

Burmese opposition party congress adopts pro-market agenda

John Roberts
1 April 2013

Despite its pro-democracy rhetoric, Burma's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), adopted a Western-oriented free market program, without any discussion, at its first congress in 25 years, and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, cemented her ties with the military regime that had kept her under house arrest for a quarter century.

The NLD gathering in Rangoon (Yangon), the former capital of Burma (Myanmar) from March 8 to 10 was the first large party meeting since the military junta formed a semi-civilian government in 2010 and began to orient toward Washington.

There was no debate on political or economic policy, or the role that Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders have played since winning 43 seats in the military-controlled parliament at by-elections sanctioned by the junta last April. The congress was a bureaucratically managed affair, which entrenched Suu Kyi's leadership and her increasingly close relations with the military and the government of ex-general President Thein Sein, a former junta chief.

The policy program released at the end of the congress committed the NLD to a market economy with a perfunctory reference to fighting poverty. The program included a commitment to work closely with the global financial institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The outcome was in line with Washington's embrace of the military-backed regime as part of President Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia to counter the influence of China, which has had intimate ties with the regime. The NLD is serving as a partner in opening up Burma's resources and cheap labour to Western capital in the regime's shift away from economic dependence on China.

Suu Kyi, herself the daughter of the founding

commander of the Burmese armed forces, has long represented dissident factions of the capitalist elite who were sidelined by the generals but are now looking to the military for support in imposing their brutal economic agenda on the already impoverished Burmese masses.

In her closing speech to the congress, Suu Kyi declared: "We have to rebuild a good relationship between the army and citizenry as it was once." The NLD adopted a policy on defence and security that stated: "The party believes that the army is an essential organisation of a nation."

Just over two weeks later, on March 27, Suu Kyi was a guest of honour at a nationally-televised military parade, in observance of the country's Armed Forces Day, in the capital, Naypyidaw. She sat in the front row, flanked by her former military captors. At the ceremony, commander in chief, Senior General U Min Aung Hlaing said the military would maintain its "leading political role".

In the lead-up to the congress, Suu Kyi worked closely with three of the country's most powerful tycoons, Tay Za, Khin Shwe and Zaw Zaw, whose conglomerates dominate construction, mining, finance and tourism. For example, Tay Za, a close friend of former junta leader Than Shwe, joined Suu Kyi last December in fund raising for the NLD's education network. The *cogitAsia* web site noted that Suu Kyi's "view of the cronies and her relations with them could potentially help them get released from targeted sanctions," still maintained by the US and EU against some junta-related figures.

The NLD claims to have 1.3 million members. The congress was attended by 894 delegates and 900 invited observers, including members of the military's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Ageing

leaders made up three-quarters of the 15-member central executive committee that was duly elected.

There were disputes within the NLD in the months before the congress. Last year, allegations of “cronism” in party elections triggered some mass resignations and protests. According to one report, hundreds demonstrated outside the party office in central Myin Gyan township, alleging the rigging of a party election in which 7,000 young members were not allowed to vote.

A locally based financial consultant, Daniel Gelfer, told the *Wall Street Journal* on March 6: “Decision making and influence within the party has been very much centred upon one individual. Even very senior party members defer to [Suu Kyi], unwilling to take decisions without her.”

On March 14, within days of the congress, the NLD’s commitment to the regime was displayed when Suu Kyi travelled in convoy to the area near the Letpaduang copper mine. Her mission was to prevail upon the local population to accept the findings of an inquiry commission that she had headed, on behalf of the government, into a violent police crackdown on anti-mine protesters last November, which left more than 100 demonstrators injured. Her inquiry said the Chinese- and military-owned mine project should proceed, despite the environmental and social concerns of farmers.

On her trip, Suu Kyi was booed and heckled by hundreds of angry protesters. In the Monywa township, residents barricaded the town and only allowed her to enter after she left behind some of her police escort and accompanying journalists. In Hsede village, her motorcade was chased by villagers yelling, “Stop the Project”. Her reaction was one of contempt. “They want me to do what they want,” she told the media. “I simply said no ... It is wrong to engage in politics to win popularity.”

The image that emerged from the NLD congress was that of a loyal and cooperative opposition, seeking a smooth transition, on behalf of domestic and foreign capital, to a civilian government, with Suu Kyi as president, at elections scheduled for 2015. The congress called for political and judicial reforms in line with that objective.

There are signs that the regime is ready to accommodate that transition. On March 15, the

parliament’s lower house approved a resolution, moved by the military controlled-USDP, for a review of the constitution in line with the “reform process”.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact