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Succession Strategy

The Burmese people are probably about to get their first chance to vote in twenty years. Things did not go well last time; the military prevented the winners taking power. Now, new groups are emerging to try to take advantage of the limited opportunities on offer.

tHE BURMESE MILITARY GOVERNMENT ISSUED five laws on March 8, providing a framework for elections which are likely to be held later this year. While a number of opposition activists and politicians will boycott the polls, others are preparing to participate in the first opportunity to vote since 1990.

The elections are the brainchild of junta supremo, Senior General Than Shwe, and represent his 'succession strategy' – a way of easing himself out of the day-to-day running of the country, while ensuring that no single person can

consolidate power, and represent a threat to his continued pre-eminence behind-the-scenes.

The polls could still be cancelled, if Than Shwe and his inner grouping feel they are losing control of the process. In this scenario, the most likely pretext would be to fabricate some kind of national emergency, perhaps by provoking a resumption of conflict with armed ethnic groups, most of which have agreed ceasefires with the military government over the past twenty years.

Assuming that they do go ahead, the elections are likely to result in a consolidation and legitimisation of continued military control in Burma/Myanmar. For this reason, many opposition activists are opposed to the process. These include Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy (NLD), won the last elections in 1990, only to be denied the opportunity of forming a government by the military. The NLD has recently announced it will not register to contest the elections.

However, some non-military-controlled actors, including groups which are outright opposed to the government, are nevertheless preparing to participate. These include representatives of Burma's ethnic nationality – or minority – communities, which make up about a third of the population.

ANY CHANGE WILL HELP

Why are independent candidates interested in contesting the polls? Not because of any great enthusiasm for the process, which will be tightly controlled by the military regime, but rather because they see little alternative but to go along with the government's plans, and in some cases, even glimpse a few potential opportunities.

The elections are likely to result in the creation of more political space; a relative concept in such a repressive country. Certainly, they will introduce opportunities for a broader range of economic actors to make their interests felt, including many closely associated with the military.

To many activists and observers, any change is better than the status quo; constitutional rule-of-law, however problematic, being preferable to continued rule by military fiat. Indeed, to the extent that the elections are Than Shwe's 'exit strategy', many proponents of change in Burma argue that the process should be encouraged.

Most observers of the Burmese political scene are familiar with two main branches

of the opposition: the urban-based, pro-democracy movement, led by Suu Kyi, who has spent most of the last two decades under house arrest; and a loose alliance of ethnic-nationalist insurgents, who once operated across large swathes of the country, but in recent years have been restricted to a few jungle enclaves along the Thai border. The Burma Army continues its brutal counter-insurgency campaigns in these border areas, which have displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians.

THIRD FORCES

There are however, other important sectors of the political scene. These include armed ethnic ceasefire groups which have ended outright hostilities with the central government, and political elites who have not taken up arms, but rather seek to work for change from within military-controlled Myanmar.

Among the former, probably the best prepared are Kachin nationalists, including a number of senior officials recently retired from the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) – which agreed a ceasefire in 1994 – who are preparing to compete in the polls through a new vehicle, the Kachin State Progressive Party.

This group is likely to appeal to large numbers of the Kachin population in northern Burma. However, it may yet be denied the chance, if the military government insists on trying to bring the armed wings of the KIO and other ceasefire groups under the direct control of the Burmese army, before the election. Such a development might be designed to provide a resumption of armed conflict – not just in Kachin State, but in other restive border areas.

Another interesting set of alliances is emerging in the Karen ethnic community. Two Karen parties are likely to participate in the elections, one in Karen State, adjoining Thailand, and another in the old capital of Rangoon, and further to the west, in the Irrawaddy Delta, including areas affected by Cyclone Nargis two years ago. The latter party will attempt to appeal beyond a purely Karen constituency, to members of other ethnic groups, including Burmans, whose villages are often interspersed with those of the Karen.

An important set of emergent players is associated with the 'third force' in Burmese politics, which is seeking to mobilise support primarily among the Burman majority. This mostly civilian network is positioning itself as an alternative to military-backed

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MAY 6 British general election

MAY 6 Corruption trial of former Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, resumes

MAY 7 Tenth anniversary of Vladimir Putin becoming Russian President

MAY 12 Afghan President Hamid Karzai visits US

MAY 23 Elections in Ethiopia

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parties, which is nevertheless independent of the NLD and its 'politics of dissent'.

After sixty years of armed ethnic conflict, the elections are a rare opportunity for ethnic-nationalist and other elite groupings to outline their political objectives, and compete on the national political stage. Having said this, most ethnic parties are focusing on winning seats in provincial legislatures, rather than the two national-level assemblies. They are hoping to gain enough seats to leverage at least some concessions on the issues which have structured ethnic and state-society conflict for over half a century.

In particular, ethnic nationalist politicians hope to begin using minority languages in schools and local government departments, in areas where their populations live, and to have some say over the proceeds of natural resource extraction, and the use of government funds. They also hope to promote the creation of greater political 'space', within which civil society-based approaches to community development can flourish, and provide a vehicle for long-term, bottom-up democratisation.

The main risk of participation in the elections is that this will legitimise the process, and support the consolidation of militarised rule. Those taking part may also undermine their own standing in disgruntled ethnic communities. Their attempts to promote incremental change in this way are therefore quite principled, and in many cases decidedly brave.

INTERNATIONAL AGENDAS

Regarding the international aspect of the elections, the China angle is of considerable importance. Burma's giant neighbour to the north is its main geo-strategic patron. It offers cover for the generals' misrule and human rights abuses – for example in the United Nations Security Council – in exchange for access to the country's natural resources. Less influential, but still of some note, are the various Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries which border Burma to the south and east, and are looking for stability and investment opportunities.

Despite – or perhaps, even because of – the lofty rhetoric of western actors, European and North American countries have very little influence on the political situation. Regardless of whether the British or United States governments – or the European Union – like it or not, the elections will take place, and if they do not, this will not be because of western pressure. To think otherwise is to misunderstand the nature of Burmese politics, in an era of declining western influence globally.

Those inside the country seeking to participate in the elections, are hoping to make the best of a poor set of options. They are surely better placed than exiled politicians and their sympathisers to judge the opportunities and constraints locally.

