



CENTRE FOR APPLIED NON VIOLENT ACTION & STRATEGIES

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CANVAS

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SUBJECT: Analysis of the situation in Burma, as of December 2012.

Political situation

Burma is governed by military junta since 1962, with Senior General Than Shwe as a head of state and also as a Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, Commander in Chief of a Defence Services, and Minister of Defence. The majority of ministry are held by military officers with the exceptions being the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, and the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, which are held by civilians.

Elected delegates in the 1990 People's Assembly election formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), a government in exile since December 1990, with the mission of restoring democracy. Aung San Suu Kyi has held the position of prime minister of the NCGUB since its inception. The NCGUB has been outlawed by the military government.

Major political parties in the country are the National League for Democracy and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, although their activities are heavily regulated and suppressed by the military government.

In May 2008, Burma's constitution referendum was approved by 92,4% of the 22 million voters.

The government has said that elections will take place in 2010, without providing an exact date. Both, the 2008 State Constitution and Political Parties Registration Law, ban people serving prison sentences (including persons in the process of putting up appeal for those sentences) from contesting in the elections. They also prohibit persons who owe allegiance to a foreign government from contesting.

NLD has been automatically deregistered following the 6 May deadline, making continued party activities illegal. The party has suggested that it will transform itself into a social organization, there have also been suggestions that it will become an underground political movement.

Either approach carries risk. It would be very difficult for an illegal party to conduct social activities, because recipients of such assistance would be exposed. A underground strategy would be quite different from previous political engagement. If it attempts both approaches, "social programs that have a political purpose" it will also threaten the work of non-political NGOs and civil society organizations.

A number of NLD leaders have decided to form a new party called the National Democratic Force. The NDF was formed by Than Nyein and a small group of other former leading members of the



National League for Democracy (NLD), as NLD was dissolved by the Burmese regime for failing to register as a political party by the May 6 deadline.

There are 32 political parties registered for the 2010 elections.

The International Community

The country's foreign relations with neighbor states are closer than with the West. The United States and European Union has placed embargoes on Burma, including an arms embargo and suspension of all aid with the exception of humanitarian aid. It reflected on Burma's economy, most of American and Western companies withdraw themselves from the country, supporting democratization process.

Burma is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and part of ASEAN +3 and the East Asia Summit.

The international reaction to the electoral laws was strong. America's position is that the electoral law was disappointing and a step back in the democratization.

(ASEAN) annual summit in April avoided direct criticism, calling for free, fair election, thus contributing to Myanmar's stability and development".

It is important that foreign governments continue to concern about the electoral process and to point out the disrespect for international norms. With the constitution and electoral legislation in place, there is limited space to influence the process. Many political actors have made clear that they don't believe it is worth participating. But many others are taking risks by attempting, they are fully aware of how rigorous the election law is, but they are still convinced that the best is to participate in the elections.

China considered elections and new constitution necessary for country stability, saying that government would have more legitimacy.

Bilateral relations with the Russian Federation are the strongest. Russia had established diplomatic relations with Burma when it became independent and it remained till today. Russia and China remained the biggest support for the regime, defending their actions ahead of other global criticism.



Economy

The country is one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia. Burma's GDP grows at an average rate of 2.9% annually – the lowest rate of economic growth in region.

The economy is still rated as the least free in Asia (tied with North Korea). All fundamental market institutions are suppressed. Private enterprises are often co-owned or indirectly owned by state. The corruption watchdog organization Transparency International in its 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index released on 26 September 2007 ranked Burma the most corrupt country in the world, tied with Somalia. The sell-off and privatization process have been accelerated in 2010. Many, but not all the sales have been mentioned in the state media, but the process has been lacking in transparency and accountability.

Demographics and ethnic organizations

Burma has a population of about 56 million. There are over 600,000 registered migrant workers from Burma in Thailand, and millions more work illegally. Burmese migrant workers account for 80% of Thailand's migrant workers. Burma is ethnically diverse. The government recognizes 135 distinct ethnic groups.

Prior to the ceasefires, ethnic organizations are considered as drug smugglers or terrorist groups. Several of the major ceasefire groups– including the Kachin Independence Organization, the Shan State Army (North) and the New Mon State Party – have retained their arms. They are not happy with the constitutional law and will retain their status as armed ethnic organizations. Therefore, they can't be political parties and will not participate in the elections.

Most ethnic organizations are focusing their attention on the regions, rather than the national level. They feel that they have a better chance of success at this level, because the military is more interested in the national politics.

Ethnic ceasefire groups have come under increasing pressure from the regime to transform into "Border Guard Forces" under the partial control of the military. The authorities have repeatedly extended the deadline, but no major ceasefire group has yet agreed.

At the same time, most ceasefire groups have either formed new parties to contest the elections or have sided with the ethnic groups and encourage them to engage in the electoral process. For example, the Kachin State Progressive Party has close links to the two main Kachin ceasefire groups (the leader of the party, Dr Tu Ja, is the former vice chairman of the Kachin Independence Organization), and a Pa-O political party (the Pa-O National Organization) is closely connected to the ceasefire group of the same name. Registration law provides deregistration of any political party having direct or indirect links with these armed groups, and it is very risky for registered political parties to connect with them.

Some of the ethnic organizations are still engaged in armed conflict with the regime (The Karen national Union, Shan State Army South, and Karenni National Progressive Party) . They all have rejected elections.



Burma's generals and regime strategy

Senior General Than Shwe, 73, is the head of the ruling junta and controls the army. He is the most hard-line leader, strongly opposed to allowing any political role for opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. After working in the Burmese postal service, Than Shwe joined the army at the age of 20 and his career included a stint in the department of psychological warfare. He has acted as Burma's head of state since 1992, and was initially seen as more open than his predecessor, General Saw Maung. Some political prisoners were released, and human rights groups were allowed to visit Burma. But he continues to suppress all dissent, and oversaw the re-arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2003.

Maung Aye. Maung Aye is also a career soldier and the second most powerful man in the country. He is believed to have established strong ties with Burma's many drug lords in the Golden Triangle while operating as a colonel in the late 1970s and 80s, before he joined the military leadership in 1993. He has a reputation for ruthlessness and xenophobia, and is also staunchly opposed to allowing Aung San Suu Kyi any future role.

In late April, Prime Minister Thein Sein and more than twenty ministers and deputy ministers resigned from the armed forces and applied to the election commission to register a political party. Under the party registration law, civil servants and members of the armed forces are prohibited from forming or being members of political parties, and parties are prohibited from accepting or using direct or indirect state support, including money and property.

Student's groups

The 88 Generation Students group is synonymous with the long struggle for democracy in military-ruled Burma.

Its name comes from the 1988 uprising, when troops opened fire on mass student demonstrations in Rangoon, leading to the deaths of thousands of people. The group's key members were at the forefront of the protests, and have suffered harsh reprisals ever since. Many have been subjected to lengthy prison terms, and human rights groups have catalogued a number of claims of torture. But despite this, the group still plays a prominent role in pro-democracy campaigns inside Burma - and when rare protests against the government take place, the 1988 veterans are usually involved. Most recently the group organized a series of protests to condemn the sharp fuel price rises that have been introduced by the government. Members of the 88 Generation include some of the most prominent dissidents in the country after Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition National League for Democracy party. Perhaps the best-known member of the group is Min Ko Naing - who was the unofficial leader of the underground student union at the time of the 1988 uprising.



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