

comment & analysis

DESPITE LANDSLIDE WIN, NLD IN A PRECARIOUS SITUATION

Unresolved questions from Myanmar's landmark election



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Seldom do events in South-east Asia capture the attention of the world the way Myanmar's Nov 8 election did.

Global headlines used terms such as a "new era" and described the event as the rarest of political transitions — the peaceful transfer of power from an authoritarian military government to civilian rule.

There is no question that the strong victory by the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) marks a symbolically powerful moment and grants the NLD meaningful leverage to shape the future of the country.

Yet, the 2008 Constitution also guarantees the military significant powers independent of election results. Given this, we argue that the election should be seen less as a contest for who rules the country, and more as a contest to establish the basic parameters of power sharing between the military and the NLD.

This places the NLD in a precarious situation: It can move very cautiously and risk disappointing hopeful domestic and international audiences, or it can act decisively and risk antagonising the nervous military and endangering hard-won democratic space.

The election left many key questions about the future of Myanmar politics unresolved.

First, and most fundamentally, why did the NLD win by such a wide margin? Did voters vote for the NLD or against the military?

This question is important for what happens next. If voters simply supported the NLD out of affection for Ms Suu Kyi — for which there is some evidence — what does that mean once she no longer leads the party?

Alternatively, if they voted for the NLD out of dissatisfaction with dec-

ades of corrupt, inefficient, abusive rule by the military, what will happen if the NLD proves incapable of improving the economy?

Will they view their former autocrats in a more favourable light, as some voters in Indonesia's most recent election did? In either case, for the NLD to sustain its gains in the face of economic struggles or Ms Suu Kyi's eventual departure, it will likely need to develop an identifiable platform and manage expectations.

Second, in the near term, will the power sharing arrangement between the military and the NLD prove to be sustainable? The NLD, whether fairly or not, will be judged on its ability to manage a government that it does not fully control.

This means that the NLD will have to work with the military, which puts Ms Suu Kyi and the NLD in a highly precarious position. The landslide victory brings with it massive expectations for change, both from domestic and international audiences.

Yet, Ms Suu Kyi, as a pragmatist and political realist, will recognise that she faces considerable constraints in her decision making, most notably in that she does not have the capacity to push through reforms that encroach too severely on the military's interests.

As such, two scenarios are possible. One is that the NLD, conscious of its need to work with the military, will be cautious in reforming in deference to the military. For this strategy to succeed, the NLD will need to temper the expectations of a country that expects momentous changes in line with the momentous election. Or risk losing support in future elections.

For example, will citizens abide by the military's continued domination of several key economic sectors?

A less likely possibility is that the NLD will respond to public dissatisfaction and attempt to engage in rapid reforms or mobilise support to reform the Constitution. This high-risk approach carries the danger of panick-



Myanmar Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD, whether fairly or not, will be judged on its ability to manage a government that it does not fully control. PHOTO: REUTERS

ing the military and triggering a coup.

As neighbouring Thailand demonstrates, perpetual political instability is a real possibility when a military's interests are disregarded and institutional safeguards to prevent interference are weak.

IS MYANMAR A DEMOCRACY?

Third, will the NLD be able to reform the country's notoriously ineffective bureaucratic structures to improve day-to-day governance and service delivery? This will prove challenging because formal control of the bureaucracy belongs to the military, via its constitutionally guaranteed control of the Ministry of Interior.

With nearly 80 per cent of senior bureaucrats coming from military backgrounds, working through indirect channels will likewise be difficult. Aside from potentially inhibiting the implementation of policy, a corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy is a major vulnerability for the NLD, given that for most citizens it is the primary day-to-day interface with the government.

Fourth, will Ms Suu Kyi manage the transition from being the symbolic face of opposition against military rule to being the political leader of a precarious coalition? Her former role seldom required the type of compromise that carried a risk of alienating supporters. She now faces the perfect storm

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of high expectations but limited formal power; her necessarily pragmatic decisions will rarely convince all.

As a final question, now that Myanmar has held a free and fair election where the ruling party has lost, should we call it a democracy?

While in some senses this is an “academic” question, semantics matter for policymakers, particularly those advocating for greater engagement with Myanmar. Critics such as Human Rights Watch criticised United States President Barack Obama's initial overtures to Myanmar as premature due to its continuing repression of political prisoners. Certainly, being able to call Myanmar a democracy would help alleviate these concerns.

While many contend that democracy is a matter of degree, others support an “either-or” distinction that privileges an alternation in power. Using the latter definition, the 2015 election constitutes a transition. Certainly, many non-democratic elements remain as part of the 2008 Constitution.

Perhaps we can only confidently say Myanmar is democratic if the NLD manages to survive a full term in office and compete in another free and fair election. The many open questions around Myanmar's political landscape warrant healthy scepticism, but we remain hopeful that enthusiasm generated through the election will indeed mark the beginning of a new era.

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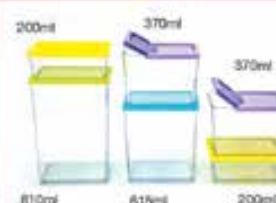
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