

Myanmar Readies for its First By-Elections
Asia Sentinel
March 28, 2012
By Richard S. Ehrlich

Sunday delivers a test for the country's nascent democratic institutions

Burma's Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is predicted to easily win a parliament seat in Sunday's by-election amid expectations that Washington will respond by easing economic sanctions, but the polls also symbolize how far she has fallen.

Forty-five of 48 seats in parliament are to be contested. The remaining three, in Kachin state, await a ceasefire between the military and ethnic Kachin rebels.

Several of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party candidates are also expected to win slots in the 664-seat bicameral national parliament. Even combined with other opposition politicians, however, Suu Kyi and her allies will be little match against the regime.

Ranking military officers permanently occupy 25 percent of all chambers in parliament, and currently enjoy a 75 percent majority of the remaining seats through their pliant Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) parliamentarians.

In addition to the NLD and USDP, 15 other parties are competing in the by-elections. Suu Kyi is running from Kawhmu township, a constituency south of her hometown Rangoon, also known as Yangon, and could be building momentum for a nationwide election in 2015 when she will be 70.

Millions of voters hope the NLD leader and her party will be able to use their cluster of seats in parliament to rescue the country from its current destitution and possible civil war. Some analysts, however, say they fear Suu Kyi has been reduced to a mere token whom the regime no longer fears, and is being permitted to win a seat because her election is worth the lifting of US sanctions.

Washington hopes her victory will be the first of many democratic changes, so the US can increase its economic and political influence in the Buddhist-majority, former British colony.

During more than a decade of US, European Union and other international sanctions, two giants on Burma's borders -- China and India -- have been exploiting the notoriously corrupt country's oil, natural gas, timber, mines and other resources, selling weapons to its military, and extending the region's infrastructure for access to Burma's strategic Indian Ocean coast.

The military has ruled the country since a 1962 coup and has meted out some of the world's worst human rights violations including forced labor, extrajudicial killings, torture and imprisonment, according to London-based Amnesty International and New York's Human Rights Watch.

"In addition, there are US laws that impose sanctions on Myanmar for unacceptable

behavior linked to functional issues, such as the use of child soldiers, drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, failure to protect religious freedom and violations of workers' rights," wrote Murray Hiebert at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and Internal Studies.

Suu Kyi's campaigning has already enabled Burmese to enjoy greater media freedom, and help push the regime into freeing hundreds of political prisoners while loosening some other restrictions.

Burma's government-controlled media no longer barks out racist tracts railing against Suu Kyi for being the widow of a Caucasian British citizen, and an "axe-handle" for the US Central Intelligence Agency and others who allegedly use her as a wedge to seize the country.

"Media coverage of the elections is heavily tilted toward the participation of the Myanmar democracy icon Mrs. Suu Kyi," said Bidhayak Das, who works for the Bangkok-based Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), an election monitoring group.

Old habits die hard. There have been numerous reports of harassment of the opposition and the irregularities. The government has refused the NLD the chance to hold rallies in large stadiums and its candidates have reportedly been attacked and subjected to other harm. In the meantime, the government has been handing out goodies to voters in many contested areas.

It isn't the first time. And, given the Burmese disaffection with the government, the election could well result in victories for the NLD, although only a fraction of those in the infamous 1990 nationwide election when the NLD convincingly won 392 of the 492 contested seats in parliament, which should have allowed her to become prime minister. But the military barred her from taking office and instead cocooned her under house arrest, on and off, for more than 15 years until her most recent release in November 2010.

She boycotted the next election in 2010 because its rules barred her from becoming prime minister after she illegally allowed an American, John Yettaw, to sleep in her villa unregistered for two nights.

Today, Suu Kyi is a frail icon, 66, and twice fell ill during her campaigning in March, vomiting and relying on an intravenous drip.

Burma's minority ethnic groups meanwhile have expressed uncertainty over their fate after the elections because several of them have been fighting guerrilla wars for greater autonomy or independence since the 1950s.

Suu Kyi and most of the military and political people ruling the country are ethnic Burmese who dominate the population with a 60 percent majority. They have failed to quell the desire of the country's 40 percent minority Kachin, Karen, Shan, Wa, Chin, Mon and others who crave a federal-style system or independence for their valuable, resource-rich territories along Burma's borders with Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh.

Since June, 20,000 Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) guerrillas -- many of whom are Christian -- have battled the regime's offensive in northern Burma. More than 40,000 people have fled the fighting along China's mountainous southern border.

China wants to build a pipeline through Kachin state to extract natural gas from Burma's zone in the Indian Ocean.

"The suffering of Kachin people is the suffering of Myanmar people, and we all have to find a cure for these problems," Suu Kyi said earlier this month during a campaign visit to Kachin state, though she has not offered any solution.

During World War II, the US Office of Strategic Services -- predecessor of the CIA -- used 10,000 Kachin guerrillas as allies against Japan's forces which had invaded Burma partly with the help of Suu Kyi's Japanese-trained father, Gen. Aung San.

After the war, countless Burmese fled during several decades of repression, but some are now returning to test the changes.

"Overwhelmed by the political reforms of the country, migrant Myanmar citizens are coming back home to serve the nation," President Thein Sein, who was installed by the 2010 election, said in a speech on March 24.

"Their expertise, experiences and wisdom are priceless forces for us. We are keeping the door open for the remaining national brethren. Please come back! Cooperate with us for national development. Doors are always for you."

By staging the election and allowing other freedoms, the regime has risen to its most powerful position on the world stage, attracting politicians, businessmen and others from America, Europe and elsewhere.

Columbia University professor Joseph E. Stiglitz visited in 2009 and again last February and suggested "removing the sanctions that have now become an impediment to the country's transformation."

The sanctions include a ban on most international banking activity -- rendering credit cards and bank transfers useless and resulting in a cash-only economy.

Copyright © 2005 - 2012 Asia Sentinel.

Source: http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4372&Itemid=168