

## Myanmar in 2015: Some Major Developments

By **Obja Borah Hazarika**

The Economist voted Myanmar the "country of the year 2015" due to several improvements made in the nation. Indeed, there were several momentous events which marked the socio-cultural-political landscape of Myanmar in the year 2015; not least of all were the historic elections which took place on 8 November 2015 in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) was given an overwhelming mandate to rule the country. The elections were testimony of the intention of the erstwhile military rulers to bolster democracy in the country. Undoubtedly, the election and respect for the results this time around was commendable compared to the highhanded manner in which the NLD was treated when it had won the elections in 1988. The national election, which was yet another signal indicating the fruition of the transition from military rule to a democratic polity, was the major highlight of Myanmar in 2015 and was greatly welcomed by the world community at large.

### **National Elections**

One of the major implications of the results of the elections in which the NLD won nearly 80 per cent of the elected seats in Parliament is that it will have an outright majority in both legislative chambers and thus will be able to control law-making and choose the president. Another immediate implication is that the USDP which won only 41 seats, 8 percent of the legislature, was reduced to a fraction of what it won in the 2010 elections. This result was humiliating for the USDP despite the fact that the seats reserved for the military will still allow it to have a presence incompatible to its performance in the elections. Many high profile leaders of the USDP including Shwe Mann, the high-profile outgoing speaker; Htay Oo, acting head of the party; Wai Lwin, the ex-defence minister; Chief peace negotiator Aung Min. Such results imply that the populace of Myanmar have voted for change and want to sever all ties with the military past which was reflected in the USDP and its leaders, thus it was a major victory for democracy in the country.

The results also imply that the military still wins despite the failure of the USDP to perform well in the elections as the reserved seats for the military in the Parliament endow the military with a powerful say in the future course of the country with regard to matters including balancing China, engaging the US, the future course with India as well as ensuring that the economy of Myanmar takes into account the need to ensure the continued supply to bolster and boost the military which will allow it to remain an influential factor in the politics of Myanmar, thereby ensuring its continued importance and consequentially its indispensability. The overwhelming win by the NLD is of some concern to the military as it is worried about the NLDs links with the west and the implications which may include greater closeness between the West and Myanmar, a possibility which the Myanmar is skeptical of given long years of sanctions which the West slammed on Myanmar when the junta was in power.

The role of the military in ensuring a peaceful election process and subsequently accepting the defeat of the USDP and the win of the NLD bodes well for the future process in the Parliament. However, an antagonistic approach towards the NLD may endanger peaceful transition of power and future law-making in the country. If the military continues to respect the mandate of the people and support the NLD in its legislative processes, a constructive and meaningful relationship between the two foremost actors in the politics of Myanmar may emerge which will be the optimum condition for the future of the country. The NLD on its part must ensure that the military conceives of itself as playing a meaningful role in the political processes of the country as it could take a more confrontational approach if it perceives itself to be redundant. The NLD can ensure this by keeping in mind the military's concerns about preventing overt engagement with the West, among other apprehensions.

While the elections were just the first step in the direction of enabling democracy to take shape in the country, several provisions still remain which reek of authoritarianism. For instance, efforts to usher changes in the constitution prior to the elections to enable Suu Kyi to stand for President failed as well as other efforts to reduce the overwhelming powers of the military over the civilian process. The failure to change these rules implies that the NLD will face difficulties in governing the country as it will continue to be tied down by provisions which grant the military enormous powers relating to their control of 25% of seats of the 664-seat parliament and the need for a 75% vote for initiating any change in the constitution, which in effect gives the military a veto over the rest of the elected members.

The military also has control over portfolios like border, home and defence as well as the power to take control of the government in case of emergencies. The National Defense and Security Council of Myanmar, an 11-member body, six of whom are from the military, has the power to overrule any law which the NLD led Parliament may seek to legislate. Thus, the NLD despite winning an overwhelming majority faces such seemingly insurmountable challenges which will hinder its attempts at ushering change in Myanmar.

### **Reconciliation with Ethnic Groups**

Apart from the elections, the past year also saw some eventful developments with regard to the reconciliation process between the government and ethnic rebel groups of the country. On October 15, 2015, the government of Myanmar and eight rebel ethnic organisations signed a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) which was under negotiation since 2011. The NCA was signed with the aim of meeting the main demands of these ethnic armed groups with regard to federalism, autonomy and control over natural resources found in their native regions, among others. The NCA was a laudable achievement as it was for the first time that such an agreement was signed between a collective of ethnic armed groups and the ruling authority of Myanmar. However, some of the largest

rebel groups including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), refrained from signing the NCA. Moreover, the NCA does not require the ethnic groups to disarm and an agreement on the demands for a federal constitution also could not be reached which was one of the topmost concerns of the armed rebel groups. Thus, the peace process continues to remain glaringly precarious notwithstanding the NCA.

The ethnic minority parties recorded losses in the elections which was one of the most surprising outcomes given the fact that there are several ethnic based demands by minority groups in the country. Even in the upper house, which provides equal representation to the seven states and seven regions regardless of population, the ethnic minority party recorded losses. They also lost in their own state assemblies. The reasons behind such a loss could have been the proliferation of ethnic minority party thereby splitting the vote or the popularity of the NLD whose message of change resonated across the country, over and above more narrow propaganda.

Such loyalty shown by the ethnic minorities to the NLD will have major implications for the ethnic minority demands. First, the NLD is seen to be largely a party of the Burman party who are unsympathetic to the aspirations of the minority ethnic people. There is concern among the leaders of the ethnic minority groups whether the NLD representatives in Parliament will have the resolve or motivation to ensure decentralization which will allow the ethnic groups to have greater control over decisions affecting their lives and areas. There is also a concern with regard to the future of the peace process, in which the NLD was not deeply involved which makes its understanding of the issues of the ethnic communities doubtful. There is concern whether the NLD will be able to work with the military or if it will be suppressed by the military. There is also the worry that the NLD-military combine, if created, will be nothing but a Burman united front which will be less than supportive of the demands of ethnic minorities.

### **Rohingya Issue**

There were some disturbing developments in the past year with regard to communal tensions which have intermittently been flaring up in Myanmar since 2012 between Buddhists and the Muslim community of the Rohingya. The persecution of the minority Rohingyas led them to take to the seas in overcrowded boats in an attempt to find safer havens. They began reaching shores of neighbouring nations like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand but were being refused entry into these countries leading to a massive refugee crisis in the seas. On May 20, 2015, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand held a meeting regarding the plan of action on the status of thousands of starving Rohingyas who were arriving on their shores. They agreed to allow some of the Rohingyas entry while concurring that the root cause of the exodus needed to be solved with the involvement of the world community. The situation of the Rohingya population is rather dismal in Myanmar as they are not recognized as citizens and are thereby denied basic rights. They were even denied voting rights in the

November elections. The NLD party leader Suu Kyi's response towards the persecution faced by them was also not very encouraging. Preventing the repeat of clashes which have been a recurring affair between Rohingyas and Buddhists and the continuous persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar will be yet another apparently intractable challenge which the NLD faces.

### **Buddhist Nationalism**

Another major implication which arises from the election results is the future of Buddhist nationalism and its related issues in the country. During the campaign, there were repeated efforts to use Buddhist nationalist narratives for political ends by the USDP and in an attempt to win votes of the Buddhists, the USDP ruled parliament had even enacted four "protection of race and religion" laws championed by hardliner Buddhists of the MaBaTha, which want to promote Buddhism as a national religion and exterminate any other minority religions in the country, especially Muslims. The NLD had complained that religion was being misused by the NLD for electoral gains. The MaBaTha had accused Suu Kyi of being too soft on the Rohingya Muslims. The win recorded by the NLD despite such propaganda by the hardliners implies that they could not goad vast majority of the people to fall for the Buddhist nationalism rhetoric and this thereby means that the populace of Myanmar will support a solution to the communal tensions which have been a recurring menace in Myanmar without wanting the extermination, ouster or deportation of the Rohingya minorities, a solution which the MaBaTha has been promulgating. The NLD is faced with the task of limiting the Buddhist nationalist groups.

Thus, on the whole there were certain significant achievements in Myanmar's transition to democracy in the vein of the national elections which were held after a hiatus of 25 years and the NCA, both of which were no mean achievements for any country let alone one struggling to distance itself from over half a century of military rule. However, at the same time issues pertaining to ethnic insurgencies, communal tensions as well as the overwhelming role and powers of the military remain conspicuous challenges which the NLD is tasked with solving in the coming years.

### **India-Myanmar Relations**

There were several events which marked India-Myanmar relations in 2015, not the least of them all was the strike carried out by the Indian military in Myanmar on rebel camps. On 24 April 2015, nine militant groups of northeast India and Myanmar including the NSCN (Khaplang), Kamtapur Liberation Organization(KLO) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) faction led by Paresh Baruah, came together to form a new unified front called the United National Liberation Front of West South East Asia. Such a development led to fresh consternation in India and Myanmar regarding possibilities of renewed vigour of attacks of the concerned rebels groups on local people and government officials. Not much after the formation of the new combine of trans-nation rebel groups, on 8-9 June 2015, the Indian military which was closely communicating

with Myanmar, carried out two strikes on camps of NSCN (K) and KYKL (Meitei Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup) groups along the Nagaland and Manipur borders which resulted in significant casualties being inflicted on the insurgents on June 8-9, 2015. Myanmar and India have held such combined operations aimed at flushing out the rebel groups in their border areas in the past as well. For instance, Myanmar and India conducted a joint military operation "Operation Golden Bird" in 1995 in which the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), ULFA and KLO militants were attacked.

In July 2015, India and Myanmar announced a defence assistance program in which India will help modernize Burmese Army and Navy. It was also announced that India and Myanmar will cooperate in the field of IT and the two countries will work together in terms of training their military forces. Effective border management was another area in which India and Myanmar would cooperate on. Such cooperation was deemed necessary as both countries were keen on fighting terrorism and insurgent activity in all its forms and manifestations.

Other major achievements in India-Myanmar bilateral relations in the past year included the first India-Myanmar Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) meeting which was held in New Delhi on July 16, 2015. There were steps taken to enhance the existing air connectivity between the two countries. India also extended a \$500 million Line of Credit to the Government of Myanmar for development priorities. India and Myanmar also reiterated their commitment to enhance the regional and sub-regional cooperation under the BCIM-EC and the BIMSTEC framework. India also played an instrumental role in providing disaster relief support to Myanmar in response to widespread floods and landslides caused by Cyclone Komen.

Thus, there were certain major achievements in Myanmar with regard to its transition to democracy as well as in India-Myanmar relations in the past year. The NLD will benefit from international support in its endeavour to effect political change. India on its part is keen to cooperate with Myanmar which is resource rich and strategically very significant for India. It is hoped that the NLD will be able to deliver and ensure political plurality as well as social and communal harmony.

**(Obja Borah Hazarika** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Dibrugarh University, Assam. She can be reached at: obja11@gmail.com)