

US steps up pressure on Burmese junta following rigged elections

By Sarath Kumara
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Burma's ruling military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has proclaimed a predictable "victory" after elections held last Sunday. The ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) headed by Burma's military strongman Than Shwe called the elections in August, amid increasing pressure from the Western powers to relax restrictions on the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) and its detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The previous elections were held in 1990 following a wave of protests and strikes against the military junta in 1988 that was brutally suppressed. Suu Kyi and NLD played a key role in ending the opposition movement by calling off protests in return for an election. The NLD won an overwhelming majority at the poll, but, with the political situation stabilised, the military overturned the results and arrested key NLD leaders, including Suu Kyi.

The junta's 2008 constitution and restrictive electoral laws ensured there would be no repeat of the 1990 outcome. The ruling SPDC had already appointed the military representatives who will occupy 110 of the 440 seats in the House of Representatives, and army officers had been allocated 56 seats in the 168-seat House of Nationalities. The country's president, who must be an army officer, will appoint government ministers and supreme court judges. The security ministers will be named by the army chief.

With the final results yet to be announced, Burmese officials declared that the USDP led by Prime Minister Thein Sein secured nearly 80 percent of the seats. Partial election results showed that, out of the 219 seats tallied in the House of Representatives, the USDP had won 187, including 57 for which there were no other contestants. The opposition National Democratic Force (NDF), which is a break-away faction from the NDL, won eight. In the House of Nationalities, the USDP had 95 seats, against 4 for the NDF. The USDP was also way ahead in the

regional and state parliaments.

Although the junta allowed 40 parties to participate in the elections, only a dozen of those closely aligned with the military, such as the National Unity Party (NUP) founded by former military dictator Ne Win, made any gains.

The NLD boycotted the election because the constitution and electoral laws banned political parties from participating if any member had a criminal record. To participate, the NLD would have had to expel Suu Kyi, who had been convicted on a number of trumped up charges. Hundreds of NLD members and other political prisoners remain behind bars.

In order to block Buddhist monks, who led sizeable anti-junta protests in 2007, from standing as candidates, members of the religious orders were prohibited from joining political parties. National minority groups, such as the Karen, who were not aligned with the military rulers were branded "insurgents" and barred from contesting seats.

Six political parties that took part in the elections, including the pro-junta NUP, complained that the ruling USDP had engaged in fraud. According to the electoral laws, advance balloting was available for voters who were away from their constituencies. These parties reported that USDP candidates forced voters who could not be considered to be absent from their electorates to vote for the USDP in the pre-poll balloting. Some 15 percent of votes were cast in advance.

Sunday's elections were part of a political reform "road map" declared by the junta in 2003, aimed at easing Western sanctions and broadening its narrow social base, amid sharpening social tensions. In February, 3,400 workers from several factories in Burma's largest industrial zone, Hlaing Tharyar in Rangoon, went on strike for higher wages. In early March, another 4,000 workers from two factories waged a strike in the South

Dagon Township No.2 Industrial Zone on the outskirts of Rangoon. As in Cambodia and other parts of South East Asia, Burmese workers are being propelled into struggle by rising prices that have eroded their already low wages.

The US and European governments condemned Sunday's election as a farce. Their concerns, however, are not with the lack of democratic rights and the brutal social conditions of the working people in Burma, but with China's deepening economic and military ties with the junta. The same governments accept as legitimate the recent farcical elections held in Afghanistan under the US-led occupation.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was in Asia for an aggressive diplomatic campaign to undercut China's regional influence, declared in Australia that the "flawed elections" once again exposed "the abuses of the military junta". At the same time, the Obama administration is seeking to normalise relations with the military junta in Fiji. Clinton announced \$20 million in aid funds for Fiji, in order to compete against growing Chinese influence in that country and across the Pacific.

The sharpest criticism came from US President Barack Obama who was touring India as part of his administration's push to cement or create strategic partnerships against China. Speaking to the Indian parliament, Obama declared: "When peaceful democratic movements are suppressed, as in Burma, the democracies of the world cannot remain silent." Obama said it was "unacceptable to steal an election" and insisted that it was the responsibility of "leaders like United States and India to condemn it".

Obama's statements in India are a sign that the US is intensifying pressure on Burma. Last September, while maintaining sanctions on the Burmese regime, the White House offered to improve relations if the junta accepted US demands for a greater role for Suu Kyi and the NLD. US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell visited the country last November—the most senior US official figure to travel to Burma in 15 years. However, the junta feared that any loosening of its iron grip over Burmese society could unleash the rising class tensions.

Moreover, China has developed close strategic and economic relations with Burma over the past decade through investment, trade and arms sales. China is now Burma's third largest trade partner and investor. The latest Chinese projects, due to be completed by 2013, include a pipeline to transport gas from Burmese offshore fields. Another pipeline will allow Chinese tankers carrying oil from the Middle East and Africa to unload at

the Burmese port of Kyaukphyu, from where the oil will be pumped to China's Yunnan province. Burma's strategic location gives China opportunities to establish alternate land routes for energy supplies to avoid the Strait of Malacca, which is controlled by the US and its allies.

Than Shwe visited China in September, coinciding with port calls by two Chinese warships to Burma. The twin events highlighted Burma's key role in China's strategy of building port facilities in Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan that could potentially support the deployment of Chinese warships to the Indian Ocean. Chinese President Hu Jintao told Than Shwe: "Consolidating and developing Sino-Myanmar cooperation and friendship is our unswerving policy. However the international situation might change, this policy will not alter."

Beijing pointedly issued a statement praising Sunday's elections for being conducted in a "steady and smooth manner". China's foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lie added: "This is a critical step for Myanmar (Burma) in implementing the seven-step road map in the transition to an elected government, and thus is welcome."

In August, just after the Burmese elections were announced, the Obama administration threatened to back the creation of a UN inquiry into crimes against humanity by the Burmese junta. According to the *Washington Post*, China then launched a campaign "aimed at thwarting" the US threat by lobbying high-level UN officials and European and Asian governments. China's two-month effort had "taken the steam out of the US initiative," the newspaper reported last month.

A Burmese regime firmly in China's camp is incompatible with the Obama administration's aggressive turn to reassert its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. While there is speculation that Suu Kyi may be released from house arrest, such a move is unlikely to satisfy Washington, which wants an opening up of the Burmese economy to foreign investment and a more pro-Western orientation. Obama's comments in India indicate that the US is about to intensify its pressure as part of its carrot-and-stick approach to the Burmese junta.

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