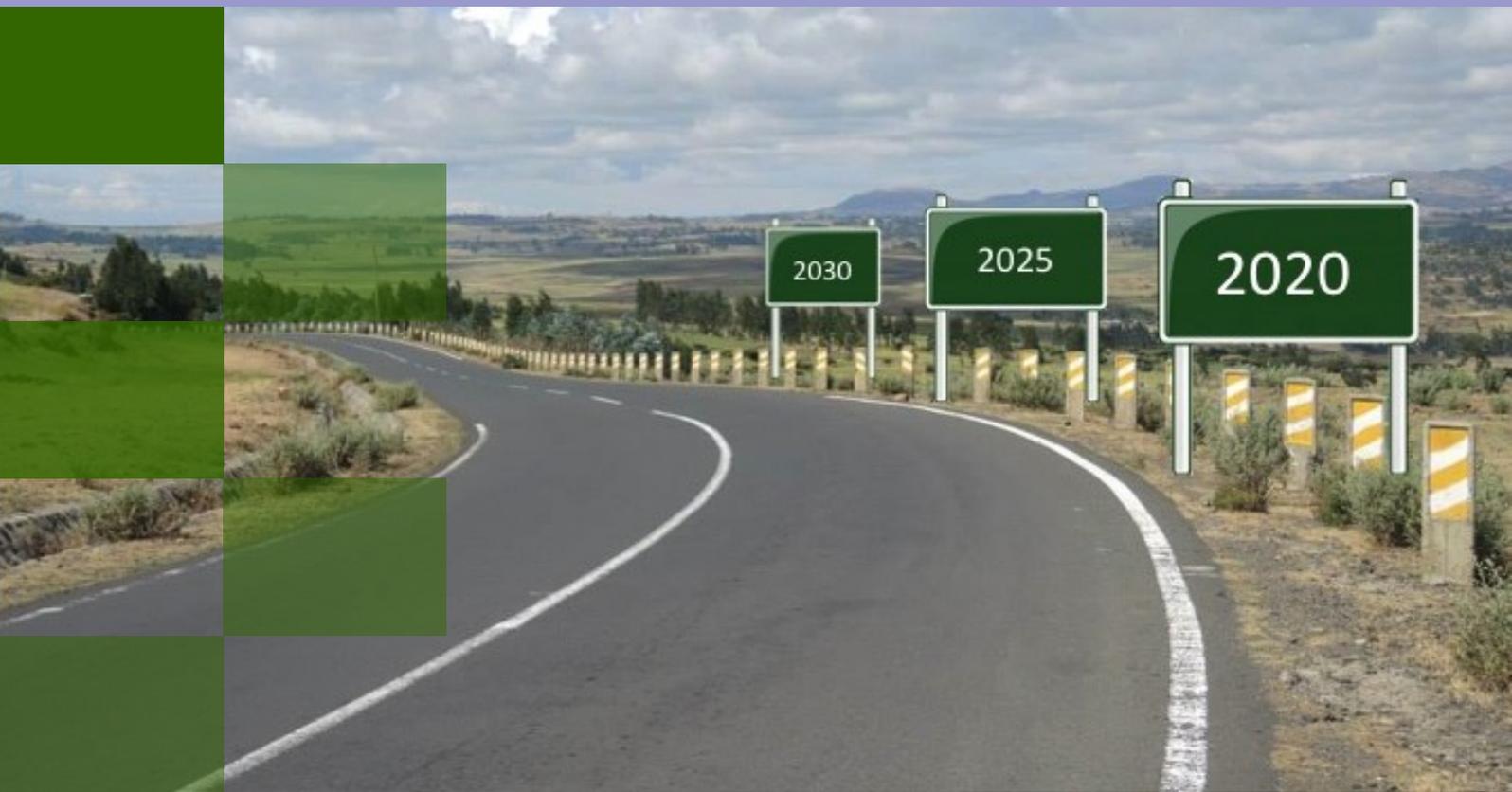


Trends. Threats. Projections

Myanmar 2016: What next for the NLD?

M. Mayilvaganan



March 2016



Myanmar 2016: What next for the NLD?

M. Mayilvaganan

Myanmar has witnessed significant political and socioeconomic changes during the last five years. Civilian leaders have emerged in a military dominated polity where policy decisions are made through the Parliament. With a GDP growth rate of 7.7 percent and an estimated \$74 billion in 2015, Myanmar is one of the rising economies today compared to being a least developed country few years ago. The daily life of the average citizen in Myanmar is better, aided by increasing investment, employment opportunities and new found personal freedom.

While there is widespread recognition within and internationally that the military (Tatmadaw) is the main driver of the current transition, yet there are big questions: Will the military permit triumphant National League for Democracy (NLD) to govern the country peacefully? Will the meaningful changes initiated in 2011 continue? Will Myanmar under NLD move towards a more inclusive and stable development progress? Will peace be finally achieved between the centre —Bamar dominated government—and the periphery—ethnic minorities, which control parts of the states in the border areas? Will NLD succeed in addressing the thorny issue of the religious minority Rohingyas? How will the relations between Myanmar and China develop under NLD regime?

I

Myanmar Today: A Short Introduction

Following the historic win, in November 2015 general election, on 1 February 2016 Myanmar began the historic parliament session, dominated by Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD for the first time. With the massive win, the NLD is also set to take over the presidency in April 2016. Thein Sein, currently the President, is expected to step down. Thein Sein, and his Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has been leading the transitional administration since 2011 that brought in reforms in a short duration almost after five decades of military reign.

After the 2015 electoral triumph, Suu Kyi immediately had called for national reconciliation; consequently she also initiated a reconciliation process by meeting the President Thein Sein and military's Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing. The future of NLD and Myanmar depends on the endurance of political reforms and national reconciliation is of paramount importance. Even though the military had orchestrated the on-going reforms and allowed progress through its proxy USDP, there are doubts whether the Establishment will extend the same support towards the newly elected NLD.

The NLD today is approaching cautiously all major national issues, including military and it appears that all major stakeholders are aware of each other's requirement and compulsion. This understanding and dependence might essentially shape the future outcomes and determine Myanmar's future path.

The NLD today is approaching cautiously all major national issues, including military and it appears that all major stakeholders are aware of each other's requirement and compulsion. This understanding and dependence might essentially shape the course of transition and Myanmar's future path.

II

The Road Ahead: Four Directions

Given the current developments in Myanmar, one could forecast the following four directions.

A. Tactical Understanding between the NLD and Military

Today, Suu Kyi and her NLD has generated a new hope and beginning for Myanmar. In reality, there are difficulties for the Myanmar's first entirely civilian-led government. Foremost, as Myanmar sails into "uncharted waters", the idea of a smooth democratic transfer of power is debatable. Even today, the bitter discontent of the 1990 elections lingers in the memory of the public where the victorious NLD was denied opportunity to govern the country. Managing the military and securing its support is the foremost challenge for NLD.

Regardless of its comfortable majority in the Parliament, the NLD will require working in tandem with the military and needs a power sharing arrangement with them. Military's powers are not confined to Parliament alone; the 2008 Constitution (scripted by the military) provides control over three key ministries - home affairs, defence and border affairs to the army chief apart from reserving 25 percent of the seats in Parliament for the Establishment. This can make it difficult for the NLD to propose any amendments to the constitution as it requires the approval of more than 75 percent of the members of House of Representatives (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw).

Such an arrangement is the only option that the NLD has today as it is impossible to keep the military away from politics. Besides, most of NLD's party members have no experience of public office. The NLD therefore is anticipated to go along with the military with some tactical understanding. Suu Kyi's meeting with the former Generals like Than Shwe and President Thein Sein shows the NLD's cognizance of current reality.

The military is also expected to allow the NLD to complete its terms and may even support Suu Kyi's candidature for presidency if not now, later by giving consent for necessary constitutional amendments to repeal the clause that prevents her now. By doing so, the military can not only take credit for letting Myanmar to move forward but also will allow it to retain its interests, power and continue to be a king maker.

Thus by adjusting to each other, both are likely to gain. This will work to the advantage of both NLD and the military - a clean image and charismatic leadership of NLD coupled with the military being the strongest force within Myanmar. This alludes to a possible adjustment with NLD politically and provides space for institution building. Unless, the military's interest and its status are not upset by the NLD, it may allow the NLD to govern the country. Once the military perceive that their interests are challenged it may reverse the transition and reforms.

B. Complex Peace

The most crucial question is whether the NLD coming to power will lead to a larger national reconciliation. An understanding with the military will offer space for the NLD to work towards an inclusive and stable democracy. However, the interplay of internal dynamics among three major parties - the NLD, military and the ethnic groups is of importance; interactions among these three are crucial in achieving peace. Even if the NLD wishes to forge reconciliation by bringing in meaningful decentralisation of power, and resource sharing, any flawed or rigged process could undermine the process and can the country back to armed struggle.

Even if some groups accept an agreed solution, others, possibly the splinter groups may fall back on violence under one pretext or another. The various interest groups are deeply divided, making power sharing or an acceptable political solution complex. If the NLD is seen as soft on certain ethnic minorities that are hostile, it may push military to intervene and even repeal the government. Any pact between the NLD and the ethnic minorities has to be honoured by the army; otherwise it does not have any value in Myanmar.

Finally, will the NLD go for a meaningful but an alternative reconciliation dialogue with the ethnic minorities? In Myanmar, there already exists an agreement brought out by President Thein Sein government. The NLD is most likely to review the 'nationwide' Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) of the earlier USDP regime. With battle lines already drawn, the new government may face a herculean task in forging peace in the multiethnic divided society. In turn, this would further harm Myanmar's progress on economic and foreign investment fronts, as well

The various interest groups are deeply divided, making power sharing or an acceptable political solution complex. If the NLD is seen as soft on certain ethnic minorities that are hostile, it may push military to intervene and even repeal the government.

as its international image.

Myanmar is likely to witness complex peace than a lasting peace.

C. The Rohingya Issue

Tackling the conflict between Rohingya Muslims and the Buddhist fundamentalist is another challenge for the new government. Ever since the unrest in Rakhine state between Rakhine Buddhists and minority Rohingya, thousands of Rohingyas have fled Myanmar into the neighbouring countries. Many are still trapped within camps inside Myanmar. The NLD will also face pressure from the international community to find a solution.

Given the local sentiments against the Rohingyas, the NLD will be averse to address the issue. Furthermore, Suu Kyi was accused as a pro-Muslim by a section of Buddhist nationalists like Ma Ba, while the Rohingyas allege her as pro-Buddhist. This would make the government difficult to find a middle way between its largest constituency - Buddhist and the minorities.

The unaddressed Rohingya issue is likely to emerge as a single most imminent internal threat to Myanmar. It can also bring in military to the forefront who may utilize the opportunity to either sideline the NLD or put pressure on them to fall in line with their command. Either way it is detrimental to NLD government's survival and its standing as well Myanmar's future. Rakhine Buddhists may draw support from the Buddhist all over the country while Rohingyas may draw the support of pan Islamic groups from Indonesia to Bangladesh..

D. External Focus on the US and India

Externally, Myanmar is likely to rebalance its relationship, but move closer towards the US and India. Currently Myanmar is heavily depended on China - economically, politically and militarily for its endurance. While continuing Myanmar's customary ties with the Beijing, the NLD is likely to work closely with the West, particularly the US and India in the region for backing them during the difficult times. Suu Kyi's personal equation with the US and her ties with India are evident. The geostrategic interest of these two countries will compel them to take more positive steps towards Myanmar.

Externally, Myanmar is set to gain much more under the NLD government than during the last five years. Military leadership may not find issues with Myanmar moving closer to the West and India as it is more concerned with the domestic matters than external dimensions. It may be no coincidence that Myanmar witnessed increased foreign investment and focus after the visit of the US President Obama. Today Myanmar is perceived as the most promising destination for business.

These changes will have an impact the Sino – Myanmar relations, particularly when China sees Myanmar as an important link of its forward deployment strategy in the Indian Ocean region.

III Conclusion

Despite some clear current trends and dimensions, there are still plenty of unanswered questions concerning Myanmar's future following the November 2015 election. Triumphant NLD is still unclear how to go about on major issues concerning the country, largely when the aspiration and expectations are so high. The fact that the internal divergence is so wide it is not going to make the job of NLD and in particular Suu Kyi any easier.

But there are some positives though, most notably the coming up of relationship between Suu Kyi and the military, which puts Myanmar in good stead. A lot will depend on the NLD's early moves and performance, and how military lets Suu Kyi's government operate. Undoubtedly, 2016 and next few years developments are crucial for Myanmar, which will have a profound effect on its internal and external dynamics.

Dr M. Mayilvaganan is Assistant Professor,
ISSSP, National Institute of Advanced
Studies (NIAS).

Views expressed are author's own.

