

**Tensions between Myanmar's Hardliners and Liberals**  
**Asia Sentinel**  
**February 13, 2012**  
**By Larry Jagan**

***Reform process finely balanced***

Myanmar's reform process is finely balanced between hardliners and liberals in government who continue a bitter power struggle. Change remains fragile, despite encouraging signs and growing goodwill towards President Thein Sein internationally. So far the government's good intentions have produced only limited practical change.

The reason for that is that the liberal-minded ministers who support Thein Sein and the reform agenda are being cramped by the persistent pressure from the hardliners, led by the vice president Tin Aung Myint Oo and Htay Oo – general secretary of the Union Solidarity and Development Party, who are intent on de-railing the reform process.

Now that the campaigning is underway for the forthcoming by-elections, the impact of the behind-the-scenes power struggle is increasingly apparent. The hardliners, who control the ruling Union Solidarity and Development party know that the outcome of these elections, although will not seriously change the balance of power within parliament, it will have a major influence on what happens to reform and the delicately balanced power struggle.

For the moment there is an impasse, at least until the by-elections are over. The result of these elections may then determine the pace and extent of reform in the future. Some 20 percent of ministers are liberals and 20 percent are hardliners, with 60 percent sitting on the fence waiting to see who wins, the railways minister Aung Min – the leading liberal in the Cabinet and the President's special envoy leading the peace process with the ethnic minorities -- told foreign diplomats recently.

The by-elections will be a real test for the liberals in government as they need a free and fair election to convince the international community that they are serious about change. President Thein Sein and the speaker of the lower house, and another leading reformer, U Thura Shwe Mann, met with the chairman of the election commissioner Tin Aye met a few months ago – before Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy agree to contest -- and agreed that the by-elections would be free and fair, even if it means the USDP might take a severe drubbing in the polls.

Both the President and the Speaker assured the US secretary of state Hilary Clinton that the elections would be free and fair during her visit at the beginning of December. The reformers understand how important it is that these elections are recognized as legitimate – unlike the original vote in November 2010. But the hardliners also understand that their position and influence is also intimately tied up in the outcome of the by-election vote.

So far the signs are ominous and there is growing evidence that the hardliners are trying to scupper the NLD's campaign. Some senior USDP leaders have instructed government officials to block the NLD's electoral campaign in any way they can. This was already evident in the obstacles created when Aung San Suu Kyi wanted to speak to her

supporters in Mandalay – the EC gave her permission to speak but refused approval to use the main stadium there wanted to address the rally.

The signs that this is going to be a dirty campaign were apparent even before her first trip to the Dawei industrial zone area in southern Burma. In a clear preview of things to come, the former fisheries minister and USDP central executive member, Maung Maung Thein, warned residents in area in mid-January that if they didn't vote for the USDP they would lose their jobs, according to sources in the area. More ominously though he instructed the local officials to make sure they manipulate the vote in same way that the November polls were rigged, senior military sources told Irrawaddy. Maung Maung Thein has considerable business interests in the area – especially in the fishing industry – though he has also been accused of colossal corruption.

The best example of the battle being waged behind the scenes is the issue of political prisoners. Although many have been freed, including the high-profile activists from the 88 students group – Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi – the Shan political leader Khun Htun Oo, the Buddhist monk U Gambira and the former prime minister and intelligence chief Khin Nyunt, the continued two-and-froing reflects the precarious position of the reformers who wanted to free them as soon as possible.

Before their release on Jan. 13, there had been hints that most of the political prisoners would be on Jan. 4 – Independence Day, and Feb. 12 – Union Day. But when only a handful of political prisoners were let out and the sentences of other prisoners reduced – there was widespread dismay amongst the liberal circles in Burma.

President Thein Sein appeared to have been cowed again by the hardliners.

Aung Min – the railways minister who has been leading the peace process and ceasefire talks with many of the rebel ethnic groups – was visibly depressed by the fresh hold-up, according to one of his close personnel friends. The speaker Shwe Mann virtually made a public apology.

The fate of the political prisoners is a microcosm of the broader power struggle that continues to dog the reform process. Although the president is the one who finally decides who will be released and when, he is constantly walking a tight-rope, trying to build a consensus around his "gentleman's agenda" and not provoke the hardliners in his Cabinet.

Now news of what happened has emerged. At the 30 December meeting of the powerful National Defense and Security Council – the 11-member body chaired by Thein Sein and commander-in-chief of the military General Min Aung Hlaing discusses security and other major issues of national concern -- the topic of the political prisoners was heatedly debated.

The country's leading hardliner, Vice-president Tin Aung Myint Oo strongly disagreed with releasing political prisoners before the by-elections [to be held on April 1st] as they could disrupt them.

Apparently the former second most powerful general, Maung Aye has been constantly campaigning behind the scenes to prevent the political activists, including Khin Nyunt

and his military intelligence officers, being freed.

U Shwe Mann – the third top military man in the old regime -- has been at the forefront of trying to get the political prisoners released as soon as possible. At the meeting he argued that if the government did not keep its promise to free them, Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) might decide not to contest the elections.

The interior minister U Ko Ko – another former general -- supported the immediate release of the prisoners.

The hardliners' greatest fear was that the 88 group would form a party and run in the elections. So in the face of this strident opposition, the president dithered. In the end only a handful of activists were released for Independence Day; though two weeks later a significant batch of high-profile detainees including the hardliners bet noir, the 88 student leaders and Khin Nyunt. Apparently the former prime minister's release may also have been a sop to Washington, as the US has privately been pushing for his release, behind the scenes.

President's apparent volte-face was brought about by the reformers' successful peace talks with the ethnic minorities, especially the Karen National Union (KNU). This emboldened Thein Sein and gave him the room to maneuver. Immediately after the KNU signed the truce and an end to hostilities with the Burmese government delegation – led by the railways minister Aung Min -- on the 12th January the railways minister rang Thein Sein, according to sources at the meeting. This was what the President was waiting for; four hours later he announced the major prisoner release and signed off on freeing most of the high-profile prisoners.

That's how fragile the situation is, stress government sources. The hardliners have been dogging the president and the liberals all along the way, making it as hard as possible for the reform process to proceed unhindered. They have been pushing for the prisoner release to be delayed until after the by-elections -- or at least to keep the 88 generation student leaders and Khin Nyunt detained until after the registration of candidates. They were in fact freed shortly before that.

The favorite method of the hardliners is to quote the former military supremo Than Shwe –who has officially retired by living in a mansion not far from the president's palace. The hardliners -- especially Aung Thaung, the former industry minister and now a leading member of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development party (USDP) – continually claim that the old man would be upset by a massive prisoner release in order to dissuade the president from speeding up the process. These old reactionaries from the former regime, who were close the old man before and still see him occasionally, are at the forefront of the battle to limit reform.

Everything is now being tossed into the arena. So expect the election campaign to hot up even more before the vote on 1st April. The by-elections will undoubtedly be a test of the strength for the liberals in government and the reform process.

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