New civilian government installed in Burma

John Roberts, Peter Symonds
12 April 2016

The installation of a new president and government in Burma on March 31 has been hailed in the international press and by the United States and its allies as the unfolding of democracy. President Barack Obama issued a statement declaring that it "represents a historic milestone in the country's transition to a democratically elected, civilian-led government." He praised the country's people, institutions and leaders" for ensuring "a peaceful transition of power."

In reality, the new National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government, in which the military still hold major levers of power, is the result of closed-door wheeling and dealing between NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and top army generals. It has nothing to do with the democratic rights of the Burmese people.

Obama has given his stamp of approval to the new regime not because it represents a step toward democracy, but because it will be more oriented to Washington than toward Beijing. Indeed, Obama counts the shift by the Burmese junta away from China in 2011 as a significant achievement of his "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

However, tensions remain between the military and the NLD that are evident in the formation of the new government. While the military embraced the NLD's policies of reorienting to the West and opening up to foreign investors, the generals are determined to prevent civilian interference in their affairs, preserve their substantial economic interests and retain the ability to intervene politically should the need arise.

The junta drew up the present constitution to ensure that Suu Kyi could not assume the powerful post of president, which has gone to her nominee and close collaborator Htin Kway. Suu Kyi and the NLD, which represents sections of the Burmese ruling elite who were marginalised economically and politically under the junta, have sought to expand their role in the government.

Suu Kyi has taken on four key ministerial posts—foreign affairs, education, electric power and energy and minister of the president's office—in the 18-member cabinet. As foreign minister, she will have a seat on the powerful National Defence and Security Council (NDSC). The council remains under the control of the military, which appoints six of its 11 members.

The constitution gives the NDSC sweeping powers, including exercising legislative, executive and judicial powers during a declared state of emergency. It also has the right to recommend names for the president to grant amnesties, and thus might be used to challenge cabinet decisions on the release of political prisoners.

The military has a strong presence in the cabinet and government overall. Three serving lieutenant-generals appointed by armed forces commander General Min Aung Hlaing fill the posts of defence, home affairs and border affairs ministers. Under the constitution, the military also nominates its appointees to 25 percent of parliamentary seats.

To further placate the military, Suu Kyi has appointed two retired generals—Aung Ko as religious affairs minister and Thein Swe as labour, immigration and environmental minister. Both were members of the military-dominated United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that was routed in national elections last November.

In an interview with *Voice of America*, Aung Ko defended the USDP government's promotion of Burmese Buddhist supremacism and anti-Muslim chauvinism. He said the regime's "over support" for Buddhism had been misunderstood: while Buddhists were "full citizens," religious minorities were not "deliberately oppressed" and the country's Muslims were the largest group of "associate citizens."

Aung Ko's reference to Muslims as second-class

© World Socialist Web Site

citizens provoked outrage inside Burma and overseas. The systematic discrimination and persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority, many of whom are denied citizenship, permeates the entire political establishment, including the NLD. Not accidently, the NLD ran no Muslim candidates in last November's election.

The appointment of ex-general Thein Swe as immigration minister is a clear concession to the military. The old parliament rejected the military's demands that the immigration post be reserved for a general. Suu Kyi has de facto conceded the position to the military, and, with it, control of Rohingya refugees.

Of the remaining cabinet posts, four have gone to NLD members who are trusted Suu Kyi loyalists. Another five have been allocated to so-called independents, business figures or technocrats. The remaining position of ethnic affairs minister has been given to the Mon National Party.

To try to consolidate her position in this unstable, divided cabinet, Suu Kyi has moved to establish a new cabinet-level post of "state counsellor"—in effect, a de facto prime minister with wide powers to consult the parliamentary and executive branches of government. The upper house of parliament on March 31 voted 137 to 70 to create the position, against the opposition of the military, and specifically nominated Suu Kyi for the job. The lower house passed the legislation last week despite military nominees standing in protest.

Since releasing her from house arrest in 2010, the military has forged close working relations with Suu Kyi, who has been systematically promoted by the US and its allies as "an icon of democracy." Under the previous USDP government, she served as a virtual ambassador at large, promoting Burma to foreign investors and pushing for the removal of international sanctions.

The generals, however, fear being marginalised, with their interests threatened, if Suu Kyi emerges as the country's de facto political leader within Burma and on the world stage. Commenting to the *Wall Street Journal* about the installation of Suu Kyi as state counsellor, former Lieutenant General Khin Zaw Oo warned: "The relationship between the NLD and the military will be impacted."

Having assumed her new role, Suu Kyi announced that the hundreds of political prisoners arrested under the military and still in detention would be freed. Last Friday, the police dropped 199 cases against political activists around the country. Those freed included dozens of student activists in central Tharrawaddy who had been detained for more than a year over an education protest in March 2015.

While the decision to release the political prisoners will further exacerbate tensions with the military, Suu Kyi is desperate to shore up her image as "democrat" amid criticism of her close collaboration with the generals. She needs to muster her support as the government's next steps, particularly in extending pro-market restructuring, are likely to be highly unpopular.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site