

Burmese opposition collaborates with military on “transition”

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In the wake of Burma’s November 8 election, National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi has begun talks with senior military and government figures to facilitate “national reconciliation” as her party prepares to form the next administration.

With 82.9 percent of the vote count completed, the NLD has won the overwhelming majority of seats up for election. This gives it a clear majority in the parliament, where 25 percent of the seats are reserved for military appointees. The latest estimates give the NLD 255 seats in the 440-member lower house and at least 135 seats in the 224-member upper house.

Despite the NLD’s majority, Suu Kyi is seeking working relations with the military junta that has ruled the country since 1962. She met on Sunday with the lower house chairman Shwe Mann, a former general, who lost his seat at this month’s election. “She congratulated me for accepting the election result early and comforted me,” he said in a Facebook posting, with a photo of the two together smiling.

According to Reuters, Shwe Mann said Suu Kyi asked him for assistance during the transition period—the NLD is unlikely to take office until next March. Suu Kyi is also due to meet President Thein Sein, another ex-general, and military commander-in-chief Min Aung Hliang after the election results are finalised this week.

The willingness of the generals to accept an NLD-led government flows from the junta’s shift since 2011 away from close ties with China and toward Washington. In return, the US eased some crippling economic sanctions on Burma, enabling the Thein Sein regime to start opening up the country to Western investment.

The change of course was in line with the pro-US

orientation of the NLD, which represents sections of the Burmese bourgeoisie whose interests were obstructed by the army’s domination of key sections of the economy. Over the past four years, Suu Kyi has collaborated closely with the military-backed government and functioned as its roving ambassador, encouraging foreign investment, an end to sanctions and closer diplomatic ties with the US and its allies.

While Shwe Mann, Thein Sein and Aung Hliang have promised a peaceful transition, the military remains determined to safeguard its interests, particularly its substantial business empires. The concern of the generals is not Suu Kyi and the NLD leadership, but working people and their raised expectations of greater democratic rights and improved living standards following the election.

Under the 2008 constitution, the military has kept key levers of power in its hands, including the appointment of the ministers for defence, interior and border affairs. By reserving 25 percent of parliamentary seats for its appointees, the military has ensured that it has a veto over all changes to the constitution, which require a 75 percent vote in favour.

Suu Kyi will reportedly hold talks with Thein Sein and Aung Hliang about possible constitutional changes. At present, she cannot assume the presidency due to a clause banning those with close family connections to foreigners—her children are British citizens. Any constitutional changes, however, are likely to be purely cosmetic as the NLD is not prepared to mount a direct challenge to the military.

Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, Ko Ni, a lawyer on the NLD’s constitutional reform committee, complained: “Once the military ruled the country by force and by arms. Now the military is ruling the country by the 2008 constitution.” He suggested that

the NLD should ignore the current constitution and pass a new one via a simple 51 percent majority vote in parliament.

The article noted, however, that no other NLD representatives supported such a confrontational approach. “Some dismissed it angrily. All essentially echoed... [the] view that ‘we are now playing [by] the guidelines of the 2008 constitution,’” it stated. In other words, the new NLD-led government will abide by the rules and strictures laid down by the military.

The old parliament, along with the government, will continue in place for months. It met yesterday and is scheduled to deal with major economic “reforms,” including the replacement of the 100-year-old Companies Act by the Myanmar Companies Act, which will modernise corporate structures, particularly with regard to foreign shareholdings in Burmese companies. Also expected are further changes to the finance and banking sectors.

Differences could emerge, particularly over the allocation of funds in the budget to be decided by the current parliament. The military, which has enjoyed lavish funding in the past, is unlikely to adopt a policy of austerity—for itself at least—in the upcoming budget.

Nevertheless, the NLD and the current government agree on pro-market restructuring to encourage foreign corporations to use the country as a cheap labour platform. In August, the regime set the minimum eight-hour wage at \$US2.80, barely above the international poverty line of \$2 a day, in order to allow Burma to be competitive with countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Bangladesh.

An Australian adviser to the NLD, Sean Turnell, told *Bloomberg* on November 11 that the new government will step up this program. “The broader reform process—of re-orientating Myanmar to not just a market economy, but one based on property rights, rule of law, fiscal prudence, monetary stability—will significantly accelerate.”

Moreover, all sections of the country’s ruling elite—the military and the NLD—will come together as these policies widen the gulf between rich and poor, undermine living standards and produce opposition and resistance from the working class and rural poor. In any confrontation between the next NLD government and working people, the army will unerringly side with the former.



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