

Suu Kyi's party predicted to win Burmese election

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The national elections in Burma (also known as Myanmar) tomorrow are being touted in the international media as the first multi-party elections since 1990, and, even if flawed by the military's 2008 constitution, at least a step toward democracy.

The election campaigns have been dominated by the military, which stands behind the party of President Thein Sein's incumbent government—the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP—and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Because of the intense popular hostility toward the military and its 50-year brutal and corrupt rule, the NLD is expected to win a majority in the 1,142 seats that are being contested in the Union Assembly—the national parliament—and in state and regional assemblies.

Some 32 million people are eligible to vote. Far from being an exercise in expanding their democratic rights, however, the election is a fraud perpetrated on the population. Both major factions of the ruling elite are jockeying for power while attempting to conceal that their economic and political program is essentially identical.

This agenda consists of drawing closer to Washington by accommodating its anti-China “pivot to Asia,” which places the Burmese population in grave danger and on the front line of the Obama administration's war drive against Beijing.

In return for this Faustian deal, an expected inflow of investment will put the ruling elite in a better position to exploit the nation's cheap labour force and its extensive natural resources in cooperation with US and other Western corporations. For decades, the economy stagnated due to the sanctions that were imposed following the military junta's violent suppression of a

mass uprising in 1988 and its annulment of the 1990 election won by Suu Kyi and the NLD. For the past two decades, China has been Burma's major trading partner and source of investment.

For the millions of voters among the urban and rural masses hoping for a better life and democratic rights if the NLD wins government, their aspirations will soon be dashed.

Suu Kyi and the NLD represent a section of the ruling elite that were excluded from political and economic dominance by the junta's rule. According to some estimates, the military and its business cronies control 70 percent of the economy.

The NLD has based its campaign on Suu Kyi's reputation as Burma's “democratic icon.” On November 1, at the only major rally held by the NLD in Rangoon, the largest city, Suu Kyi issued rousing calls for democracy, without making specific policy references.

In her last interview of the campaign on Thursday, Suu Kyi insisted that she would lead the government, despite the constitution excluding her from the parliamentary-appointed presidency because her deceased husband was a British citizen. “If we win, and the NLD forms a government, I will be above the president, who will work in accord with the policies of the NLD,” she declared.

The NLD's pro-market agenda will have devastating consequences for the Burmese working class and rural poor, but has hardly received a mention in the campaign. Its program includes slashing government spending, cutting public sector employment in the name of combatting corruption, and privatising state assets. The NLD is also committed to implementing agricultural “reforms” that will benefit large agribusiness at the expense of poor farmers, and

deregulating the financial system in the interests of transnational banks and investors.

In March 2013, the Suu Kyi clique pushed through its pro-market economic program without any debate in the first NLD congress in 25 years. In the lead up to Sunday's election, the dominant faction rejected the candidacy of prominent members of "Generation 88," who are associated with the anti-junta mass movement in 1988, as well as other well-known activists. When some NLD members criticised her choice of more conservative candidates, 10 were expelled. NLD candidates are banned from speaking to the media.

The anti-democratic outlook that Suu Kyi shares with the rest of the ethnic Burmese Buddhist elite is not limited to hiding of her pro-business agenda. It is also seen in the exclusion of the Muslim Rohingya minority from the election.

Around 750,000 Rohingya in the state of Rakhine, who did vote in the 2010 election and the 2012 by-election, were disenfranchised by the Thein Sein regime in February. This anti-democratic action has been accompanied by a vicious anti-Muslim campaign throughout the Buddhist areas of the country, led by Burmese nationalist monks of the Ma Ba Tha movement, which is supporting the USDP.

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Suu Kyi and the NLD have adapted to this campaign. The NLD does not have a single Muslim candidate. This is despite the fact that the NLD has 1,150 national and regional candidates and has veteran Muslim members, some of whom were political prisoners under the junta. During her tour of Rakhine state, Suu Kyi studiously avoided the internment camps where 100,000 Rohingya have been languishing since the pogroms of 2012.

In a bid to avoid an electoral rout, the military-backed USDP has resorted to anti-Muslim chauvinism and pork-barrelling. Senior USDP officials have donated large sums to selected constituencies and local development schemes, including electrification and health projects.

The USDP campaign has claimed that further democratic reforms will only be possible under the "stability" of its military-backed government. Its strategists aim to get at least 15 percent of the vote which, with the 25 percent of the seats reserved for the

armed forces, would give them 40 percent of the seats in the Assembly. The USDP hopes to be able to form a coalition with the ethnic parties that are expected to win seats.

The NLD needs at least 67 percent of the vote to win a majority. The government appears concerned that, despite its in-built constitutional advantage and control of the mass media and the election commission, the hostility in the electorate towards it will result in an NLD victory.

On Tuesday Thein Sein posted a four-minute Facebook video featuring the bloody violence in Egypt as the military regained control after the "Arab spring" of 2011. This was contrasted with tranquil scenes in Burma after the military moved to quasi-civilian rule in 2010, released Suu Kyi from 15 years of house arrest and rehabilitated the NLD in 2012.

The video carried an implicit message: by highlighting violence in a Muslim country, Thein Sein is warning that the military will resist any threat to the interests of the business clique it serves. Regardless of the election outcome, the armed forces commander will appoint all military and security ministers in the new government.



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