

Suu Kyi holds transition talks with Burmese military

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National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi met with the most senior members of Burma's military last week in the capital Naypyidaw. The purpose of the closed-door talks was to cement a power-sharing arrangement between the two factions of the ruling elite when the NLD forms the new government early next year.

The NLD won an overwhelming majority in national elections last month allowing it to install its nominee as president in late March. Suu Kyi is excluded from holding the top office by a provision of the military's 2008 Constitution but has declared that she will nevertheless determine the new government's policies.

Suu Kyi met separately on December 2 with outgoing President Thein Sein, who is an ex-general, and with military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. Last Friday she had talks with former military chief and State Peace and Development Council chairman, Than Shwe, who was the junta's strongman from 1992 to 2011 and still wields considerable influence behind the scenes.

Both sides have remained silent on the substance of the talks, in order to keep the population in the dark over the close collaboration between Suu Kyi and the military. The vast majority of voters repudiated the military-backed party at the polls and supported the NLD in the hope of a better life, democratic rights and justice for the decades of abuses suffered under military rule.

Having raised expectations, the NLD, as well as the military, is concerned over the potential for social unrest. A senior NLD official who was in the meeting with Thein Sein told the media that the emphasis was on maintaining "stability between now and [the] time when the current government's term is over."

After the meeting between Suu Kyi and Than Shwe,

the former dictator's grandson released minutes quoting his grandfather as saying "after winning the election, it's the reality we have to accept—that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will be Burma's future leader."

The military's embrace of Suu Kyi and the NLD follows decades of enmity and distrust in the wake of the brutal military crackdown on mass protests and strikes in 1988. In those tumultuous events, Suu Kyi and the NLD played the critical role in blocking a revolutionary settling of accounts with the military. As the junta was tottering, Suu Kyi stepped in to call off the protests and urge people to accept the military's bogus offer of elections.

Suu Kyi and the NLD were just as terrified of the 1988 mass movement as the military. The junta restabilised its rule and repudiated NLD's victory in the 1990 election. Even though Suu Kyi did not challenge the junta's actions, she was kept under house arrest out of fear that she would become the focus of another social upheaval that the NLD could not control.

In the wake of the 1990 election, the junta has confronted a virtual economic blockade by the US and its allies and was compelled to rely heavily on Chinese investment and aid. While posing as the champion of democratic rights, the NLD, which was banned, represented sections of the ruling elite whose interests were marginalised by the military's domination of economic life.

The junta's shift in orientation was driven by the country's deepening economic crisis in the wake of the 2008 global financial breakdown, and the threat posed by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" directed against China. The junta was acutely aware that its close ties with Beijing and its status as a "rogue state" could become the pretext for US provocations and interventions.

Moreover, the large inflows of Chinese capital, mainly directed to resource extraction and infrastructure projects, had caused major imbalances, compounding the impact of the country's economic isolation. The currency appreciated, adversely affecting the economy overall. Unable to sell on the international markets, agricultural products were dumped locally, driving down prices and bankrupting farmers.

Having suppressed opposition protests led by monks in 2007, the junta was increasingly fearful of social unrest getting out of control. Suu Kyi shared that fear, warning in September 2011 of an "Arab-style" uprising and offering to work with the military to "manage change... through negotiation."

As part of its carrot and stick approach to the junta, the Obama administration had already been putting out diplomatic feelers. Its concern was not with the democratic rights of the Burmese people, but to take Burma out of China's orbit.

When the junta signalled its willingness to shift foreign policy by shutting down a major Chinese dam project in September 2011, the US rapidly moved to normalise relations. Shortly after Obama formally announced the "pivot" in November 2011, Hillary Clinton became the first US Secretary of State to visit Burma in decades.

Overnight, as corporations lined up to take advantage of investment opportunities, Burma ceased being a pariah state, and was hailed in the West as "a developing democracy." While retaining control of key levers of power, the military and the NLD came together to economically open up the country and re-orient foreign policy to Washington. The junta found Suu Kyi very useful as an unofficial ambassador at large, burnishing the country's new "democratic" image.

Differences nevertheless remain and were undoubtedly the subject of haggling in last week's talks between Suu Kyi and top military figures. While the military is prepared to concede a leading role to the NLD, it retains control of the key security ministries and has an effective veto over constitutional changes. The top brass has no intention of allowing a civilian government to meddle in military affairs and will seek to ensure immunity from prosecution for the junta's many crimes.

The military also wants to protect and expand its vast

business empires. From 2009 to 2012, the military prepared for pro-market reforms by privatising assets and allowed the establishment of private banks. But it ensured that the state assets largely ended up in the hands of the military or its associates. For its part, the NLD will want to rein in the army's economic power and open up business opportunities for entrepreneurs not connected to the army.

Both factions of the Burmese ruling class want to prevent the emergence of popular opposition to the deepening social polarisation that will inevitably be produced by the transformation of Burma into a new cheap labour platform.

In the name of "national reconciliation," Suu Kyi has already made abundantly clear that she will not challenge the military's prerogatives. Explaining why she had met with her former jailer Than Shwe, she declared that she wanted "all-inclusive collaboration, including with the Tatadaw [army]."



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