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## Aung San Suu Kyi's choice

(10:30 AEDT, 23 November 2011)

*When the Thein Sein Government announced that it would hold by-elections for the national parliament on 1 April 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi and the opposition NLD were faced with the choice of whether to continue their boycott of the political process or to join it. Both decisions carried certain risks.*

In some ways, it is easier and safer to be a critic on the sidelines than to become an active participant in the formal political process. Yet, to not do so when an opportunity presents itself risks continuing powerlessness, a loss of credibility and possibly even irrelevance. This has been the dilemma faced by Burma's main opposition party and its charismatic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

On 18 November, however, the NLD announced it would re-register as a political party and compete in the country's forthcoming by-elections for 48 vacant seats.<sup>1</sup> According to news reports, Aung San Suu Kyi herself is considering standing as a parliamentary candidate.

The decision to re-register was described as unanimous, but clearly there are still deep concerns within the NLD and among its supporters. Aung San Suu Kyi has cautiously welcomed the new and apparently reformist government in Naypyidaw, but formally joining the political process will require the NLD to put the past behind it and embrace an entirely new paradigm.

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1 'Suu Kyi's NLD Democracy Party to Rejoin Burma Politics', *BBC News*, 18 November 2011, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15787605](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15787605).

This will not be easy. The legacy of 50 years of military misrule is evident for all to see. There are still hundreds of political prisoners in Burma and some ethnic communities are fighting bitter guerilla wars. It will also mean forgetting the 1990 elections, which the NLD won by a landslide but which were shelved by the ruling military council. For more than 20 years, this has been the basis of the NLD's claim to be Burma's legitimate government.

It will mean abiding by and 'respecting' the flawed 2008 constitution, which perpetuates military rule, in part by setting aside 25 per cent of all seats in the national and regional parliaments for members of the armed forces. The charter also provides an amnesty for all past members of the regime guilty of human rights abuses. And, because of her marriage to a British citizen, it prevents Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president.

Registration as a political party will also require the NLD to accept the current government, which is dominated by the Union Solidarity and Development Party—an organisation made up of former military officers and regime supporters. Thanks to a rigged poll held last year, it currently holds 883 of the 1,154 elected seats in Burma's 15 parliaments.<sup>2</sup>

The decision to re-register only came after the NLD heard Aung San Suu Kyi's own views. Yet, it is by no means certain that she will join the formal political process.<sup>3</sup>

If Aung San Suu Kyi stood for parliament and was successful in winning a seat, she would become only one elected member in the 664-seat national parliament. She would not have any official position and, even if the NLD swept the by-elections, she would lack a strong party base in Naypyidaw. However, she would still be bound to observe all the rules and regulations governing the parliament and its subordinate bodies.

As a private citizen, Aung San Suu Kyi is currently an independent actor, albeit a very influential one. Yet, as an MP, there is a real risk that she would lose her ability to speak and act so freely. If she is appointed to

2 *2010 Election Watch: Key Results* (Bangkok: ALTSEAN-Burma, 2010), [www.altsean.org/Research/2010/Key%20Facts/Results/Overall.php](http://www.altsean.org/Research/2010/Key%20Facts/Results/Overall.php) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.altsean.org/Research/2010/Key%20Facts/Results/Overall.php](http://archive.altsean.org/Research/2010/Key%20Facts/Results/Overall.php)].

3 'Myanmar Opposition Leader Undecided on Contesting Polls', *M&C*, 22 November 2011, [www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article\\_1676737.php/Myanmar-opposition-leader-undecided-on-contesting-polls](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1676737.php/Myanmar-opposition-leader-undecided-on-contesting-polls) [page discontinued].

a senior position by President Thein Sein, she may have greater power—in a formal sense—in one area, but this would probably mean losing her ability to play a significant role in others.

Also, as a parliamentarian, Aung San Suu Kyi would be obliged to adopt much more detailed policies and vote on a wide range of domestic issues. To date, she has tended to speak in very broad terms, often referring to Buddhist moral teachings and universal democratic principles. Direct participation in the political process would mean formulating and taking firm positions on a host of contentious issues.

Even if she argues and votes against specific policies, the government is bound to prevail. And, as an MP, she would still have been part of the formal process by which those issues were decided. She will in effect have been coopted by the government and may become associated, at least in some minds, with a range of unpopular laws over which she had no effective control.

More to the point, perhaps, for more than 20 years, Aung San Suu Kyi has been an enormously powerful figure, lauded and consulted by presidents, prime ministers and other world leaders. She has never seen herself simply as another member of Burma's parliament. Her ability to maintain this elevated position and influence events will be greatest if she remains outside the formal political process, at least for the time being.

Burma's opposition 'movement' has never been a tightly knit, well-organised and disciplined force with an agreed policy platform.<sup>4</sup> It has always been a very loose and fractious coalition of groups and individuals in Burma and abroad. The two things it has had most in common have been a shared commitment to regime change and respect for Aung San Suu Kyi.

The NLD's decision to re-register as a party and participate in the formal political process will place even those shared beliefs under considerable strain. Some ethnic groups, for example, distrust the NLD and will follow

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4 Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Opposition Movement: A House Divided', *The Interpreter*, 25 November 2008, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2008/11/25/Burmas-opposition-movement-A-house-divided.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2008/11/25/Burmas-opposition-movement-A-house-divided.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-opposition-movement-house-divided](http://archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-opposition-movement-house-divided)].

a different path, possibly including armed resistance. If Aung San Suu Kyi stands for parliament, she is bound to alienate some of her supporters. If she does not, it may look as if she lacks faith in the process.

Burma's prodemocracy forces have endured terrible privations over the past 23 years to get to this position. Now that it is here, however, they may find that the real work has only just begun. The existence of an undisguised military dictatorship guilty of appalling human rights abuses offered them a simple choice. The decision of whether or not to trust a hybrid civilian–military government that seems to promise incremental reform and national reconciliation is much more difficult.

It is said that politics is the art of compromise. The NLD seems to have accepted that, albeit reluctantly. However, some others in the opposition movement remain unwilling to abandon their hardline stance against the Naypyidaw government. If Aung San Suu Kyi does not become a part of the formal political process herself, they will doubtless feel more justified in not joining the NLD's bold leap of faith into the future.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,  
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian  
National University, Canberra, Australia.