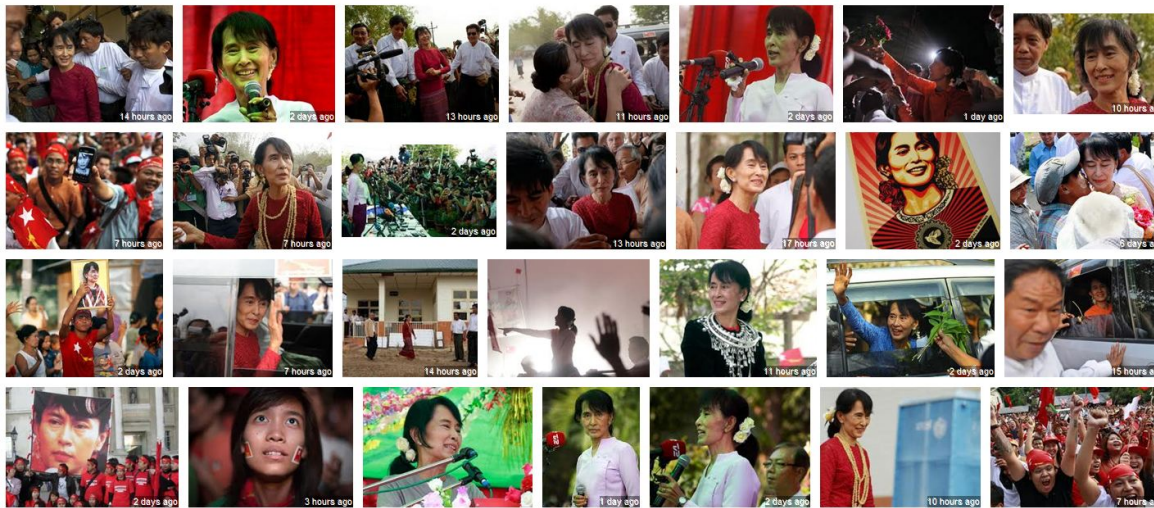


After Aung San Suu Kyi's election



After Aung San Suu Kyi's widely anticipated electoral [triumph](#) she is poised to take a seat in parliament for the very first time. Her National League for Democracy supporters have spent the night partying in Yangon; today this will become a nationwide festival of good vibes. But let's not get too carried away. The fact that her party won the lion's share of the 44 seats it contested means it is worth considering some of the longer-term implications of the by-election result.

[Last week](#) I argued that:

It is much more dangerous for President Thein Sein if Aung San Suu Kyi fails to win her seat. Such an outcome would lead to inevitable cries of vote-rigging and could spark an uncontrollable backlash. It may even spell the end of the nascent democratising project. To further his wide-ranging agenda, Thein Sein, and his allies, *need* Aung San Suu Kyi in parliament. After fighting for so many years to keep her sidelined it is a remarkable change of fortunes.

This result certainly meets President Thein Sein's short-term needs. With Aung San Suu Kyi's election, we will see the further rollback of [Western sanctions](#) and an even warmer reception for Burmese government representatives around the world. Burma will begin to be treated more "[normally](#)" in the sense that a greater diversity of issues will get attention and its politics will no longer be so captive to the stalemate of "The Lady vs. The Generals".

There is no doubt that this is an exciting time for those who have longed hope for a more open, democratic and prosperous Burma.

However, I think the calculations of President Thein Sein and other political players start to change almost immediately. This is the time to be giving their decisions real scrutiny. Assuming that the Union Solidarity and Development Party, and thus the armed forces, want to hold on to executive and legislative power, they will have to start working to defeat Aung San Suu Kyi in the (planned) 2015 general election.

At the highest levels of Burma's government and armed forces there will be those who now fear the ignominy of a 2015 electoral thrashing which would see them losing power once-and-for-all.

So, with Aung San Suu Kyi in parliament, what are some of the government's main options:

1. President Thein Sein could move to more fully co-opt Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. For months there has been speculation that she will be offered a ministerial post. Irrespective of whether she chose to accept or reject such an offer, it could work to the president's advantage. I see few risks in putting the offer on the table.

2. If it appears feasible then the President could even propose a government of national unity, bringing Aung San Suu Kyi and opposition ethnic political forces into his team. This has serious risks, especially if it is resented by less conciliatory factions of the armed forces, but it could be exactly the kind of audacious move that helps generate longer-term political support for the Union Solidarity and Development Party.

3. The Union Solidarity and Development Party can certainly use its superior numbers in all of the country's legislatures to claim credit for the positive changes in Burmese society that loom just over the horizon. Sanctions will be lifted, an economic boom is definitely on the cards: this will make the 2015 electoral campaign more conducive to the incumbent government. Union Solidarity and Development Party strategists may even seek to make "Thaksin Shinawatra-style populism" (with pork barrelling, and all the trimmings) the hall-mark of their rule. And if President Thein Sein can broker peace deals in *all* ethnic minority regions then his party could feel even more confident that they will garner endorsements at the ballot box in 2015. Of course this strategy may not work but I think it is probably their best chance of avoiding electoral oblivion in an open competition with Aung San Suu Kyi.

And then there is the final option:

4. Hardline elements from the old military regime could become far more active in trying to scupper Aung San Suu Kyi's prospects. Their responses could range from the mildly disruptive to the outrageously violent. Any such efforts on their part are high risk but they may consider that they now need to move aggressively to destroy Aung San Suu Kyi's momentum.

Whatever happens next we will all need to come to grips with much more fluid and unstable politics in Burma. At this time of flux the chance of even more astonishing democratic progress is

undeniable. But we cannot discount the possibility of disappointment and further heartache.

On that more sombre note, it is relevant that last week I organised a workshop and [public forum](#) here at the Australian National University on post-coup societies in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Some of the analysts who gathered to discuss the topic considered Burma a moderate risk of experiencing another military coup over the next 12-18 months. It was suggested that the risk of direct military intervention in politics was probably higher than at any time [since 1962](#).

After Aung San Suu Kyi's election, we will need to be watching closely.