

Myanmar's Suu Kyi set for sweeping power as election wins mount

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Myanmar democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi made it clear today that she was ready to defy the powerful military's attempts to clip her wings, as fresh results from Sunday's historic election showed her party heading for a resounding win.

As vote tallies trickled in, Suu Kyi's long-oppressed National League for Democracy (NLD) looked set to take control of most regional assemblies as well as forming the central government, a triumph that will reshape the political landscape.

Under the constitution drawn up by Myanmar's former junta, Suu Kyi is barred by the constitution from taking the presidency because her children are foreign nationals, a clause few doubt was inserted specifically to rule her out.

But in two interviews today, the Nobel peace laureate said that whoever was appointed president by the newly elected houses of Parliament, she would call the shots.

She told the *BBC* that she would be 'making all the decisions as the leader of the winning party' and *Channel News Asia* that the next president would have 'no authority'.

The ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which was created by the junta and is led by retired soldiers, has conceded defeat in a poll that was a milestone on Myanmar's rocky path from dictatorship to democracy.

A clear win

The NLD said its tally of results posted at polling stations showed it was on track to take more than two-thirds of seats that were contested in Parliament, enough to form Myanmar's first democratically elected government since the early 1960s.

The party would win more than 250 of the 330 seats not occupied by the military in the lower house of Parliament, NLD spokesperson Win Htein predicted today. Under the junta-crafted constitution, a quarter of the seats are unelected and reserved for the armed forces.

Reuters was not able to independently verify the party's own estimates of its performance.

The election commission said the NLD had won 78 of the 88 seats declared so far for the 440-strong lower house. No seats have been declared in the upper house.

Official results also showed that Sunday's election had handed the NLD a landslide win in the battle for regional assemblies, with Suu Kyi's party winning 143 of the 165 seats declared so far for local legislatures and the USDP just 12.

"The difference between the parties is huge. It's a clear win," said Sitida, a 37-year-old Buddhist monk in the central city of Mandalay who marched in the country's 2007 'Saffron Revolution' protests that were bloodily crushed by the junta.

Sitida, who was sentenced to 70 years in prison for his role in the demonstrations but was given amnesty as part of political reforms in 2011, said the military would now have to accept the NLD's win and negotiate an orderly retreat from politics.

"Daw Suu can make this happen. Daw Suu can convince them," he said, referring to Suu Kyi with an honorific.

However, while the USDP has been cut down and much of the establishment shaken by the extent of Suu Kyi's victory, the army remains a formidable power.

In addition to his bloc of Parliament seats, the commander-in-chief nominates the heads of three powerful and big-budget ministries - interior, defence, and border security - and the constitution gives him the right to take over the government under certain circumstances.

The military has said it will accept the outcome of the election, and Suu Kyi said times have changed since the 1990 election in which she won a landslide that the military ignored. She spent years under house arrest following that poll.

"I find that the people are far more politicised now than they were ... so it's much more difficult for those who wish to engage in irregularities to get away with it," she told the BBC.

'Now comes the hard part'

Still, analysts say a period of uncertainty may be looming for the former Burma because it is not clear if Suu Kyi and the generals will be able to share power easily.

Sunday's vote was the Southeast Asian nation's first general election since the military ceded power to a quasi-civilian government in 2011, ushering in reforms and opening up to foreign investors.

Money from abroad flowed in quickly as sanctions were eased. Foreign direct investment stood at US\$8 billion in fiscal 2014/15, more than five times the flows recorded just two years earlier.

Washington welcomed the election as a victory for Myanmar's people, but said it would watch for the democratic process to move forward before making any adjustments to remaining US sanctions on a country long considered a pariah.

President Barack Obama has invested significant personal effort in Myanmar, visiting the country twice in the past three years, hoping to make its democratic transition a legacy of his presidency and an element of his strategic 'pivot' to Asia.

Daniel Russel, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asia, said that after 50 years of military dictatorship, "this was a hell of a step forward for the democratic process in Burma" but added: "Now comes the hard part."

- Reuters

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