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Burma: After the elections, what?

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There were widespread predictions that Myanmar's 2008 constitution and 2010 elections would result in the emergence of essentially sham parliaments, at both the national and the provincial levels, and a puppet government still controlled by the armed forces. However, some experienced Myanmar-watchers were prepared to entertain the possibility that the new institutions being created could gradually allow for the expression of a wider range of views and possibly even independent decision-making.

If all goes according to plan, on 7 November, Burma's ruling council will hold nationwide elections for what it is calling a 'genuine multiparty discipline-flourishing democracy'.

The creation of an elaborate, multilayered parliamentary system is clearly aimed at consolidating and perpetuating military rule. However, as the French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville noted more than 150 years ago, once they are begun, such transitions can have unintended consequences.

The post-2010 scenario favoured by most commentators and activists is that, after its sham elections are held and its faux parliamentary structure is in place, the Naypyidaw regime will continue to pursue its militarisation of Burmese society, leading to an even wider gulf between the armed forces leadership and the civilian population.

According to this thesis, the controlled engagement of selected civilians in the new national and provincial assemblies is designed to reduce social pressures while confirming the current power position of the armed forces in state and society. It is also aimed at eliminating—or at least neutralising—alternative sources of power and influence, including opposition political movements and ethnic minority organisations.

Based on the regime's behaviour over the past 20 years, the obvious aims of the 2008 constitution and the restrictive electoral regulations promulgated in recent months, such an outcome is quite possible—even likely.¹ Yet, in a number of ways, the implementation of the new constitution will significantly alter Burma's political landscape.

The change from direct to indirect rule will mark an important shift in the way the armed forces approach the business of government. Some allowance must be made, therefore, for the possibility that not everything will proceed quite as the regime envisages. As The Australian National University's Morten Pedersen has observed, Burma's generals would not be the first to underestimate the processes set in train by what began as reforms closely managed from above.²

After 2010, there will be many more centres of formal decision-making. In addition to the national parliament in Naypyidaw, there will be seven regional assemblies, seven state assemblies, five self-administered ethnically designated zones and one self-administered ethnically designated division.

The relationships between all these entities are unclear. Despite its length, Burma's new constitution is either incomplete or ambiguous on many matters. Naypyidaw will always be able to exercise its overriding authority, but practical arrangements for interaction between the assemblies and the boundaries of their respective areas of responsibility are still to be worked out.

1 'Myanmar Announces Strict Election Campaign Laws', *The Star Online*, [Malaysia], 19 August 2010, http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/8/19/worldupdates/2010-08-19T180751Z_01_NO_OTR_RTRMDNC_0_-509434-1&sec=Worldupdates [page discontinued].

2 Morten B. Pedersen, *Prospects for Political Change in Burma*, Issues Paper No.13 (Canberra: Centre for International Governance and Justice, The Australian National University, November 2009), cigj.anu.edu.au/cigj/link_documents/IssuesPapers/IssuesPaperNo.13.pdf [page discontinued].

Similarly, it is not clear how the provincial assemblies and ethnic zones will coexist with the country's 13 regional military commanders. While due to relinquish their civil responsibilities after 7 November, these senior officers will retain considerable independence and power.

Also, with 21 new governing bodies, there will be many more participants in the formal political process, representing a much wider range of interests. Twenty-five per cent of seats at all levels are reserved for military personnel, but there is still scope for the election of a large number of genuine candidates. The bicameral national parliament, for example, has 498 popularly elected seats, with another 665 allocated to the provincial assemblies.³

The voting patterns of the personnel occupying the reserved seats will be managed by the government, but there will be others who could act more independently. Some former military officers and even members of the regime's own party may not be quite as pliant as everyone now imagines. Also, there are bound to be some MPs, including representatives of the ethnic communities, who will make a real effort to represent their constituents.

Bear in mind, too, that the armed forces will be going through a number of major changes. Regime leader Than Shwe is reportedly unwell and preparing to retire, possibly to become president or an 'advisor' to the new government. Over the next few years, several more senior generals will pass from the scene. Also, thousands of other officers are due to 'retire', to provide a cadre of loyal 'civilian' candidates for the new national and regional assemblies.

In such a fluid environment, one cannot rule out a gradual diffusion of power between members of the armed forces and civilians and between the central government and provincial assemblies. While powerless at first, some ceremonial and administrative positions may slowly accrete some real influence. To have any credibility, the provincial assemblies will need to be seen to exercise a degree of sovereign authority, if only over parochial issues.

3 Richard Horsey, *Countdown to the Myanmar Elections: Prepared for the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 25 August 2010), www.boell.de/sites/default/files/assets/boell.de/images/download_de/weltweit/Elections_Report_25Aug.pdf.

A few analysts have gone so far as to suggest that such trends could slowly open up political space that will permit the evolution of a more effective and democratic government.⁴ Others, like David Steinberg of Georgetown University, have raised the possibility that there may eventually develop greater scope for debate and compromise, and even some independent decision-making.

There is unlikely to be much movement in that direction while Than Shwe and senior officers of that ilk remain influential—whether or not these older generals remain in uniform, retire or assume new civilian positions. They are too hard line and set in their ways to allow any weakening of the current controls. It is conceivable, however, that after they pass from the scene a new generation of military leaders may gradually relax their grip.

These younger officers are still unlikely to permit a truly representative civilian government to emerge in Burma, but they may allow the national and provincial assemblies a little more latitude. If there is the prospect of increased national prosperity and less civil unrest, they may be more open to arguments for the introduction of economic reforms, and possibly even the gradual development of civil society.

If this occurs, however, it is likely to be a very slow process and one that will be carefully monitored. There is no chance that the military leadership would knowingly allow control of the government, or the armed forces, to slip from its grasp. In the event of any challenges to these institutions, or perceived threats to Burma's unity, stability and independence, there is little doubt that the generals would swiftly reassert their domination of Burmese society.

4 Graham Reilly, 'Ray of Hope in Burma's Sham Elections', *The Age*, [Melbourne], 18 March 2010, www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/ray-of-hope-in-burmas-sham-election-20100317-qfj1.html.

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