

## The elephant and Myanmar politics



When news broke about the National League for Democracy (NLD) postponing its parliamentary debut on account of a dispute over the wording of the oath to be taken by new Members of Parliament (MP) one immediate reaction was to recall a well known Myanmar saying "Hsinpyaung Gyi Ah Mee Kya Hma Tit" or "The tusker got stuck at the tail". After all the efforts by the government, led by reformist President U Thein Sein, and the NLD, led by Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (DASSK), to set aside differences and work together on common issues for the sake of Myanmar, the process to bring the NLD back into the mainstream political process now appears stalled over the choice of words whether to "uphold and abide by" (current version) or "respect" (NLD's preference) the Constitution.

Much has been written about the so-called 'oath-taking issue' at home and abroad and one need not repeat the arguments for or against the NLD's stand based on its principle of not endorsing the Constitution whose "undemocratic" elements it hopes to amend as quickly as possible. Instead, I wish to reflect on the elephant analogy in the vocabulary relevant to Myanmar politics

The elephant has been a powerful symbol in Myanmar's political history going back several centuries to the time of monarchs and extending right up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The white elephant has been a prized symbol of legitimacy historically for successive rulers of Myanmar. In the colourful parliamentary debates and oftentimes acrimonious exchanges between the government and opposition during the 1950s, references to proverbs relating to the elephant abounded. These epithets include, *inter alia*: "covering the elephant carcass with goat skin"; "sucking sugar cane on account of the white elephant"; "a black elephant dare not look at the white one's face"; "elephant and goat" (comparing power and resources); "tiger and elephant confront in the open field"; "person on the elephant"; "plotting like an elephant"; and "cost of the [mahout's] pick is more than that of the elephant". They are no less applicable to the burgeoning parliamentary politics of Myanmar today.

In fact, given the varied interpretations and re-interpretations of "democracy" by the political stakeholders in present-day Myanmar, the tale of the six blind men and the elephant would not be a far-fetched analogy. The six here would be the government, the opposition parties, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (that won the 2010 elections), the NLD, the military and the polity. This coarse-grained illustration is not meant to imply that the six identified stakeholders are 'blind' but only alluding to their general disposition to a particular interpretation or perception.

On the other hand, perhaps, the most relevant 'elephant' for the current political impasse in Myanmar is the proverbial "elephant in the room" the *Tamadaw* (literally meaning royal force) or Myanmar Defence Services which has hardly been in public view since the end of March 2011. This is in contrast to the ubiquitous news stories and images carried by the state-owned media in the recent past when the military was in charge of virtually everything, everywhere. As the political and economic reforms manifested and proceeded at a rapid pace there has been very little attention paid to the powerful institution led by a new generation of officers who had no part in the 1962 and 1988 coups that had changed the course of, and left an indelible mark on, the pages of Myanmar's history.

However, the role of the *Tatmadaw* came back into sharp political focus when DASSK voiced concern over the question of the military's commitment to support ongoing reforms and mooted the possibility of a constitutional coup that would derail the reform process and set back Myanmar's incremental democratization for years if not decades. The NLD again upped the ante when the NLD by-election manifesto identified Constitutional amendments as one of the three prioritized aims of the party; the other two being the rule of law and internal peace which could also be seen as issues impinging upon the military's prerogatives. In fact, DASSK in her media presentation for the by-elections, mentioned "unelected representatives" as an example of undemocratic stipulations in the Constitution that require amending. It had already rattled the military representatives (25 per cent of all parliamentary seats) nominated by the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) and apparently does not sit well with the *Tatmadaw* which has yet to give up its long-standing leading role in politics. Even more unpalatable for the military would be attempts to amend the prerogatives accorded to the military in following the declaration of national emergency which

has been interpreted by the Constitution's critics as the right to stage a coup.

After sweeping 43 out of 44 seats in the 1 April by-elections, the NLD's insistence, on the eve of the re-convening of the parliaments (lower and upper houses) to amend the wording in the oath could be seen by the military as provocative and confrontational. The replacement of 59 junior (major rank) representatives (out of 166) by senior officers (five brigadiers, 14 colonels and the rest lieutenant colonels) the day before the beginning of the current parliamentary session has been interpreted by many observers as a reaction to the NLD move to ensure the coherence and reasoning power of the military contingent in the legislature.

Recently promoted Vice Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is some two decades younger than Senior General Than Shwe whom he replaced. The new military leaders had sworn to safeguard the Constitution and are responsible to the President even though the latter is not the supreme commander of the armed forces. According to the Constitution the C-in-C has considerable autonomy in military affairs as the *Tatmadaw* is exempted from civilian control in its judicial, organizational and operational affairs.

Moreover, there is no evidence of any significant change in the six-decade old institutional culture enshrining the self-professed role of the military as not only guardians of the state but also 'minders' of the body politic, and its skeptical view, bordering on contempt, of politicians and political parties. Under such circumstances, despite President U Thein Sein's recent assurance that there would be no U-turn in the reform process there is a clear and present danger that the military may be inclined to perceive the NLD's stance in this latest test of wills as a harbinger of future turbulence in parliamentary politics. As such military leaders who have embraced the idea of symbiosis between the state and the *Tamadaw* could regard the current standoff between the NLD and the political establishment as the beginning of a campaign to change the rules of the political game and threatens its identity and institutional integrity.

In order to prevent erosion of confidence in the reform process and forestall an adverse reaction on the part of the powerful *Tamadaw* the protagonists could do well to reach an early compromise for the sake of the country and the people, thereby giving affect to the traditional Myanmar saying "Hsin See Pyi Myin Yan" or "riding an elephant with a cavalry escort" (i.e. a dignified procession).

*Dr Tin Maung Maung Than is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.*