

Will Aung San Suu Kyi be president? Odds are lengthening

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After an initial effort to cultivate positive relations with the Thein Sein Government and armed forces leadership, Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to draw the conclusion that neither was prepared to change the constitution and permit her to stand for the presidency. She returned to a strategy of seeking to have both domestic and foreign actors apply public pressure on Naypyidaw in an attempt to achieve her ambitions and those of her party.

A year ago, a Lowy Institute panel was asked whether Aung San Suu Kyi would become President of Burma (Myanmar).¹ The question was also raised on *The Interpreter*.² The answer on both occasions was that such an outcome was far from certain. Powerful forces in Burma were working hard to prevent it. Few informed observers were optimistic about her future.

1 'Lowy Lecture Series: Burma's Transition—Progress and Prospects', Lowy Institute, Sydney, 9 May 2013, www.lowyinstitute.org/news-and-media/videos/conversation-michael-fullilove-sean-turnell-and-andrew-selth-discuss-reform-process-burma [page discontinued] [now at soundcloud.com/lowyinstitute/lowy-lecture-series-burmas-transition].

2 Andrew Selth, 'Will Aung San Suu Kyi Be President of Burma?', *The Interpreter*, 16 May 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/05/16/Will-Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-be-President-of-Burma.aspx?COLLCC=3636179620& [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/will-aung-san-suu-kyi-be-president-burma].

Since then, the odds on the charismatic opposition leader becoming president have lengthened considerably.

When writing about Burma, it is always prudent to begin by saying that its internal affairs are difficult to read and the country has always had the capacity to surprise. That said, there have been increasing signs that a decision has been made to extend the period of ‘disciplined democracy’ beyond President Thein Sein’s term and that steps are being taken to ensure that Aung San Suu Kyi cannot contest the presidency after the 2015 general elections.

After a mixed civilian–military government was formed in 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to feel that her best interests, and those of her party, lay in a compromise with Thein Sein, whose ambitious reform program she publicly endorsed. She also tried to get closer to the armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) in an apparent attempt to reassure its leaders that she did not pose a threat to their institutional or personal interests.³

Since then, however, Aung San Suu Kyi has clearly become disillusioned with Thein Sein and the slow pace of political reform. She has also failed to weaken the armed forces’ commitment to a gradual, controlled, top-down transition to a more democratic system. This seems to have prompted her discussions with powerbrokers like Shwe Mann, the Speaker of the parliament’s lower house, in what was probably an attempt to outflank her opponents.

At the same time, she increased her efforts to persuade other countries to put pressure on Naypyidaw.⁴ She warned world leaders (including Australia’s Prime Minister) not to get too comfortable in dealing with Burma’s current government.⁵ She also sought their help in getting the 2008 constitution amended to remove those provisions enshrining the *Tatmadaw*’s special place in national politics and preventing her from becoming president.

3 ‘Aung San Suu Kyi Attends Burma’s Armed Forces Day’, *BBC News*, 27 March 2013, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21950145.

4 Andrew Selth, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi’s Risky Strategy’, *The Interpreter*, 30 October 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/10/30/Aung-San-Suu-Kyis-risky-strategy.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aung-san-suu-kyis-risky-strategy].

5 Andrew Selth, ‘When Aung San Suu Kyi Comes to Call’, *The Interpreter*, 3 December 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/12/03/When-Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-comes-to-call.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/when-aung-san-suu-kyi-comes-call].

Yet, over the past six months, the President⁶ and the *Tatmadaw*'s Commander-in-Chief⁷ have reiterated their commitment to the 2008 constitution and to a 'disciplined democracy'. Both have hinted that they favour another five-year term under a former general. And, on 13 June, a parliamentary committee dominated by pro-government members voted against amending the clause of the constitution that bars from the presidency anyone (like Aung San Suu Kyi) whose family has foreign ties.⁸

As Larry Jagan has observed, Aung San Suu Kyi now seems convinced that an accommodation with the government and armed forces is no longer possible.⁹ With the system stacked so heavily against her, she has few options, but she is already pursuing two lines of attack. Both carry considerable risks and neither guarantees success. Indeed, they could prove counterproductive and bring about the opposite results to those she desires.

Aung San Suu Kyi is trying to use her prestige and popularity to increase pressure on the government in Naypyidaw. Constitutional reform is not as high a priority for most Burmese as the provision of basic services,¹⁰ but she has launched a nationwide campaign aimed at winning support for constitutional amendments. She is organising public meetings and widening her message to challenge the *Tatmadaw*'s guaranteed allocation of 25 per cent of all parliamentary seats.

Second, she is once again seeking help from the international community.¹¹ She is downplaying her presidential ambitions and expressing her concerns in terms of genuine democratic elections and the removal of sectoral interests, as enshrined in the constitution. This seems to reflect

6 'Speech Delivered by President U Thein Sein on the Occasion of the 3rd Anniversary of the Assumption of Duty at the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, Naypyitaw, 26 March 2014', *Network Myanmar*, www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF16/Thein-Sein-26-03-2014.pdf [page discontinued].

7 'Commander-in-Chief Says Armed Forces Responsible for "Safeguarding Constitution" as 69th Armed Forces Day is Marked with Parade', *New Light of Myanmar*, [Yangon], 28 March 2014, www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF16/C-in-C-27032014.pdf [page discontinued].

8 'Suu Kyi's Presidential Hopes Suffer Setback', *Deutsche Welle*, [Bonn], 17 June 2014, www.dw.de/suu-kyis-presidential-hopes-suffer-setback/a-17710999.

9 Larry Jagan, 'Suu Kyi Shifts Pre-Election Tack in Myanmar', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 12 June 2014, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-120614.html [page discontinued].

10 *Survey of Burma Public Opinion, December 24, 2013 – February 1, 2014* (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, 2014), www.iri.org/sites/default/files/flip_docs/2014%20April%2003%20Survey%20of%20Burma%20Public%20Opinion,%20December%2024,%202013-February%201,%202014.pdf.

11 'Myanmar's Suu Kyi Seeks Global Support for Charter Change', *West Australian*, [Perth], 14 June 2014, au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/world/a/24239496/ [page discontinued].

recognition that support for such broad principles is easier for foreign governments than interventions in Burma's domestic politics on behalf of an individual.

A possible third approach is for Aung San Suu Kyi to reach out again to figures like Shwe Mann, or other parties and groups, including the ethnic communities. There have long been rumours of deals that could help Aung San Suu Kyi achieve her personal and party goals. However, Burmese politics is notoriously volatile and such arrangements rarely last long. Also, Shwe Mann is himself a presidential hopeful.

In any case, the armed forces remain the ultimate arbiters of power in Burma. They have stepped back from day-to-day government and allowed other institutions to develop. However, thanks to the 2008 constitution and the appointment of military officers to key positions, the *Tatmadaw* still effectively controls the government and parliament. It also commands the state's coercive apparatus, including the police and intelligence agencies.

Aung San Suu Kyi's confrontational approach already worries the armed forces.¹² Appeals to the *Tatmadaw's* rank and file for support and calls for foreign governments to put greater pressure on Naypyidaw are likely to confirm the doubts already held by the generals about her readiness to preserve the country's stability, unity and sovereignty—the three 'national causes' to which the armed forces remain deeply committed.

Having chosen to permit a more open political and economic system to develop, the *Tatmadaw* seems determined to retain control over the process. It is not backing away from the goal of a more modern, prosperous and respected country. However, it does not yet seem ready to put its trust in an inexperienced civilian politician, backed by a fractious party, to manage developments in a way that safeguards Burma's national interests, as it sees them.

This impasse poses real dangers for Burma. Civil unrest in support of an Aung San Suu Kyi presidential bid would threaten Burma's already precarious internal stability and make the implementation of reforms even more difficult. Naypyidaw is more sensitive to domestic and international

12 Shwe Aung, 'Election Commission Curbs Suu Kyi's Campaign Trail', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 11 April 2014, www.dvb.no/news/election-commission-curbs-suu-kyis-campaign-trail-burma-myanmar/39558 [page discontinued].

opinion than it was before 2011, but it would not hesitate to send in the police and the army if protests became too disruptive. It could even declare an emergency.

Continued refusal to lift restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi's presidential candidacy, or tough action against protesters seeking a genuine democracy in Burma, would strengthen the hand of those activists and sceptics who were never convinced of Naypyidaw's commitment to change. They are already trying to wind back the level of engagement by countries like the US and the UK,¹³ citing continued human rights abuses and the failure of many promised reforms to materialise.¹⁴

Yet, an overreaction by Western countries, such as the imposition of unrealistic benchmarks or even a return to sanctions, would help hardliners within the *Tatmadaw* to claim that such fair-weather friends cannot be trusted. It could result in not just a slower pace of reform, but also a greater reliance by Naypyidaw on countries like China, whose interests in Burma are less aligned with the democratic opposition movement and many in the international community.

13 Andrew Selth, 'Should Burma Participate in UN Peacekeeping?', *The Interpreter*, 13 May 2014, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/05/13/Should-Burma-Myanmar-participate-in-UN-peace-keeping.aspx?COLLCC=2310905121& [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/should-burma-participate-un-peacekeeping/].

14 Daniel P. Sullivan, 'Burma's Promise: President Thein Sein's 11 Commitments to Obama', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 19 November 2013, fpif.org/burmas-promise-president-thein-seins-11-commitments-obama/.

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