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Burma's elections: Thirteen reasons

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On 7 November 2010, elections were held in Myanmar for the bicameral national parliament and 14 unicameral provincial assemblies. About 30 million registered voters were asked to choose between more than 3,000 candidates for over 1,100 seats. If, as the regime's critics claimed at the time, the entire exercise was simply a charade—albeit a very elaborate one—the question had to be asked, why bother? There were at least 13 reasons to do so.

Burma's first national elections in 20 years are due to be held this Sunday. They have already attracted a great deal of official attention and public commentary—almost all of it negative.¹ That is to be expected. No one believes the polls will be free or fair. The only debate has been whether the proposed new arrangements for governing Burma can yield any positive outcomes. On this question, opinion remains strongly divided.²

Curiously, few commentators have questioned why the regime is bothering to hold elections. After all, it clearly has no intention of surrendering real power, which will remain firmly in the hands of the armed forces, regardless of the election results. So, why the charade?

1 'Rudd Concerned about Burma Elections', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 2010, www.smh.com.au/national/rudd-concerned-about-burma-elections-20101031-178os.html.

2 *The Myanmar Elections*, Asia Briefing No.105 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 27 May 2010), www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/B105-the-myanmar-elections.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-elections].

The military government does not face any serious challenges, either from the opposition movement inside the country or from its supporters outside it. Nor does any insurgent group have the armed strength or popular support to overthrow the generals—now firmly ensconced in their new capital of Naypyidaw.

For its part, the international community has repeatedly demonstrated that it cannot agree on a common policy approach to Burma and, in any case, it has few effective means of influencing the generals. Despite the generals' fears, and the hopes of some activists, no country is going to try to change the regime by force.

Indeed, the military government is probably stronger now than it has been since the 1962 coup. Provided that the armed forces remain cohesive and loyal, they could quite easily continue to rule Burma as they have done for the past 22 years, by decree and force of arms.

The regime has stated that it is holding elections to install a 'genuine multiparty, discipline-flourishing democracy' that is better suited to Burma's changing circumstances. Yet, it is patently clear that no one is fooled by the rhetoric emanating from Naypyidaw—not the international community and certainly not the Burmese people.

If that is the case, why are the generals going to all the trouble of staging elections and creating an elaborate multilayered parliamentary structure that can only complicate life for them, and possibly even weaken their grip on the country? In recent months, numerous theories have been advanced to answer this question. They include the following:

1. The regime hopes that, by creating an 'elected' national parliament, 14 regional parliaments, five self-administered ethnically designated zones and one self-administered ethnically designated division, it will let the steam out of the opposition movement and reduce the likelihood of further civil unrest.
2. By allowing the election of selected popular candidates, the regime hopes to reduce the influence of prominent opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The regime can claim that it needs to listen to the people's 'true' representatives, not a private citizen who holds no elected office.

3. Through the pre-election process, the regime has effectively eliminated the NLD, which decided not to contest the polls and has since been dissolved. In fact, the regime has split the opposition movement, some elements of which have decided to field candidates for the new national parliament.³
4. By introducing restrictive election laws and favouring the government's own political party, the generals have ensured the election of a large number of people sympathetic to military rule. This will permit the regime to claim popular endorsement in a way not possible before the elections.
5. After Sunday, the elections can be cited by the regime as the most recent national poll, based on a constitution endorsed by more than 90 per cent of the population. This counters the opposition's argument that only the NLD can provide a legitimate government, having won the 1990 elections by a landslide.
6. The new political arrangements will give Burma's ethnic minorities a voice in government for the first time since 1988. This will help direct their demands through official channels, where they can be more easily managed, and permit the regime to bypass other ethnic leaders who can be branded as 'unrepresentative'.
7. The 2008 constitution, the switch from direct to indirect military rule and the creation of a wide range of new government institutions are all part of a master plan by ageing regime leader Senior General Than Shwe to protect himself and his family and to safeguard his legacy after he dies.⁴
8. The professionals in Burma's armed forces want to divest themselves of direct responsibility for running the country and return to soldiering, while retaining the option of taking back political control if necessary.

3 'UN Expert: Genuine Change from Burma's Elections are "Limited"', *Voice of America*, 20 October 2010, www.voanews.com/english/news/UN-Expert--Burma-Conditions-for-Genuine-Elections-Limited-105470653.html [page discontinued] [now at www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/un-expert-genuine-change-burmas-elections-are-limited].

4 Ba Kaung, 'Than Shwe's Post-Election Plans', *The Irrawaddy*, 15 July 2010, www.irrawaddy.org/highlight.php?art_id=18974 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=18974].

9. As a modern, 'progressive' country, Burma needs to have a modern-style parliament to meet in its new capital. This will bring it into line with other countries in the region, which also have parliamentary systems of various kinds.
10. The regime hopes that having a parliamentary system will reduce the level of international criticism levelled against Burma since 1988. The generals anticipate that the new government will eventually win the same kind of recognition that is given to other 'guided' democracies.
11. Once Burma has an 'elected' parliament, it will be easier for countries like China to justify their continuing support for the regime, including in multilateral forums.⁵ This is critical, given Burma's need for continued diplomatic cover in the UN, not to mention its dependence on China and other countries for arms, technology, aid and markets.
12. The regime calculates that the facade of an elected parliament will help ease Burma's diplomatic relations with its fellow members of ASEAN, which have been embarrassed by the regime's periodic resort to military force to suppress popular dissent and stay in power.
13. The regime hopes that an elected parliament of sorts will pave the way to an easing of international sanctions and greater access to international finance, such as that provided by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

All these theories are quite plausible. More than likely, the regime has considered most, if not all, of them at one time or another and sees the elections as serving a wide range of purposes. If so, the 7 November polls are much more than just a device to consolidate and perpetuate military rule. Indeed, they may be part of a quite sophisticated attempt by the regime to change the way that Burma is governed and interacts with the outside world.

5 *China's Myanmar Strategy: Elections, Ethnic Politics and Economics*, Asia Briefing No.112 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 20 September 2010), www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/B112-chinas-myanmar-strategy-elections-ethnic-politics-and-economics.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/china-s-myanmar-strategy-elections-ethnic-politics-and-economics].

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