

Quo Vadis Myanmar?: Military Rule, the 2010 Election and Beyond

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Abstract

Myanmar (or formerly Burma) has been ruled by the military (tatmadaw) since 1962 and although multiparty elections were held in 1990, the Myanmar military junta simply refused to accept the results and transfer power to the National League Democracy (NLD) that won with a landslide victory. Instead, the Myanmar military junta announced its own version of political reform through the introduction of a “disciplined democracy” and as such convened a National Convention for the purpose of drafting a new constitution for the country. The constitution was finally approved in 2008 through a referendum that was highly rigged. Based on provisions of the 2008 Constitution, the military junta held another round of multiparty elections on 7 November 2010. Taking stock of events since 1988 and in the light of recent developments, this paper therefore attempts to gauge the future direction of the country’s political landscape by interpreting and analyzing recent events. More importantly, it would attempt to show how much change can be expected in Myanmar especially when taking into account a flawed Constitution, a highly rigged elections and a new pseudo-civilian government. In other words, is there going to be real political change or are the elections a mere window dressing by the country’s military junta?

Keywords: *Military Rule, Myanmar, Constitution, Elections, New Government.*

Introduction

Myanmar achieved independence on 4 January 1948 after about 122 years of British colonial rule. Upon independence and until 1962, the country practiced a system of Westminster-styled parliamentary democracy under the premiership of U Nu. However, on 2 March 1962, the country’s military (*tatmadaw*) under General Ne Win staged a coup and ousted U Nu’s democratically-elected government, citing reasons of state security. This therefore ended the country’s first and last experiment with parliamentary democracy (Silverstein, 1977; Silverstein, 1982).

One of the first moves made by General Ne Win to consolidate the power of the military was to suspend the 1947 Constitution, such that the military ruled by decree between 1962 to 1974, when a new constitution was introduced. The new constitution, aimed at augmenting the role of the military vis-à-vis the country’s political system, thus marked the death knell of democracy in the country (Moscotti, 1977). With little constitutional guarantees, the people

of Myanmar began witnessing an array of human rights violations at the hands of their new political masters. Practicing a zero policy on tolerance against political dissent, the country was ruled at the whimsical policies of General Ne Win (Maung, 1969). The rise of the military not only marked an end to democracy in the country but due to mismanagement, even saw the country's economy moving on a downward spiral (Maung, 1991).

As a result, by 1987, the economic situation had deteriorated sharply such that the military junta was forced to apply for the Least Developed Country (LDC) status from the United Nations, with the hope that some of its external creditors would write-off the country's foreign debt. More importantly, this event set the stage for dissent against the military that had remained dormant for at least more than two decades. The subsequent events that unfolded from 1987 onwards were in fact a clear manifestation of decades of oppressive rule by the country's military regime. Demanding a transfer of power to civilian rule, by 1988, these pro-democracy demonstrations grew even bigger and louder. However, instead of caving into the demands of the peaceful demonstrators, the military unleashed yet another round brutality through an incident that folded on 8 August 1988 [or 8.8.88] (Lintner, 1990; Maung, 1999).

The infamous 8.8.88 incident saw the military opening fire at peaceful demonstrators in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) as well as other major cities around the country. The result was simply outrages as the incident saw the death of some 3,000 peaceful demonstrators, mostly students. Nonetheless, the fiasco immediately put Myanmar on the agenda of Western like-minded states, mainly due to excessive use of force by the country's military against peaceful demonstrators. In an immediate response, the international community called on the military to observe restraint and demanded a return to civilian rule. As international pressure intensified, the military junta finally announced that a free and fair election would be held in 1990, after which it would transfer power to the duly elected party (Steinberg, 2001: 45-46).

The election, held in May 1990, saw the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by the country's democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi, securing a landslide victory, with her party winning 392 of the 485 seats. However, once the results had been announced, the military junta began dragging its feet on the issue of transfer of power. Instead, the military not only placed Aung San Suu Kyi and a host of other NLD politicians under detention, but in fact, went ahead consolidating its power by arbitrarily arresting, harassing and intimidating political opponents (Fink, 2001: 69).

From 1990 onwards and despite international pressure, the military junta simply refused to budge on the issue of transfer of power. Instead, it announced its own version of political reform through the introduction of a roadmap for "disciplined democracy". In line with this, it convened a National Convention for the drafting of a new constitution for the country and the new constitution was finally approved in 2008, through a highly rigged referendum (Fink, 2001: 82-86).

In the meantime, the junta continued to rule the country with impunity, often inflicting severe hardship on the population, not to mention the country's abysmal human rights record. As for its poor human rights record, gross human rights violations occur on a daily basis, often inflicted upon the proponents of democracy, ethnic minorities and even the ordinary man in Myanmar. Recent findings from Harvard University even show that the military junta has been committing systematic human rights violations against its people, such that there are even elements of genocide (International Human Rights Clinic, 2009). It is based on these findings as well as a number of other reports since 1991 that there have been calls amongst some members of the international community that the Myanmar military junta be investigated for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Horton, 2005; DLA Piper, 2005). In fact, it was based on the gravity of the human rights situation in Myanmar that on 10 March 2010, Tomás Ojea Quintana, the United Nations Human Rights Council's (HRC) Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Myanmar, proposed that the United Nations establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the Myanmar military junta for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Human Rights Council, 2010). Thus far, some sixteen countries have supported the idea and these include Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and the United States (Burma Campaign United Kingdom [BCUK], 2011a).

The Flawed 2008 Constitution

Although the process of drafting a new constitution began in 1993, it was only concluded in 2008 –some 15 years later. One of the major reasons for the long duration was the frequent suspension of the convention by the Myanmar military junta, especially whenever international pressure increased on the junta. In fact over the fifteen years of drafting the constitution, the process was suspended some thirteen times. In addition, although the NLD was party to the process when it began on 9 January 1993, however, by 1995, it withdrew citing reasons of non-cooperation from the military junta (Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma [ALTSEAN-Burma], 2006: 1-7). The process of constitution drafting was finally concluded on 3 September 2007, and in February 2008, the military junta announced that a referendum would be held in May 2008, aimed seeking the approval of the people. When the constitution was finally made public on 4 April 2008, only versions in the English and Burmese languages were made available, without due consideration to the country's numerous ethnic minorities (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2008: 29).

Based on provisions within the new constitution, some 25 percent of the seats in the Union Assembly (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*) are reserved for the military, appointed by the country's commander-in-chief. Nonetheless, military officers are also allowed to contest the remaining 75 percent seats as long as they retire from the armed forces. Similarly, in the People's Assembly (*Pyithu Hluttaw*), the military is allocated some 110 seats out of the total of 440 seats and for the Assembly of Nationalities Parliament (*Amoytha Hluttaw*), the army is allotted 56 of the 224 seats. In addition, the military is also assigned the role of selecting the

country's president and two vice-presidents as well as all cabinet portfolios. In fact, the post of minister and deputy minister for the defense, security and home affairs as well as border affairs ministries are also, solely reserved for the military, with the country's commander-in-chief given the privilege to submit the names of the candidates. In every ministry, there is also a military and security component reserved solely for military personnel (HRW, 2008: 44-45). As all legislation passed by the parliament requires a two-third majority, it is obvious that the military holds the trump card.

Despite the fact that the country was ravaged by Cyclone Nargis on 2 May 2008 and although there was intense criticism from some quarters of the international community on the manner in which the new constitution had been drafted, the military regime went ahead with its referendum as scheduled (Lawrence, 2008: 26-29; Martin, 2010: 3-4). As a result, on 15 May 2008, the military regime made a preposterous claim that some 92.4 percent of the country's eligible voters had approved the constitution, with the total voter turnout put at 99 percent. While both China and Russia "welcomed" the outcome of the referendum as move in the direction of democratization in the country, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and the European Union voiced grave concern and dismissed the whole process as a "sham" (HRW, 2008: 49). Meanwhile, while most, if not all, of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-member states remained silent, the organization's secretary-general, Surin Pitsuwan, was quoted as saying that "it is a development in the right direction" (HRW, 2008: 52).

The 7 November 2010 Election: Neither Free, Fair nor Inclusive

When the Myanmar military junta first announced, in late 2009, its intention to hold an election in 2010, some observers with an interest in developments in the country did voice a certain degree of cautious optimism over the whole exercise. On this, one source noted that:

This is a particularly interesting time for Burma watchers. A flurry of activity, both domestically and internationally, has aroused hopes that things might be starting to move in a positive direction. But the optimism is offset by fears that this might be a repeat of the window dressing, so often seen before, that is designed to obscure the reality of a regime conducting business as usual (Heyn, 2009).

Similarly, Linn was of the view that with the election, the country "is at an intersection of political makeover" (Linn, 2009). Even the United Kingdom's former ambassador to Myanmar and a long-time vocal critic of the Myanmar's military junta, Derek Tonkin, expressed a similar view when he stated that "given the impasse of the last 20 years, what has happened in the last three months [of 2009] gives us the hope there will be some movement" (Leithead, 2009). However, this optimism was short-lived as when the election was finally held, it was in a highly restrictive environment, with the NLD – the main contender for power and the backbone of the country's democracy movement – excluded.

Although a number of political parties registered, further regulations were imposed, such that political activity was undertaken in an extremely restrictive environment. The military junta's Election Commission imposed severe restrictions on the movement of political parties, with their speeches being vetted and censored. In addition, the Election Commission also imposed a non-refundable candidate registration fee of US\$500 – a sum considered extremely steep especially in country where most people earn less than a dollar a day. In fact, a political party would have had to spend some US\$600,000 if it had wanted to contest in all the seats (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2011c). In the same direction and obviously aimed at ensuring that all of the country's civil servants vote for the military junta-backed party, on 31 December, the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) announced that all salaries of low-paid government servants would be raised with effect from 31 January 2010. This was in fact the fifth time a salary hike took place since 1988, the last four being in 1989, 1993, 2000 and 2006 (*The Irrawaddy*, 2011b).

As for the political parties that contested in the election, these were mainly comprised of two major groups, namely the pro-military junta parties and parties that attempted to represent the democratic forces in the country. The two main pro-military junta parties were the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and National Unity Party (NUP). The USDP was formed when the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) – the military junta's civilian arm – was disbanded and turned into a political party in March 2010, led by the country's former Prime Minister, Thein Sein (*Mizzima News*, 2010). On the other hand, the NUP is a junta-backed party that contested the 1990 election but performed miserably when it only won 10 seats (Taylor, 2005: 22-23). Due to the absence of the NLD, the two main pro-democracy parties were the Democratic Party (DP) and National Democratic Force (NDF). The DP was established by Than Than Nu, daughter of Myanmar's first prime minister, U Nu (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2010a), while the NDF is a splinter of the NLD that took the decision to contest in spite of the NLD's decisions to stay away from the election (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2010b).

While there were some 20.8 million eligible voters during the 1990 election, the 2010 election saw an increase of eligible voters to 29 million. Similarly, while some 492 seats were open for contest in 1990, in 2010, the number of seats in all the three houses totaled to some 1,171. However, while in 1990, some 235 political parties registered with the Election Commission, in 2010, there were only 47 political parties. Similarly, when it came to the election in 2010, only 37 political parties fielded candidates, although in the 1990 elections there were some 93 political parties fielding their respective candidates. All in all, while the pro-military junta political parties fielded some 2,200 candidates in the 2010 elections, the number of candidates from the other parties was only at 500 – mainly due to the US\$500 surety imposed by the Election Commission (ALTSEAN-Burma, 2010c: 17). As a result, the DPM and NDF only managed to contest for some 160 and 49 seats respectively.

When the results were finally released, in total, the USDP won some 883 seats or 76.5 percent. In the House of representative alone, the USDP won 259 out 325 seats (or 79.6 percent), in

the House of Nationalities it won 129 of 168 (or 76.7 percent) seats, while in the Regional Assemblies, the USDP secured 495 of 661 seats (or 74.8 percent). The NUP managed to gain 63 seats while the other major parties that won seats were the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) with 57 seats, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party with 35 seats, the NDF and All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP) with 16 seats each. However, the Than Than Nu-led DP failed to win even a single seat (*The Irrawaddy*, 2010; Mathieson, 2011b).

Due to the fact that the election was neither free, fair nor inclusive, most Western states dismissed it as a “sham” aimed at simply perpetuating military rule in the country. In fact, Quintana himself was quoted as that, “the election process has been deeply flawed and disappointing” (D’ Almeida, 2010). Contrary to that, China, Myanmar’s staunch ally, welcomed the election as signaling the dawn of a new era, with similar remarks made by India. Nonetheless, Myanmar’s immediate neighbours in the Southeast Asian region gave a lukewarm response to the election (*BBC News*, 2010).

Myanmar’s ‘New’ Government: Old Wine in a New Bottle?

Upon securing a comfortable victory in the 7 November 2010 election and in a highly calculated move, on 13 November 2010, the SPDC unconditionally released Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest –six days after its orchestrated election and on the very day her detention order expired. The move – seen as a tactical concession – was mainly aimed at appeasing mounting international criticism towards a sham election that was neither free, fair nor inclusive. On this, Maung Zarni, a prominent Myanmar activist and observer, even noted that, “Suu Kyi’s release has taken away some anger away from the junta over the election” (*The Times of India*, 2010). Obviously based on the belief that the democratic forces in the country did not pose any threat to the new government anymore, the release was also tacitly used to deflect mounting international criticism against the military junta over a sham election.

Further, on 30 March 2011, the ruling SPDC was dissolved, with reins of power transferred to a pseudo-civilian government (*Democratic Voice of Burma*, 2011). Since its formation, this ‘new’ government has been sending mixed signals pertaining to its intention of whether it is going to undertake real political reform and tolerate dissent. It is clear that since its inception, Myanmar’s new pseudo-civilian government has been threading a fine line between a hard-line stance, on the one hand, and a soft-line approach, on the other, which clearly indicates its unwillingness to undertake sustained political reform in the direction of democratization. Instead, what it has been doing is undertaking piecemeal efforts aimed at reducing international pressure. A number of events that have unfolded prior to and after the 2010 election lends further credence to such a view.

The first relates to the appointment of key personnel in the new pseudo-civilian government. The swearing-in of a new government was soon followed by the formation of a 30-member

cabinet, which unfortunately is comprised of mostly former military men who had resigned their posts to contest for the election. In fact, only four of the 30 cabinet members are from a non-military background, with more than half of this cabinet comprising of former members of the SPDC (*Bangkok Post*, 2011).

In addition, almost all key positions in the new government are currently in the hands of protégées of Senior General Than Shwe, the country's former military supremo. These include Thein Sein, who was appointed President, Shwe Mann who was appointed speaker of the country's parliament and General Min Aung Hlaing as the chief of the country's armed forces. Interestingly enough, although Shwe Mann is said to be closer to Than Shwe when compared to Thein Sein, the choice of the latter as President of the country was obviously related to the issue of human rights violations. As Thein Sein has no battleground experience and should a United Nations-led Commission of Inquiry materialize, it would indeed be an uphill task to implicate him to war crimes and crimes against humanity in Myanmar. In addition, Thein Sein is also said to be less corrupt when compared to Shwe Man, whose children are also into business. The latter consideration evidently suggests that the new government is indeed making an attempt to project a clean image, at least free of corruption (McCoy, 2011; Mathieson, 2011a; Lintner, 2011).

The second relates to whether Than Shwe has effectively retired, especially since the SPDC has been dissolved (Linn, 2011). With the dissolution of the SPDC, the senior general is said to have retired, but many observers believe that he still calls the shots from behind the scenes, and especially since most of the people in the new government are indeed his protégées. This view was further reinforced by a statement from a senior government official who noted that Than Shwe's views are still taken into account by the new government when making key decisions (McCoy, 2011).

What lends further credence to view above is when on 15 March 2011, Than Shwe announced the formation of the State Supreme Council (SSC) – an extra constitutional body – that is not only headed by him, but even given the power to overrule the country's parliament and president (*The Irrawaddy*, 2011c). According to one source, “the State Supreme Council will become the highest body of the state” and “will assume an advisory role to guide the future governments” such that it “will be very influential” (*The Irrawaddy*, 2011a). Coupled with this is the formation of a National Defense and Security Council (NDSC), which comprises of Than Shwe, former vice-senior general Maung Aye as well as a number of Than Shwe's protégées, including Thein Sein and Shwe Mann (*The Irrawaddy*, 2011a). In addition to this, the country's powerful military intelligence unit – the Military Affairs Security (MAS) – is also headed by another protégée of Than Shwe – Major-General Soe Shein (Sithu, 2011).

The third relates to a law that was passed days before the 7 November 2010 election. The People's Military Service Law (PMSL) was passed by the SPDC on 4 November and stipulates that all citizens between the age of 18 and 45 are required to serve with the armed

forces for two years, with an extension of up to five years in the event of a state emergency (*Associated Press*, 2011). Fourthly, in early May 2011, the new government announced the formation of a new intelligence unit tasked with gathering information on the country's political parties, ethnic insurgents groups, cease-fire groups and violent domestic actions (*The Irrawaddy*, 2011d). Both these events not only clearly point to the further militarization of the state but even the narrowing of a highly restricted political landscape.

Fifthly, while stressing on the need for good governance, economic development and a war against corruption in his inaugural address to the nation on 30 March 2011, Thein Sein, nonetheless reiterated on the need for a powerful modern army, frequently making references to the central role of the armed forces in the country (Phanida, 2011). On another occasion, while Thein Sein approved a mass amnesty and freed some 14,600 prisoners, however, only 47 were in fact political prisoners. The action was lambasted by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) deputy Asia director, Elaine Pearson, who called the release as "a pathetic response to international calls for the immediate release of all political prisoners" (*Agence France-Presse* [AFP], 2011a; BCUK, 2011b).

A recent development in the Kachin State where the new government has renewed its counter insurgency operations against the rebel Kachin Independence Army (KIA) again suggest a hard-line policy by the new government, very much like the previous era. This also clearly indicates its total disregard for human rights and calls by the international community that it enters into a tripartite dialogue with the country's democratic forces and ethnic groups. More importantly is its breach of a cease-fire agreement reached with the KIA in 1994 (*The Irrawaddy*, 2011e; Peck, 2011; *AFP*, 2011b). Based on this development, it is probable that the other cease-fire groups might abandon their agreements with the government, thus resulting in a civil war in Myanmar.

In contrast, whilst the NLD made an olive branch offer to the new government upon its inauguration calling for a dialogue to discuss the country's future, the latter did respond immediately. On the same note, while Aung San Suu Kyi has been freed, her party – the NLD – nonetheless was deregistered on 6 May 2010. Although rendered an illegal entity in May 2010, the SPDC and even the new government has not forced the NLD to cease its operations but instead has allowed it to operate, probably signaling a greater degree of tolerance towards dissent. However, on 29 June 2011, the new government finally issued a stern letter to the NLD to cease operations with immediate effect (*The Nation*, 2011; *The New Light of Myanmar*, 2011).

Similarly, although Aung San Suu Kyi is free and was allowed to meet Yangon-based diplomats (*AFP*, 2010) and foreign reporters as well as address people around Yangon, her activities were initially limited to the country's capital. Nonetheless, on 19 May 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi declared that she would be making a tour of the country in the coming months, namely aimed at addressing the people as well as to attend to party matters (Naing, 2011). Reacting to this, on 29 June 2011, the government issued a stern warning to Aung San Suu Kyi suggesting that her proposed tour could incite riots and chaos (*Reuters*, 2011;

Aung 2011). The tour could well prove a litmus test for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD to the extent the new government is willing to tolerate dissent (Ryall, 2011). This is because the last time she did the same, Aung San Suu Kyi was ambushed by government-sponsored thugs and rearrested on 30 May 2003 in the infamous Depayin incident (ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC, 2005).

Nonetheless, without a security guarantee from the authorities coupled with a stern warning from the government, on 30 June 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi announced that she would visit Bagan (Pagan) – the country’s ancient capital – on a sightseeing tour rather than attending to party affairs (Moe, 2011). This was obviously done after Aung San Suu Kyi had sensed that her planned trip could pose a serious risk to her own safety and security. Further, on 4 July 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi arrived in Bagan with her son, Kim Aris, and although she was greeted by scores of journalists, she avoided making any statements (AFP, 2011c).

In a related development, on 3 June 2011, United States Senator John McCain (Republican - Arizona) made a fact-finding visit to Myanmar to assess the situation in the country. During an interview to the CNN, McCain apparently reiterated that it was imperative for Myanmar’s new government to undertake democratic reforms, failing which it could possibly face an Arab-styled uprising in the country (Neisloss, 2011; Zaw, 2011a). In an immediate reaction and during an address to the Yangon Regional Parliament, Shwe Mann, the speaker of the country’s Lower House, issued a stern warning obviously aimed at ensuring that an Arab-styled did unfold in the country (*The Irrawaddy*, 2011f).

Nonetheless, recent events since late July 2011 also do indicate that Myanmar’s new government has somewhat been employing a softer approach when it comes to the issue of its human rights record and political reform. The first of this was when on 20 July 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi and major opposition figures were invited to the annual Martyr’s Day ceremony in Yangon. Aung San Suu Kyi attended the ceremony together with some 3,000 supporters, thus making it Myanmar’s largest public gathering of opposition members since the 2007 Saffron Revolution (Myat, 2011).

Further, on 25 July 2011, it was also revealed on that Aung San Suu Kyi held talks with Labor Minister Aung Kyi – being the first since the new government was inaugurated. It was also disclosed that both parties had in fact met at least on nine occasions since 2007 (Tun, 2011). Similarly and although initially Aung San Suu Kyi was disallowed to undertake the tour of the country, in mid-August she was finally allowed to travel to Bago – an allowance that was welcomed by the United States as encouraging (AFP, 2011d). In the meantime, on 17 August 2011, President Thein Sein called on all Myanmarese abroad, irrespective of their political beliefs, to return home and urged the ethnic armed groups to surrender (*Mizzima News*, 2011). Nonetheless, with no offer of personal security guarantee for the returnees, the offer has been, largely met with skepticism (Htwe, 2011a).

Probably the most important event signaling a softer approach by the new government was when Aung San Suu Kyi met and held talks with President Thein Sein in Naypyidaw

on 19 August 2011. She not only later met all the ministers but was even invited to attend a high-profile government workshop on poverty (Zaw, 2011b). Although the meeting was held behind closed doors and little was revealed about it, in a statement later, Aung San Suu Kyi's noted that, "the president wants to achieve real positive change" (AFP, 2011e)."

Similarly, although Quintana had not been allowed to visit Myanmar since his last trip in February 2010, in August 2011, he was, nonetheless, finally given the approval to do so. In fact, although during his last trip he was disallowed to meet Aung San Suu Kyi, in this trip, he not only met the top brass of the new government but even Aung San Suu Kyi and was given access to political prisoners (*Voice of America*, 2011). Subsequent to the visit by Quintana, on 5 September 2011, Myanmar's new government established the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) – a 15-member body, comprised mostly of retired senior government officials, academics, diplomats, doctors and lawyers (Hwte, 2011b).

At another level and knowing that its election was dismissed as a sham by some members of the international community, the new government has also embarked on the road to acquire external legitimacy and recognition. This was evident when President Thein Sein, upon assuming the presidency, made his first official visit to China – a long-time supporter of Myanmar's military junta. It also during this visit that the two countries entered into an agreement to forge a "strategic partnership" (Allchin, 2011). On the other hand, China was also quick to respond when the new government was inaugurated in March 2011. In fact, just two days after the swearing-in of President Thein Sein, Beijing sent Jia Qinglin, the fourth most important figure in China's Communist Party's Political Bureau, to Myanmar. The latter apparently not only came to 'bless' Thein Sein's pseudo-civilian government but even brought in a billion dollars in aid and soft-loans for development and military hardware for Myanmar (Jagan, 2011).

All the same, the country's new government has also started making a strong bid for chairmanship of ASEAN when its turn comes in 2014 (Abbugao, 2011; Ashayagachat, 2011). Immediately after being sworn in as president, Thein Sein even wrote to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta requesting the organization to accept Myanmar's bid for the chair (Jagan, 2011). In fact, during the visit to China, President Thein Sein even pressed on the Chinese government to utilize "its regional economic and political muscle to press ASEAN to guarantee [Myanmar] the host status" (Manthorpe, 2011). This is not the country's first bid because even in 2004, Myanmar made an attempt to secure the ASEAN chair but failed due to its abysmal human rights record. Further, a second attempt was undertaken at the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in 2010 when Thein Sein made bid to secure the chair for Myanmar in 2011, which once again proved futile mainly due to its human rights record. All the same, ASEAN is also in a quandary because the United States have categorically stated their reservations about Myanmar's leadership role in ASEAN, namely due to the country's poor human rights record (Jagan, 2011). Meanwhile, Myanmar will also be hosting the 27th Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) in 2013. All these obviously indicate

that considerations of legitimacy, international recognition and the country's international isolation remain of paramount concern for the new government, as had been the case with the SPDC. This even prompted Win Min, a Myanmar academic based in the United States to comment that "the Thein Sein regime is desperate for international recognition" such that it is "crucial for them to gain credibility and a measure of respectability for their so-called civilian government" (Jagan, 2011).

Conclusion

Taking stock of events since 1988 and recent developments in the country, it is clear that the November 2010 election in Myanmar was a mere sham aimed at perpetuating the military's hold on power. On the November 2010 sham election, Benjamin Zawacki, a researcher with Amnesty International, pointed that, "it's a beggar's belief that the government can attempt to burnish its democratic credentials by holding elections" (Amnesty International, 2010). With the exclusion of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi it was obvious that the election would not usher a new era in Myanmar. The fact that the new government has thus far refused to enter into a tripartite dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic minorities, clearly demonstrates its unwillingness to accept the reality on the ground. In reality, the November 2010 election was in fact a repetition of a similar process that unfolded in 1974, when General Ne Win took on a civilian garb but still ran the country like a despotic ruler, with the backing of the military.

Although Myanmar's new government, upon its inauguration, started with a hard-line approach, recent events since late July 2011 suggest a softer approach. How far will this be translated into sustained human rights improvements and political reforms remains to be seen. Nonetheless, Aung Zaw argues that all these gestures are in fact related to the country's quest to obtain expert advice from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reform the country's foreign exchange system as well as ensuring that Myanmar's bid for ASEAN's chairmanship is successful and as such must be viewed with guarded optimism (Zaw, 2011b). In contrast, Zarni opines that these gestures are mainly aimed at remedying the current economic situation in the country, which is witnessing severe economic problems. According to Zarni:

For the regime, there is absolutely no change of heart when it comes to what matter most to them – prolonging the half-century of neo-totalitarian rule of the generals. My foregone conclusion is that there is absolutely no plan among the generals, the outgoing seniors or incoming generation of juniors, to share power with other popular stakeholders of Burma such as Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic minority leaders (Zarni, 2011).

Lastly, whilst acknowledging the complexity of the puzzle that prevails over Myanmar, Matthews is of the opinion that even if an astrologer were to predict the future of the country,

it would be extremely difficult to see the direction of things “because Myanmar’s enigmatic situation defies the hubris of those who would dare predict its destiny” (Mathews, 2001: 230).

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