refugees arrived at the temporary refugee camps, local volunteers and the Thai Red Cross arranged food and water for thousands who stood in queue to receive the aid.

Although some Myawaddy residents managed to flee to safety in Thailand, others remain in the town and are living under constant threat, as more than 30 people, including civilians and troops from both sides of the conflict, were reportedly killed on Monday.

The Burmese military has declared a state of emergency in Myawaddy, placing a curfew on the residents and warning them not to go outside.

“The army warned us not go out from our house. If we do, they said they will open fire,” a 28-year-old Myawaddy resident told *The Irrawaddy* by phone. “My family members are living in fear. We will try to flee to Thailand if there is chance,” he said.

Although there is no official confirmation, according to sources in Myawaddy there are also arson attacks taking place in the town. “Government troops were targeting houses and properties of the DKBA for arson attacks,” said Ma Ni Ni, a local resident.

Taking advantage of the diversion created by the election, DKBA Brigade 5 troops led by Kyaw Thet took positions in Myawaddy on Sunday afternoon. Kyaw Thet is loyal to the DKBA Brigade 5 leader, Saw Lah Pwe, who broke away over a disagreement with senior DKBA leaders when they agreed to join the junta's border guard force (BGF) under Burmese military command.

Mae Sot's current refugee crisis is the second such crisis sparked by tension over the BGF. In Aug. 2009, 37,000 Kokang-Chinese refugees fled from Burma to China after junta troops overran the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army after the group rejected the BGF.

The Burmese junta has shut down the Myawaddy-Mae Sot border gate since July 18 due to potential instability on the border. The closure has cost Thailand billions of baht in lost trading revenue.

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[Mr. Beard Breaks Away](#)

"Burma_News" <burma_news@verizon.net>, Burma News - 07 November 2010 Datum: Mon, 08. Nov 2010

THE WHITE HOUSE - Office of the Press Secretary, November 07, 2010

Statement by President Obama on November 7 Elections

The November 7 elections in Burma were neither free nor fair, and failed to meet any of the internationally accepted standards associated with legitimate elections. The elections were based on a fundamentally flawed process and demonstrated the regime's continued preference for repression and restriction over inclusion and transparency.

One of the starkest flaws of this exercise was the regime's continued detention of more than 2,100 political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, thereby denying them any opportunity to participate in the process. The unfair electoral laws and overtly partisan Election Commission ensured that Burma's leading pro-democracy party, the National League for Democracy, was silenced and sidelined. The regime denied the registration of certain ethnic parties, cancelled elections in numerous ethnic areas, and stage-managed the campaign process to ensure that pro-democracy and opposition candidates who did compete faced insurmountable obstacles. Ultimately, elections cannot be credible when the regime rejects dialogue with opponents and represses the most basic freedoms of expression, speech, and assembly.

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We will monitor the situation in Burma closely in the weeks and months ahead. The United States will continue to implement a strategy of pressure and engagement in accordance with conditions on the ground in Burma and the actions of the Burmese authorities. We renew our calls for the authorities to: free Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners immediately and unconditionally, cease systematic violations of human rights, begin to hold human rights violators accountable, and welcome pro-democracy and ethnic minority groups into a long-overdue dialogue. Only genuine, inclusive dialogue can place Burma on the path to a truly representative democracy which upholds human rights and builds a better future for its citizens.

The Irrawaddy - <<http://www.irrawaddy.org/>>, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=19871&page=1>

Escaping the Traps of the Past

By [MIN ZIN](#)

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Snr-Gen Than Shwe, center, walks with a cadre of possible next generation military leaders. (Photo: MMM/The Irrawaddy)

Although Burma's upcoming Nov. 7 election will not resolve the country's ongoing political crisis or provide much-needed reforms, one should not be blind to the fact that the election will have consequences—whether negative or positive. Political actors who either participate in or boycott the election will bear the aftershocks of this event. Political players will not be able to write their political plans on a blank slate. Instead, they have to work with what is at hand.

The 2010 election will contribute to changes in the format of governance—the transformation of the one-dimensional military junta into a hybrid form of government that includes both political and military elements. Regardless of who pulls the strings, this could lead to either a serious internal split or the utter inefficiency of the ruling body.

A recent major reshuffle within the Burmese military reportedly included the appointment of the future commander-in-chief and deputy commander-in-chief, although the top two generals who have long occupied these positions—Snr-Gen Than Shwe and Vice Snr-Gen Maung Aye, respectively—have retained their military titles. Interestingly, the junta's third- and fourth-ranking generals, Gen Shwe Mann and Lt-Gen Tin Aung Myint Oo, both quit their military positions and adopted civilian titles, according to state media reports.

If this reshuffle indicates that Than Shwe has made a pre-mortem succession arrangement by installing an heir apparent and investing him with considerable power to manage the Tatmadaw, or armed forces, the opposition and its advocates should celebrate this development as good news for two reasons.

First, this transition is an inter-generational succession, unlike the intra-generational shift from Saw Maung to Than Shwe in 1992. For the departing Than Shwe to continue to control the political role of the Tatmadaw and call the shots for key policy decisions, he needs to create a formal position for himself and leave the army chief position to a successor who is not only loyal but also weak.

Temporarily, at least, this could mean a disruption of personalized power among the military top brass—something that the opposition could seize upon as an opportunity to reformulate a new and positive dynamic of civil-military relations. It is particularly significant that this will occur within the context of a transition from military to hybrid rule. Unlike one-party rule and the closed socialist economy under former dictator Ne Win, the new hybrid political arrangement and market economy will make it difficult for the departing leaders to control the military completely, especially when the role of Than



Leadership of the NDF, including chairman Khin Maung Swe. (Photo: MMM/The Irrawaddy)

Shwe fades away due to a decline in his health or other causes.

Second, if Than Shwe is confident enough to assume the role of president in the aftermath of the election and dedicates more of his energies to overseeing the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), it will give the military a chance to gradually detach itself from past wrongdoings and renew the integrity of the institution.

We have seen attempts by the military to break with the past before. For instance, as retired Lt-Gen Chit Swe revealed in his memoir, some senior officers who took part in the 1988 coup wanted to dissociate themselves from the failures of the defunct Burma Socialist

Programme Party (BSPP), noting that the massive popular uprising of that year was directed at ruling socialist party politicians, not the army.

Thus the military's claims to a distinct corporate identity could allow it to distance itself even from soldiers-turned-politicians if the new government faces a crisis of legitimacy. If the Tatmadaw was able to part ways from the ruling party following the socialist era, when all soldiers were technically party members, it can certainly assume a distinct role from the USDP, which is set to become as ideologically vacuous and deeply hated as the BSPP.

Such a change in the Tatmadaw's power dynamic in the post-election period could open the way for a new civil-military relationship. Thus the election could prove consequential for the opposition, particularly the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

In this context, it is important to note that although the NLD decision not to contest the election was probably the right one, the party was wrong not to diversify its pro-democracy struggle and avoid an internal split by setting up or at least allowing a proxy party to exist. Unfortunately, without Suu Kyi, the other NLD leaders seem incapable of articulating or implementing any political program or strategy. They often seem narrowly focused on party survival, merely biding their time until Suu Kyi's release from house arrest without having any further agenda.

With Suu Kyi at the helm, the party appears to have some direction, but it is still prone to poor political timing. Since rising to prominence as the leader of the democratic opposition, Suu Kyi has made a number of unfortunate judgment calls that have had lasting consequences.

These include her direct confrontation with former dictator Ne Win in 1989, at a time when he still wielded considerable power behind the scenes; her premature public disclaimer that she was not making any secret deals with the regime soon after holding talks with Than Shwe in 1994; her announcement of plans to boycott the National Convention less than two months after a visit by then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in 1995, raising the regime's suspicions of a conspiracy and hindering future trust-building efforts and possible negotiations; and her decision in 2003 to travel at night through hostile areas, including Depayin, despite warnings of possible violent attacks. Although Suu Kyi and her party are certainly not responsible for the regime's subsequent actions on these occasions, these examples of past missteps do serve to illustrate the lack of strategic thinking on the part of the NLD and its leader.

Despite its history of misjudgments and recent forcible disbandment, however, the NLD remains a potent force in Burmese politics. For its part, the junta seems content to contain the party's influence ahead of the election, while the NLD itself also appears to be in a holding pattern, waiting for Suu Kyi's release, which is scheduled to take place less than a week after the election.

Thus both sides are strangely in synch, for the most part avoiding open confrontation while no doubt anticipating a future showdown.

Again, however, this approach betrays the NLD's weakness at formulating plans of action that are likely to lead to real results. In this case, the price of losing sight of the potential for marginal gains, including additional opportunities to reach out to the public, recruit new members and mobilize resources, could be even greater than in the past.

By failing to offer an alternative to the regime's relentless drive to legitimize itself under the guise of elections, the party risks losing its moral authority as the leading light of the democracy movement, without which it has precious little in the way of political capital. Although two decades of absolute military rule have been far from kind to the NLD, there's no reason to believe that the messy post-election political scene, which will likely be fraught with political violence, corruption

and political alliances between crooks, cronies and accused war criminals, will be any kinder. By taking a “purity-seeking” stance, the party could find itself in the wilderness of permanent opposition status for many more years to come.

Of course, the NLD is not alone in facing some hard choices at this juncture in Burmese history. The parties that have opted to contest the election are also going to have to navigate their way carefully around the many pitfalls that still await them. The ethnic parties are in a particularly precarious situation, as their efforts to win a place at the table come amid a deteriorating security situation that threatens to throw Burma back to the bad old days of life before the multitude of cease-fire agreements that have been in place for most of the past two decades. Even if these deals hold and the ethnic parties win a few seats in parliament, elected leaders will be hard-pressed to improve the lot of their constituents in an environment where military-owned businesses, junta cronies, foreign investors and ethnic drug lords and elites plunder natural resources without regard for the long-term needs of ordinary citizens.

The international community will also have to decide where it stands on the outcome of the election. At the moment, it looks like most countries will simply fall back on their established positions, with perhaps some softening of the stances of a few longstanding Western critics of the regime. Unless all countries concerned are somehow able to reach a consensus on where Burma should be heading after the election, however, continuing division will stand in the way of the sort of decisive action that will be needed to move things forward.

The Burmese political scene, in short, may be similar to a living museum, in which military domination, a hybrid parliamentary “talking shop,” thuggish political violence, kleptocracy, contained Balkanization, gulags and committed struggle by principled dissidents will exist and operate in multiple levels of conflict.

Under such circumstances, the possibility of a collapse of Burma’s polity due to implosion or explosion can’t be ruled out. Of course, it is not desirable, as the country will descend into a bloodbath and anarchy.

Ultimately, however, Burma’s future direction will remain, in the near term at least, largely in the hands of its current rulers. But if the generals believe that a USDP “victory” will give them a mandate to stifle real change indefinitely, they are seriously mistaken. Just as the past cannot be erased, the future is also not to be denied. And the future belongs to those who learn from their mistakes and adapt accordingly—not those who consider themselves permanently entitled to dictate the fate of an entire nation.

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