

Sordid horse-trading over next Burmese president

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The installation of Burma's new parliament, or Assembly of the Union, last week set the stage for a new round of sordid wheeling and dealing between the military and the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, to share out positions and power.

The NLD overwhelmingly won the November 8 national election by exploiting the deep popular hostility to the military junta that has ruled the country with an iron fist for decades. The NLD won 77 percent of the seats up for election, reducing the military-backed United Solidarity Development Party (USDP) to a parliamentary rump.

The military, however, still wields considerable power under the constitution, which it drew up. The ministerial posts of defence, interior minister and border control, as well as 25 percent of all parliamentary seats, are reserved for the military. As a result, the generals wield a veto over any constitutional amendment, which requires a super-majority of 75 percent plus one in parliament.

While the new legislature's installation was accompanied by widespread celebration, reflecting popular aspirations for democratic rights and decent living standards, the NLD has been holding closed-door meetings with the military to work out a deal to install Suu Kyi as president. Under the constitution, she is barred from holding the post because two close relatives—namely her children—hold foreign citizenship.

During the election, Suu Kyi declared that if the NLD won she would be the ultimate decision making authority, even if she did not become president. Now she is seeking a deal with the military to nullify the constitutional block on her presidency in return for giving the generals a greater say in parliament and the government.

The talks are clearly highly sensitive. Any exposure of their content threatens not only to upset the horse-trading between Suu Kyi and the generals, but tarnish her carefully-contrived image as a champion of democracy. In the lead-up to her meeting on January 25 with the head of the military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the NLD issued a decree announcing that no-one except party chairperson Suu Kyi was authorised to comment on “policies and transition issues.”

The NLD has already signalled its willingness to work with the military. While a member of Suu Kyi's inner circle, Win Myint, was elected to the influential position of lower house speaker last week, his deputy is T. Khun Myat, a USDP parliamentarian who served in the Office of the Attorney General under the military junta.

Last Friday, the NLD appointed Shwe Mann, former USDP head, to lead a powerful new legal advisory committee in parliament.

Two senior NLD members told the *New York Times* on Friday that party officials had offered senior government posts to the military as part of a deal to allow Suu Kyi to become president. On Sunday, Sky Net and Myanmar National Television declared that “positive results could come out of the negotiation for the suspension of constitution article 59(f)” that blocks Suu Kyi's presidency.

While the outcome is still undecided, no one should be surprised by Suu Kyi's willingness to establish close working relations with those who for decades held her under house arrest, banned the NLD and persecuted its members.

Suu Kyi and the NLD represent factions of the Burmese ruling elites whose interests were sidelined by the military's domination of the country's economy. While the military turned to China for aid and

investment, as a result of international sanctions imposed after its brutal crackdown on mass protests in 1988, the NLD advocated an orientation to the US and its allies, and an opening up of the country to Western investment.

By 2010, however, the junta faced a mounting economic and political crisis. Chinese investment in resource extraction and infrastructure had allowed the generals to enrich themselves, but also created severe economic imbalances, enraged traditional landowners and done little to ease rising levels of unemployment.

At the same time, the Obama administration had initiated its “pivot to Asia,” aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling China militarily. Its carrot-and-stick approach to Burma involved offers to ease sanctions combined with threats of further punitive measures. In September 2011, the junta signalled its shift toward Washington by suspending the multi-billion dollar Chinese Myitsone dam project.

In December 2011, shortly after Obama formally announced the “pivot,” US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Burma to establish closer ties. From being a pariah state on a par with North Korea, Burma was suddenly hailed as “a developing democracy.” The only change was that the junta, which still held the reins of power, had moved closer to Washington.

Suu Kyi and the NLD provided the necessary “democratic” window-dressing. While it had boycotted the 2010 elections, the NLD was allowed to enter parliament through by-elections in 2012. Suu Kyi, the “democracy icon,” functioned as a roving ambassador for the military-controlled government, arguing for the removal of international sanctions.

The military, however, is determined to ensure its prerogatives and substantial business interests are protected when the NLD forms the next government from April 1. If the generals are to allow Suu Kyi to assume the presidency, they are going to insist on further political safeguards in the form of senior government positions.

Senior General Hlaing has already placed more senior officers into the national parliament—27 of whom hold the rank of major general, brigadier general or full colonel, including those trained in economic and public administration. In addition, key officers have been installed in important posts in the national and

provincial bureaucracies.

The collusion between Suu Kyi and the military is an ominous warning to the working class. The new NLD government will be ruthless in ramming through the pro-market restructuring demanded by international finance capital, and will not hesitate to use the security forces to suppress any resistance to its agenda.

The overriding fear in ruling circles is of a rebellion by the country’s working class and oppressed masses. On the last day of the old parliament, outgoing President Thein Sein, himself an ex-general, declared that everything he did was to ensure that Burma’s transition did not follow the path of the “Arab Spring.” In doing so, he echoed the words of Suu Kyi in the wake of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia 2011, when she called for change and warned against an “Arab style” uprising in Burma.



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