THE STAR ONLINE

Sunday 15 November, 2015

Myanmar at the starting gate

By Bunn Nagara

New challenges: Suu Kyi may have ushered the NLD to an impressive win in the elctions, but she still needs to prove herself through progressive and inclusive policies. — AFP

Far from Myanmar's election last weekend being the end of a long struggle for democracy and development, it is only the beginning for all concerned.

IN considering Myanmar on the cusp of political change, the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) seems to signal the end of a long road to democracy after its 1990 election majority was crushed by military action.

However, the victory this time of Aung San Suu Kyi's party is even more significant than that. Insofar as it represents the yearnings of a nation, that long march is longer than many would imagine.

First, the 1990 election was not held to form a new government, but only a committee to draft a new Constitution. The election last Sunday is considerably more important in forming a new government.

Second, this election is also particularly significant because it is Myanmar's (Burma's) first free election since 1962. For more than a generation, the people have hardly known a proper election or democratic governance.

Third, far from signifying the end of a forward march to democracy, this election is only the beginning.

For all parties within and outside Myanmar, what follows from the election forms the true test of their commitment to democracy and good governance.

For military-backed incumbents used to occupying the seat of power, surrendering their posts can be a challenge. Despite some formal pledges of respecting the election result, there have been reports of senior members of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) showing grudging acknowledgment.

It can easily take half a year before any trouble from a defiant military or a disgruntled faction materialises.

In Myanmar's system, a new party takes power only after more than four months following the conclusion of an election.

The military, or even only significant elements of it, may feel itself coming under siege as an institution.

Alternatively, individuals within the military may expect that an NLD government may seek justice or vengeance for all the wrongs they had committed.

In either case, the stock reaction is to strike out by undermining or neutralising the NLD and its leaders before they entrench themselves in government. The generals who have had ample time to acquire a taste for power may have however found a new maturity, but nobody can be certain of that.

Myanmar's military leaders need not pursue political power as an end in itself to feel threatened by full and complete parliamentary democracy. Since they have a hand in virtually all of the country's industries, they may act against any move to curtail those interests.

This election also marks a new start for the NLD itself on the question of its own political maturity. Can it prove to an expectant population that it is not only able to govern, but govern better than the USDP?

The party's so-called super majority means that it has enough seats in Parliament to wield power without having to form a coalition with other parties – or even to consider the interests of minority groups.

In Myanmar, this runs the particular risk of riding roughshod over the concerns of a host of ethnic minority groups, which are at the heart of policy challenges to any government in the country.

The USDP's recent record on this has been rather unsavoury: in the weeks leading up to this election, troops had been attacking ethnic rebel communities when a ceasefire had been expected. The day after the election, government forces were again the first to violate the ceasefire.

In many countries where political parties may be weak or deficient in certain ways, national institutions come into play to ensure a modicum of justice. But in Myanmar, institutions that ideally provide a measure of checks and balances tend to be compromised, atrophied or just absent.

The aftermath of this election is also a test of Aung San Suu Kyi's fortitude and consistency. While hardship or defeat may be a test of one's strength, victory is a test of one's character.

Suu Kyi had "prepared" for this election to the point of ignoring the plight of suppressed ethnic minority groups, even downplaying the massacres of Rohingya villagers. The 1991 Nobel peace laureate and "democracy icon" has seemed to be in denial of brutal violations of democracy.

Now that her party has secured a victory convincing enough to vindicate her early principled stand, will she now speak out against violent and racist "Buddhist" groups? She has up to six months to prove herself.

This election also represents a new beginning for the rebel groups themselves. About a third of the country's 135 officially recognised ethnic groups are in armed contention with the government over disputed claims and in various stages of negotiations.

The Rohingyas in Rakhine state get no consideration at all since the government conveniently denies their right to citizenship or to any civil or political rights. Thus being subjected to the government's policies of exclusion and rampant attacks by racist mobs, they are also denied human rights.

On Thursday UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon congratulated Suu Kyi on her party's victory, while regretting that several ethnic groups such as the Rohingyas had been denied the right to vote.

Some ethnic minority candidates were even banned as candidates.

Since Suu Kyi has insisted that she would be "above the president," whoever the new president may be, would she work towards a policy of inclusion of all ethnic groups in the country? Her recent record on the issue is not encouraging.

The rebel groups and the Rohingyas need to regard this election as a possible turning point, steadily working to test the new government on issues of democracy and basic human rights. They need to press the new leadership gently but consistently without provocations that can trigger a backlash.

Suu Kyi's insistence on being an unelected ultimate leader suggests a hankering after being Iran's Supreme Leader or North Korea's Kim. No doubt she prefers to be a Megawati Sukarnoputri or a Sonia Gandhi, but she needs to prove herself through progressive and inclusive policies.

Meanwhile, the election is also a test of so-called "Buddhist" militants who operate under the protection of outgoing President Thein Sein. Will they now rein in their violent hate tactics since a new government is set to take power?

These chauvinists however are more likely to push the envelope by testing the new government.

Militant monk Ashin Wirathu has questioned the NLD's leadership capabilities, while some senior NLD members share his attitude.

Not least, this election is a test of the Myanmar people themselves on their much-cited longing for the democratic ethic. Will they give their support not just to the NLD, but to the more progressive and enlightened NLD leaders and their policies?

This election is opportune in presenting the country with the means to right many wrongs and steer it away from some likely catastrophes. No election, however historic, can be an end in itself but only a means to produce some necessary and desirable ends.

The international community itself is being tested. Will it give blanket approval to anything and everything Myanmar does from now, or see if what it does with the mandate it has is what all of the people of Myanmar deserve?

This should not have to take six months or even six weeks, given the new mood in Myanmar now.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.