

New Burmese president installed amid tensions with the military

John Roberts
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Burma's (Myanmar) parliament, the Assembly of the Union, on Tuesday formally elected the country's new president and two vice-presidents, who will take up office and lead the new government from April 1.

The new president is Htin Kyaw, a close confidante of National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi. He will replace Thein Sein, a former general who led the military-backed United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government that was routed in last November's national elections.

Suu Kyi, who has said she will run the government through her presidential nominee, was excluded from the presidency by the country's constitution because her two children have foreign citizenship. The NLD leader will choose the cabinet ministers, with the exception of the three important posts reserved for the military—defence, border security and the interior.

Htin Kyaw has two key qualifications for the presidency. He is loyal to Suu Kyi and will not unduly upset the military. He has known Suu Kyi from childhood and has longstanding family connections with the NLD. He is not a well-known political figure. Until his selection as the NLD's presidential candidate, he had not made a public political speech.

A trained economist, Htin Kyaw worked in the junta's foreign economic relations department, where he served as deputy director before resigning in 1992 to assist Suu Kyi. He played no significant role in the mass protest and strike movement in 1988 that shook the foundations of military rule.

Right up until the last moment, Suu Kyi had been seeking to cut a deal with the military that would allow her to assume the presidency. Following last year's election, she held three closed-door meetings with military chief Min Aung Hlaing and offered additional cabinet posts to the military, in return for a

constitutional fix to remove or temporarily suspend the clause excluding her from the presidency.

Last December, Suu Kyi met with the former military dictator Than Shwe and assured him that she would not focus on the past—that is, she would not pursue the military for its crimes including the brutal suppression of the 1988 uprising. In turn, Than Shwe endorsed her as “Burma's future leader.”

The military's stance has since hardened. On March 9, a senior NLD upper house member told the media: “[Suu Kyi] believed that she would be able to work with the military, but after the last meeting with the commander-in-chief [Hlaing], she realised that she cannot negotiate with them.”

The differences between the NLD and the generals are routinely presented in the international media as a conflict between “democracy” and the autocratic military. In reality, the two sides represent competing factions of the country's ruling elite, each intent on defending their class interests.

Suu Kyi and the NLD speak for layers of the Burmese bourgeoisie whose interests were marginalised by the military's domination of the economy and advocated a turn to the US and the opening up of the country to Western investment.

As the Obama administration implemented its confrontational “pivot to Asia” against China, the junta tilted its foreign policy away from Beijing and toward Washington. It released Suu Kyi from house arrest in 2011, allowed carefully-managed elections and initiated a raft of pro-market reforms to encourage foreign investment.

Suu Kyi collaborated with the military, serving as its de facto ambassador to present Burma as a “developing democracy” that is open for business. Nevertheless, sharp differences remain. The military is prepared to

allow the NLD to formally assume power but is determined to keep it on a tight leash.

The military not only has significant economic interests of its own. It is fearful that the NLD will not be able to contain the popular opposition that will inevitably emerge to the government's pro-market agenda. The military's control over the defence and interior ministries ensures that it can intervene directly to suppress any social unrest.

Significantly, the interior ministry has sweeping powers over government at all levels. Its General Administration Department handles coordination and communication for all ministries and controls appointments to all regional and state-level government bodies, as well as for thousands of towns and villages.

The manner in which the president and vice-presidents were chosen also ensured that the army would have its nominee in a key political post. The military's choice of hardliner Myint Swe, who was elected vice-president on Tuesday, is particularly ominous. He headed Than Shwe's feared military intelligence and oversaw the violent suppression of the 2007 "Saffron" protests of Buddhist monks. He is still subject to US sanctions.

The NLD's choice of Henry Van Thio for the second vice-presidential post indicates that Suu Kyi and her party will continue to make concessions to the military. Van Thio is an ex-army major with close ties to one of the junta's business cronies. As an ethnic Chin, he was also installed to make a pitch for support from the parliamentary representatives of the country's various ethnic minorities.

Tensions between the NLD and military will continue. The army has a long list of demands, including that its officers be appointed as chief ministers in Arakan, Shan and Kachin states, as well as the city of Rangoon, the centre of the nation's economic activity.

The generals are also acutely sensitive to any exposure of their corrupt practices and many other crimes. Last month the entire military lower house delegation stood up in protest at allegations by NLD members that the Thein Sein administration had mismanaged contracts.

The gesture was an obvious threat to pull the plug on the limited democratic reforms if the NLD did not drop the issue. One NLD member told the media: "We were

scared when the military stood up ... my heart just dropped ... The situation was very tense."



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