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Democracy wins in Myanmar with new leader

Doug Bandow

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In 2010 Myanmar's military junta, misnamed the State Peace and Development Council, began a controlled move to limited democracy. The process was highly imperfect and there has been backsliding of late.

Nevertheless, national elections were held last week. The poll was flawed but largely free.

Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy annihilated the regime's Union Solidarity and Development Party, winning 78 percent of the seats. Voters rejected many top military and USDP leaders.

The losers were surprised that the people gave them so little credit for the end of dictatorial rule. "All of our calculations were wrong," said one. Yet this happened before.

After ruthlessly suppressing pro-democracy demonstrations the military regime sought to improve its image with an election in 1990. The NLD similarly won about 80 percent of the legislative seats. The embarrassed junta promptly voided the results, suppressed protests and kept Suu Kyi under house arrest for most of the last quarter century.

No one expects a similar response this time, however. The military made a far more calculated move toward democracy, writing the constitution to guarantee its influence and preclude Suu Kyi from taking the presidency.

The military also achieved one of its most important objectives, balancing against its neighbor China, whose embrace had become suffocating. Moreover, after inviting in the West the military could not easily return to isolation, the almost certain result of any electoral repudiation.

However, is the military prepared to allow reform to move forward?

Suu Kyi and the NLD face extraordinary challenges, made more difficult by people's high expectations. People across Myanmar voted for The Lady, but she has never held office or participated in the give and take of politics.

She faces what remains an authoritarian state. Human Rights Watch recently warned that “the reform process has stalled.”

Amnesty International also noted continuing ethnic violence and attacks on the stateless Rohingya, reporting: “Freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly remained severely restricted, with scores of human rights defenders, journalists and political activists arrested and imprisoned.”

Thus, much must be done. Civil and political freedoms must be further expanded. All members of parliament should be elected. Peaceful protests should be protected. Judges must be made independent and fair criminal procedures need to be established. Journalists should be free to report and opine.

Moreover, power must be fully vested in civilians. Today, the Ministries of Defense, Border Affairs, and Home Affairs are formally under military control, while the army has seeded its personnel throughout the nominally civilian bureaucracy and judiciary.

Fundamental economic reform also is necessary. The Economic Freedom of the World index places Myanmar at a dismal 146 of 157 nations. Little progress has been made toward a market economy. Opined Romain Caillaud of FTI Consulting: “We are at the point where a lot of people are very negative.” The new government must make Burma attractive to domestic entrepreneurs and foreign investors alike.

Conflict continues with a number of ethnic groups. Peace requires allowing substantial self-government, creating trust after decades of military atrocities, and reintegrating ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar institutions.

Riots and massacres have continued in Rakhine State targeting the Muslim Rohingya, encouraged by radical Buddhist nationalists. The national government must protect vulnerable groups from organized violence.

Standing in the way of real change is the military-drafted constitution, which requires a 75 percent vote in parliament to amend the constitution, while guaranteeing 25 percent of the seats to the military. Forging a relationship with the army while edging it aside will require extraordinary sensitivity.

Suu Kyi also must overcome her own limitations. Although a heroic figure who has suffered much for the cause of democracy, she has failed to delegate and develop a broad leadership within the NLD. Even U.S. officials describe her style as imperious.

And her plan for governing sounds anything but inclusive: “The president will be told exactly what he can do. I make all the decisions, because I am the leader of the winning party.” Whoever Suu Kyi chooses, she added, will understand “perfectly well he will have no authority.”

It has been more than a half century since the people of Myanmar have been able to rule themselves. They face tough questions of media freedom, political reform, economic liberalization, ethnic conflict, military accountability, and more.

For too long the Burmese people could only look to the future and hope for change. Today, they have a chance to enjoy the opportunities that the rest of us take for granted. Hopefully now, after decades of conflict, the future finally has arrived for Myanmar.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute.