

The Real Winners in Burma's Election
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By Aung Zaw & The Irrawaddy

Small step in the struggle for democracy

The victory of the main opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party led by Aung San Suu Kyi should not come as a surprise despite widespread irregularities and the initial fear that the poll would not be free and fair.

It is Suu Kyi's iron will and principles that earned the support of the people. The 66-year-old and many other oppressed Burmese knew that to back down now would mean always to be discounted.

This victory, extraordinary as it is, with the NLD sweeping almost every seat, is only for a tiny 45 seats in a Parliament where the military-backed ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) holds an enormous majority.

Yet it demonstrates the will of the people and has laid the groundwork for the NLD and Suu Kyi to prepare for the crucial 2015 general elections. The NLD, winner of the 1990 general elections by a landslide, made a pragmatic decision.

Indeed, this is a small step in Burma's long struggle for democracy where so much more still needs to be done. There is no magical cure for the country's ills to shoo away the former dictators and ex-junta generals who are still alive and kicking.

In June, when Burma resumes its parliamentary session, Suu Kyi will be sitting in the assembly for the first time and media attention will again focus on Burma. But it is too early to predict what comes next and how the political landscape of the nation will change.

A week before Sunday's by-elections, I met Upper House Speaker Khin Aung Myint in Naypyidaw and he said that he is ready to welcome Suu Kyi to the legislature. Before the election, Suu Kyi visited Parliament where she held meetings with both Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann and Khin Aung Myint.

During his meeting with Suu Kyi, Khin Aung Myint told her not to worry about the small presence of opposition seats. "I told her we would all support anything that would be good for the country and people," he said.

When asked whether there had been any recent change in his attitude towards Suu Kyi, the former major-general replied that it would be wrong to think so.

"If we regard Gen Aung San [the independence hero who founded the Burmese Army and was Suu Kyi's father] as our father, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is our sister. I have never badmouthed her. I see her as my sister," he explained.

Fine words indeed, but no one is sure how much truth there is in his remarks. It seems that only time will tell.

Of course, it remains uncertain whether the majority of MPs—overwhelmingly USDP members and military officers who are constitutionally safeguarded 25 percent of seats—are mentally prepared to welcome Suu Kyi and her NLD colleagues. The real test will come very soon, with this looming parliamentary session gearing up to be an extremely

exciting

event.

What was interesting is that the NLD won all four seats in Naypyidaw, Burma's new capital, which is supposed to be the stronghold of the military-backed government. Moreover, several armed forces family members in garrison towns in central Burma also voted for the NLD.

In any case, President Thein Sein knew that these by-elections were crucial for his government's credibility. Indeed, Thein Sein was not surprised to see the NLD winning most constituencies—that he expected. He knew that widespread condemnation would follow if his USDP fixed the outcome and won a majority of seats as occurred in the 2010 general elections.

When I spoke to many senior officials in Naypyidaw and Rangoon, they told me that Thein Sein is sincere in his decision to implement reforms although he faces many challenges as well as rivals who are now undermining his administration.

The military is always in the background with conservative and hardline groups within the government a real cause for concern. The potential showdown between Thein Sein and the ambitious Shwe Mann continues to make businessmen in Burma nervous.

Thein Sein could once again tell his rivals that he was correct to allow Suu Kyi to take part in the by-elections and enter Parliament. The strategy is that it is better for the government to have Suu Kyi in Parliament as Thein Sein does not want a second rate "puppet" opposition leader to challenge him.

One of his government colleagues told me during my second recent trip to Burma that many Western nations were encouraging alternative groups to contest the elections—creating an alternative force to counter Suu Kyi. But the government preferred a credible opposition leader in Parliament instead.

In fact, many close to the President's Office told me that Thein Sein deserves kudos for holding relatively peaceful by-elections. It was his initiative to invite Suu Kyi to his palace and allow her to contest the ballot by amending election laws. Indeed, he promised to hold free and fair election long before although admitted some irregularities.

Election Will Be Good For the Economy

The election will certainly have benefits for the economy of this once isolated country. Foreign investors are ready to flock inside Burma once sanctions are lifted and new investment laws are introduced.

Many companies in neighboring countries are paying close attention to the by-elections as they look to invest in the resource-rich Southeast Asian nation. However, many are still holding off putting money in Burma due to restrictions on capital flow, the lack of a developed stock exchange, an untested legal environment and rudimentary infrastructure, according to a recent article by Bloomberg news agency.

But Burma has suddenly started attracting flocks of tourists—curious visitors and people with good will who want to visit one of the poorest yet most enchanting countries in the world. In future months, many flights to Burma will be fully booked and hotels filled to the rafters.

This week the Burmese government prepares to float its currency at around 800-820 kyat to the US dollar. Thein Sein is also preparing to travel to Japan in a bid to lure investors and resume overseas assistance. He is expecting the European Union (EU) to lift sanctions soon and the United States to similarly ease restrictive measures.

The EU has indicated it is looking at easing sanctions imposed on Burma in the mid-1990s over the regime's long history of human rights abuses, and foreign investors are lining up to do business in the country. The body is holding a meeting in April to review its policy of sanctions and it is expected that many of these will be lifted with the retention of an arms embargo.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton congratulated Burma in the wake of the weekend elections. The latest report on Burma by the Congressional Research Service indicated that US President Barack Obama could exercise his authority to waive many of the sanctions currently in place.

Clinton told reporters in Turkey on Sunday that the elections were "heartening" but urged the government to improve transparency and deal with polling irregularities.

"It is too early to know what the progress of recent months means and whether it will be sustained," she said.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa welcomed the by-elections as "an opportunity for Myanmar to make the reform process even more irreversible."

Meanwhile, Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario said they were a "vindication of the global community that believed that Myanmar could pursue this democratization track effectively."

There are several burning issues remaining to be resolved in Burma, however. The protracted war in Kachin State, abuses toward ethnic minorities in border regions and the remaining political prisoners still locked up for no just reason.

While some eager investors will immediately rush to embrace Burma, many more will remain cautiously optimistic and hopeful for more positive changes to come. The people of Burma who want to see change deserve a better future. Thein Sein, Suu Kyi and all who voted in the by-elections are the real winners.

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