

More woes for Myanmar

By Bunn Nagara



Just when reformists thought it safe to enter Myanmar's political waves again, waves of uncertainty have hit the country and threaten to reverse the reforms made so far



Troubles afoot: The USDP headquarters in Naypyitaw, where police descended to prevent senior party leaders from being active. EPA

NOVEMBER 2015 was supposed to be the promising near future for Myanmar. It would have been the month for the freest election since 1990.

That election was for a constituent assembly to draft a new Constitution, but the reactionary forces of the military acted so blatantly against the vote as to almost grant the poll the status of a parliamentary general election.

The spirit of that soul-destroying moment has resoundingly returned today. It is familiar because it has made itself at home in Myanmar for at least two whole generations.

Looking back, the 1988 student-led uprising added pressure on the ruling generals to call an election for a new Constitution in 1990. But the election results for the military's National Unity Party (NUP) were devastating: just 22% of the popular vote for a meagre 2% of the seats.

It would have been humiliating for any ruling party, and for a party of arrogant generals it was morale-crushing as well. Evidently, this "new democracy thing" was not working out as the Tatmadaw (military) had hoped.

Not that they had had much experience in democratic practice, of course. The previous multi-party elections had been in 1960, a full three decades before.

Clearly, Myanmar's progress – such as it was and now is, again – was taking decades when other countries took just years. It was a democracy defined by the barrel of a gun.

After the 1960 election, the military took two years to overthrow the elected government in a coup. In 1990, the military took just two months to act formally against the elected government.

By then, the generals had learned something else from their "field experience" in politics. A year before the 1990 election, they had placed opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest.

By this November, Myanmar would have endured 25 years since its last free election. The 2010 voting exercise was constrained and contrived with requirements, laws and prohibitions designed to prevent a free and fair election.

Still, the government of former general U Thein Sein's military-friendly Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) tried to make good its claim to a reformist agenda in 2011.

Reforms were progressively introduced as the Tatmadaw remained in the barracks. Hundreds of political prisoners were released, talks with rebel groups proceeded, a free press began to emerge and criticisms of government policy were being heard.

International confidence and investments returned to Myanmar. Criticisms of the government from Western nations and foreign NGOs eased off.

There were official visits by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama. As the reforms kept coming Myanmar was turning the corner at last, many felt and dared to hope.

Nonetheless, there were those like Suu Kyi who preferred to be "cautiously optimistic". They somehow sensed that it was still too early to declare the reforms irreversible.

By this year, cautious optimism already seemed out of place with the steady pace of government reforms. Few issues such as conflict with some ethnic rebel groups, the most serious being virtual genocide of the Rohingya community, remained to be settled.

At least that was so until four days ago.

On Wednesday evening, truckloads of troops and police suddenly descended on the ruling USDP's vast headquarters in the administrative centre of Naypyidaw. A power struggle was on.

The immediate move was reportedly to prevent senior party leaders from being active. Party chairman and Parliament speaker Thura Shwe Mann and USDP Secretary-General Maung Maung Thein, both ex-generals, were removed with immediate effect.

Shwe Mann's home was similarly surrounded. That was on the eve of the deadline for submitting the names of candidates for the Nov 8 general election.

There were recent policy disagreements between Thein Sein and Shwe Mann, who had announced his intention to run for president. The latter and his camp were not sympathetic to the former's list of candidates.

Yet Thein Sein had reportedly declared he was not going to run for another term before changing his mind. Shwe Mann, who is close to Suu Kyi and expected to move reforms further and faster, might have triggered Thein Sein's change of plans.

While the focus remains on the protagonist on each of the USDP's factions, Thein Sein and Shwe Mann, who and what each represents may be at least as important.

Shwe Mann's informal link with Suu Kyi is well known. Since she is unable to run for the presidency due to a law banning candidates with a foreign family, he is as close as Myanmar can get to a Suu Kyi leadership for now.

Thein Sein's ambition and action are more nuanced and disturbing. If he intends to stay in power for another term it would mean a slower pace of reforms, and if not he could merely be a proxy for a hardline revived Tatmadaw resistant to more change.

The third prospect is just as likely – that in not vying for a parliamentary seat, Thein Sein expects to win another presidential term by sheer force of his incumbency. That would be just as undemocratic.

In previous years, such a desperate situation concocted by ruling generals would shift public sentiment inexorably towards opposition forces, notably Suu Kyi. But not the putsch this time of some retired generals against others.

Part of the problem lies with Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). As if to mirror the crisis in the ruling USDP, the NLD is at the same time mired in its own factional squabbles over candidacies.

Of the 17 names of candidates proposed by the opposition grassroots, the NLD hierarchy accepted only one. Among those rejected were creditable choices like Ko Ko Gyi and Nyo Nyo Thin, who had earned their stripes over years of struggle at great risk to their own lives since the 1988 uprising.

Rejected parliamentarians like Nyo Nyo Thin have now vowed to run for a seat independently. Not only has the NLD lost promising candidates by rejecting them, its lesser-known choices will have to fight for votes with a divided opposition.

This splintering of the opposition constituency between the official NLD and the popular "88 Generation" group emboldens the split in USDP ranks. As divisions and instability head towards November, the case for military hardliners stepping in again to restore order becomes more persuasive.

The signs are that Suu Kyi and the NLD she chairs are depending only on her fading charisma and once iconic status for the future of Myanmar. She does not have a successor and appears unwilling to groom any.

By remaining silent over the mass murders of Rohingyas, she had shown her readiness to ditch principle for immediate political gain. Now by rejecting numerous political allies and supporters while splitting opposition ranks, she is set to be party to revived military dominance in the government.

Tatmadaw hardliners must know that she has strategically, if unwittingly, isolated herself and eroded potential support for full civilian rule in the coming election. It is now easier than before to decapitate any challenge to the military-mediated status quo since 1990.

Even if all the mean generals were united in a lust for power, they could not have achieved this golden opportunity on their own.

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