

Myanmar: Hard Won Victory the Start of an Even Harder Road?

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PHOENIX NEWS

POLICY BRIEF

International Studies Research Cluster, School of Humanities, Coventry University

Results (As at 13th November)

Party	LH	UH	Total
National League for Democracy	238	131	369
Union Solidarity & Development Party	28	12	40
Army	110	56	166
Others	32	11	43
Undecided	25	14	39

***“We will hand this process (of reform) on to a new government. ... don’t worry about the transition”
President Thein Sein***

Myanmar: Hard Won Victory the Start of an Even Harder Road?

Neil Renwick

Dateline: 16th November 2015:



It has been a long, hard and bitter road, characterised by great suffering and sacrifice by the peoples of Myanmar over many decades. Opposition to the military Junta and to the civilian ‘reform’ government backed by the military has endured and election results from the election held 8th November gave an overwhelming victory for the National league for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi

with her Party taking over 80% of the contestable seats with only a handful left to call.

What does this electoral success actually mean? A number of questions and challenges arise from this success. The questions are significant, Will the military accept the popular vote? It has notoriously rejected the popular mandate before, will it be any different this time round? If the results stand, how will the NLD work with the in-built bias to military interests ingrained in the Constitution written by the military itself and reserving 25% of Parliamentary seats to its supporters? With children born to a non-Myanmarese father, Aung San Suu Kyi is technically barred from the Presidency, what role can will she play? What does the victory mean for Myanmar’s reform and peace processes? Finally, what are the regional and wider international implications? All hard questions to answer.

The Main Challenges

Governing

"If I'm required to field a president who meets the requirements of section F of the constitution, alright then we'll find one. But that won't stop me making all the decisions as the leader of the winning party."

(BBC, 10th November, 2015; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-34774469>)

The NLD has made major inroads into the cities and urban areas, as well as holding substantial regional control. This new national reach will make a political difference in delivering 'root-and-branch' reforms.

Reforms

The reform process has made significant and perhaps unexpected changes to Myanmar's political, economic, and social condition, but has stalled recently, prompting over 600 civil society organisations to issue a long list of concerns last year. Realistically, the quasi-civilian government could only go so far in deconstructing the military-dominated system. The scale of the NLD victory reduces the political room for manoeuvre for the military, but it will remain the single most powerful factor in the post-election reform equation.

Peace process

The toughest and most pressing test for a NLD government. Addressing the continuing ethnic and religious conflicts must be a priority for the incoming administration. However, the poor results of the ethnic parties will be a limitation by removing their parliamentary voices.

- The key military figures have indicated they will accept the result. President Thein Sein publicly accepted the defeat and committed his Government to a peaceful and smooth transition;
- Despite the scale of its victory, the NLD will have to work within the constraints of the existing constitution and deal with the military-backed administration and parliamentary representatives to get anything on the legislative books. The rump Parliament meets today, but will still pass key legislation and, critically, the budget, thereby creating potential future difficulties for the NLD.
- Aung San Suu Kyi has reiterated that it is democracy for Myanmar that is the priority, not her personal occupancy of the Presidency—a move bitterly opposed by many in the military anyway; the NLD leader can exercise power and influence through the prime ministership;
- A key regional play is China. Through its official media, the Chinese Government has welcomed the the result - indeed, it is only months since Beijing welcomed Aung San Suu Kyi to official talks for the first time. After years of seeming drift, China belatedly recognised the fact that Myanmar was changing, Chinese interests in Myanmar questioned and under challenge, and an avalanche of international investment and development aid descending upon this geo-strategically critical neighbour;
- ASEAN has welcomed the result and the internationally-accepted electoral process. Myanmar sheer held the ASEAN Chair through 2014, in part, a diplomatic recognition by ASEAN of Myanmar's reform efforts;
- The election contributes to ASEAN's own development agenda and economic and political community;
- In the wider international community the result has been welcomed by many countries including the Australia, the US, UK and China, although the exclusion of Burmese abroad and the Muslims at home from the election has been widely criticised. Myanmar is of key strategic importance given its geographical location and

resources. The international community will be looking for a period of stability through the post-election transition, the next stage of reforms and, especially, in the peace process.

Critical to the immediate post-election process of transition will, quite naturally, be stability, peace and reconciliation. This is far from automatic. However, the scale of the victory and the early military and political responses, suggest that there is a momentum for this to be achieved. The challenges will come with governing and the hard choices, compromises and disagreements that will inevitably be involved.



The Author

Neil Renwick is Professor of Global Security in the School of Humanities at Coventry University. He specialises in the politics and international relations of the Asia-Pacific region with a particular focus on East Asia and China. His research explores issues of Human Security. A graduate of Durham University and the Australian National University, Professor Renwick has published extensively on this region, most recently working on Myanmar-China relations.