

# India and the New Myanmar

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**ALOK BANSAL**

The landslide victory won by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her party National League for Democracy (NLD) in the by-elections held on 01 April 2012 ushers in a new era of hope in Myanmar. The party won all the 37 seats for the lower house of parliament and 4 out of 5 seats that it had contested for the upper house of parliament (it did not contest one seat for the upper house). NLD also won all the four seats in Nappydaw - the newly established capital of Myanmar, where most of the voters are government employees, military personnel and ministers, who were expected to back the ruling military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which won an overwhelming majority in 2010 sham elections. This goes to prove that Suu Kyi has enormous support even amongst the government officials and their families. Even former prime minister and military intelligence chief Khin Nyunt, who was arrested in 2004, indicated that he had voted for the NLD. The change is quite phenomenal from 1990 when that NLD had won a landslide victory in elections, but was denied power. Most of the next two decades were spent by Suu Kyi under arrest. The NLD had boycotted the elections in 2010, as the rules had been drafted in such a way so as to prevent it from contesting the elections under the leadership of Suu Kyi.

Even though the party will remain a hopeless minority in both houses of the parliament, the presence of Aung San Suu Kyi and followers will transform the parliament, when they take their seats on 23 April 2012. In 440 member lower house Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives), where military occupies

110 seats, Suu Kyi and her members will constitute less than 10 per cent of the strength. In 224 member upper house called Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities), where 56 seats are held by military, Suu Kyi and party will have only four seats, but already members from other breakaway factions are queuing up to join NLD. Three MPs (one from upper house and two from lower house) from the National Democratic Force (NDF), an NLD splinter party that ran in the 2010 election, have applied to rejoin the NLD, as also MP from the New National Democratic Party (NNDP). Of these Senator Myat Thura Soe, who had won on NDF ticket has already rejoined the NLD while the application of three lower house MPs - Than Win (NDF), Khin Maung Win (NDF) and Kyi Myint (NNDP) - were being considered. Suu Kyi has shown considerable pragmatism and has asked her party members to avoid confrontation with other parties. She has listed her top priorities as introducing the rule of law, ending long-simmering ethnic insurgencies and amending the 2008 constitution that gives the military a significant political stake in the country.

The unprecedented change ushered in by the government of former General Thein Sein during last one year has taken the global community by surprise. Most in the international community had termed the last elections as sham and had viewed Thein Sein as nothing but a protégé of senior General Than Shwe, the military dictator, who had been ruling Myanmar with an iron hand since 1992. However, Thein Sein has surprised the world with the most dramatic and unexpected political reforms since the military seized power in 1962. He has released most of the political prisoners, relaxed media censorship, allowed trade unions and removed restrictions on the movement of Aung San Suu Kyi. On the economic front, he has allowed a free float of the currency, ending an artificial fixed exchange rate that was sustained for 35 years. The by-election results have proved that they were conducted in a free and fair manner. So Thein Sein has delivered and it is for the world to reciprocate.

Myanmar like India and the United States is an extremely pluralistic society. Unfortunately, for long it has not come to terms with its pluralistic character and the absence of democracy has further exacerbated the ethnic divisions. The government has held talks with most ethnic minorities and has succeeded in striking peace deals with 12 of them. A peace deal was struck with Karen rebels on 09 April 12 ending 62 years of insurgency, the longest in Myanmar. Suu Kyi had a major role to play in the resolution of the conflict. However, the most complex ethnic conflict in Northern Kachin state continues unabated and has resulted in the displacement of over 60,000 people. In fact during the recent by-elections,

the elections to seats in Kachin state were postponed due to security issues. The government is hopeful of reaching an agreement with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) within three months. The advent of democracy has instigated the ethnic minorities led by the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP), the biggest ethnic force in parliament to urge for the creation of genuinely federal state. (Ethnic minorities are by and large conspicuous by their absence from various organs of state, especially the military). Affirmative action may be necessary to expedite ethnic rapprochement.

**India can help Myanmar to get back in to the global mainstream economically.**

Many western countries have already opened channels of communications with the government in Myanmar and Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar in December 2011, a first by US Secretary of State since 1955. The prime minister of UK, David Cameron will visit Myanmar on 13 April 12. However, India, a country that has probably the maximum stake in Myanmar has been rather slow in reacting to the developments there. Myanmar is crucial to India's 'Look East' policy. It can play a major role in the development of North Eastern states and also help in curbing various insurgencies that have been afflicting that region of India. Myanmar is rich in natural resources like gold, gems and natural gas, and could also prove to be one of Asia's last untapped frontier markets. India can help Myanmar to get back in to the global mainstream economically. Although India has undertaken many developmental projects including Kaladan multi-modal transit and transportation project, it needs to do more especially in the field of highways, railways and hydropower plants. The current government in Myanmar has given enough indications of its desire to pull back the country from the powerful economic and political embrace of the Chinese dragon. India must quickly move to fill in the void. Indian Prime Minister is now slated to visit Myanmar in last week of May. Hopefully the visit will bring India much closer to new, democratic and federal Myanmar.

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Alok Bansal is the Senior Fellow at CLAWS.