

# Burma's "democracy icon" seeks talks with military

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Following the sweeping victory of her National League for Democracy (NLD) in Burma's elections on Sunday, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is seeking working relations with the military, which will continue to control key levers of power.

Far from a new era of democracy opening up in Burma, the NLD will collaborate closely with the army to implement their joint agenda—further pro-market restructuring to attract foreign investment linked with a closer economic and strategic alignment with Washington and its allies.

Suu Kyi sent separate letters on Tuesday to the country's president Thein Sein, military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and parliamentary speaker Shwe Mann calling for talks with each of them "in the spirit of national reconciliation." Both the president and the army have congratulated the NLD on its win and indicated their willingness to meet.

Thein Sein, himself an ex-general, declared that "the government will respect and follow the people's choice and decision and work on transferring power peacefully according to the timetable." His military-backed United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was virtually obliterated as voters took the opportunity to express their hostility to the military dictatorship that has ruled Burma since 1962.

The military's willingness to accept a peaceful transfer of power is bound up with a shift that has been underway since 2011. Already confronting a crippling economic blockade mounted by the US and its allies, the junta was concerned about its dependence on Chinese investment and was fearful of the consequences of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" against China.

In 2011, as it installed Thein Sein as president to present a civilian facade, the Burmese junta signalled

its willingness to accommodate to Washington by announcing the suspension of the massive Chinese-funded Myitsone dam project. The visit by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Burma in December 2011 marked the reestablishment of bilateral relations which was followed by an easing of sanctions and closer military-to-military ties.

Once again Washington's cynical use of "human rights" was on display. Overnight, Burma was transformed in American propaganda from "a rogue state" to a "developing democracy." The US was never concerned about the democratic rights of the Burmese people but in opening the country up to American corporations and, above all, drawing it into the "pivot to Asia" against China.

Under the 2008 constitution, the military still has considerable political powers, including to appoint the ministers for defence, interior and border affairs. A quarter of parliamentary seats are reserved for military appointees, effectively giving the army a veto over constitutional change. In addition, the military can resume full political control in the event of a vaguely defined national emergency. Suu Kyi is barred from becoming president because her children and deceased husband are foreign citizens.

However, the army's readiness to accept an NLD government is above all because both sides agree on all the fundamental issues. Suu Kyi and the NLD represent a faction of the Burmese bourgeoisie that resented being marginalised by the army's control over the nationally regulated economy and advocated an opening up to foreign investment and a turn to Washington and its allies.

Over the past four years, the military-backed government has collaborated closely with the NLD in carrying out its pro-market restructuring. Suu Kyi, as

the much-touted “icon of democracy”, has been particularly useful both in promoting Burma internationally to foreign investors and hoodwinking the Burmese population.

Suu Kyi was instrumental in defusing protests that erupted in 2012 against the Letpadaung copper mine—a joint project between one of the military’s conglomerates and a Chinese corporation. After the police failed to suppress the protests, the NLD leader stepped in and appealed for an end to opposition. While such deals had not been necessarily in the people’s interests, she said, they had to go ahead “so the country’s image will not be hurt” (see: “Burmese military cracks down on copper mine protest”).

The military clearly expect that the NLD government will accelerate the opening up of Burma to foreign investment—both by additional pro-market policies and encouraging a further dropping of US and international sanctions. The *Wall Street Journal* reported yesterday that “many US firms say investment is handicapped by American sanctions against some of the country’s businessmen”—particularly those closely associated with the military.

NLD officials this week sounded out the White House about a surprise stop-over in Burma by President Obama as part of his travels to South East Asia next week. Washington’s response to the election result has been cautious, however. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel described it as “a hell of a start” but added “now comes the hard part”—that is, consolidating a regime in line with US geo-political plans.

With counting still continuing, the NLD appears to be on course to achieve a comfortable parliamentary majority. Suu Kyi has already indicated that she wants an all-inclusive government for “national reconciliation”—in other words, either directly or indirectly including elements of the military. Australian academic Sean Turnbull, who is an adviser to Suu Kyi, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the NLD would retain some of the present government’s policies. A foreign consultant went further saying: “We’d like to see some key people in the current [military] government retained, at least during the transition period.”

Undoubtedly, these are topics that Suu Kyi will canvas in her discussions with the current president and military leaders. Win Htein, a senior NLD member and

Suu Kyi advisor, told the media on Tuesday that the party’s strategy for building relations with the army was “top secret.” He added: “It’s not something we can discuss now. It is a very sensitive issue matter and we have to respect the feelings of those who have lost.”

The most sensitive issue in NLD-army relations is not the hurt feelings of defeated military candidates, but rather the reaction of voters who supported the NLD believing that it would put an end to the military’s oppressive rule. The NLD’s determination to consolidate relations with the army is above all directed against the working class. As it implements its pro-market agenda, the new government will increasingly rely on the security forces to suppress any resistance to its attacks on living standards.



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