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US Encouraged About Burma Reforms

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The United States sees opportunities for greater political reform in Burma, following the opposition's decision to join parliament. U.S. offers of assistance have been tied to further political change in the Southeast Asian country.

Burma's opposition National League for Democracy has taken newly won seats in an assembly where one-quarter of the posts are reserved for the military and a large majority of others are held by Burma's military-backed ruling party.

It marks the first public office for Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who dropped threats to boycott parliament over an oath pledging to safeguard a constitution drafted by the military.

U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said it is a hopeful sign that pro-democracy activists and the government can work together to keep up the momentum of political change in Burma.

"We want to see them work constructively with the government. We want to see the progress continue. And in terms of any rolling back, I think we are going to keep a close eye on the progression of these reforms in Burma," said Toner.

In easing some U.S. sanctions against Burma, Toner said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was very clear that Washington will match action for action as further changes are made.

Asia analyst Doug Bandow of the Washington-based Cato Institute said the voices of opposition lawmakers in Burma's parliament are far more important than the oath they took to get there.

"The longer they go, the harder it is to put it all back in, and to my mind the oath was not the battle to fight. What worries me most is that you have got these hard-line generals, I presume, in the background, who really do not like any of this stuff, that what you want to convince them is that it is safe to proceed. Now if I am Aung San Suu Kyi, I want to change the constitution, but I do not make that front and center today," said Bandow.

Political change in Burma is part of this week's talks between U.S. and Chinese officials in Beijing. Bandow said the decision by Burma's military to allow greater freedoms of speech and assembly appears based, in part, on tensions with China, including Burma's decision to suspend construction of a \$3-billion Chinese-backed hydroelectric dam because of environmental concerns raised by civilian activists.

"Clearly part of it is this sense that the only real firm support they have is China. It is right next door. They have run into these issues about this dam. They have had the war in Burma

that has pushed people into China. China has gotten very upset. I think they suddenly say, 'Maybe we need a little more maneuvering room. So if we are engaged with the U.S. and the E.U., suddenly there are other places we can go, more money coming in,'" said Bandow.

When Aung San Suu Kyi's party won 40 of the 45 seats available in a parliamentary by-election, the United States eased a number of sanctions. Some senior Burmese officials and parliament members now will be allowed to visit the United States.

Washington has lifted its ban on the export of U.S. financial services and investment, and is preparing to nominate an ambassador to Rangoon, along with a full U.S. Agency for International Development mission and a normal country program for the United Nations Development Program.