
ELECTION MONITOR NO. 14

AUNG SAN SUU KYI MEETS JUNTA'S LIAISON MINISTER

A meeting between detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and Government Liaison Officer, U Aung Kyi, took place for the first time in 2010 at the State Guest House on 15 January, according to National League for Democracy (NLD) senior officials. The meeting comes a day after the NLD announced its decision to expand its present Central Executive Committee from 11 to 20 members. NLD CEC members Ohn Kyaing and Khin Maung Swe confirmed that the meeting had taken place but were not able to provide the details of the discussions. The meeting lasted for about 25 minutes. The NLD has welcomed the latest meeting between Aung San Suu Kyi and Aung Kyi as a good step and expressed its desire for the process to continue but remains undecided on the party's participation in the elections.¹

NLD RESTRUCTURES TOP DECISION-MAKING BODY

In a statement on Thursday, 14 January, the NLD announced the addition of nine new members to its Central Executive Committee (CEC) to allow younger members and new blood to be introduced within the party's principle policy organ. They include Dr. May Win Myint of Mayangon Township and Dr. Than Nyein, one of the founding members of NLD and brother-in-law of former Military Intelligence Chief and purged Prime Minister, Khin Nyunt. Other newly appointed CEC members include, Win Myint, member of NLD's Legal Committee, Dr. Win Naing, Thanlyin Township (Rangoon Division), Tun Tun Hein, Naung-Cho Township (Shan State), Nyan Win, Ahpaung Township (Mon State), Han Thar Myint, Butalin Township (Sagaing Division), Thein Nyunt, Thingangyun Township (Rangoon Division), and Ohn Kyaing, member of Central Information Committee. May Win Myint, is a prominent member of the party and led the NLD's Women's Wing before her arrest in 1997. Her appointment will make her the second woman to serve in the NLD hierarchy after detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The expansion of the CEC comes after Aung San Suu Kyi's meeting in December with three of the party's aging leaders – Chairman U Aung Shwe, Secretary U Lwin and U Lun Tin – during which the issue of the aging NLD leadership was discussed. While the NLD's official statement said the expansion is aimed at increasing the party's work and efficiency, some observers believe that the expansion is part of the NLD's preparations for the scheduled general elections, should it decide to participate.²

¹ Suu Kyi Meets Junta Liaison Officer - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17591 (Irrawaddy), 15 Jan 2010.

² NLD restructures top decision-making body - <http://www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/3379-nld-restructures-top-decision-making-body.html> (Mizzima), 14 Jan 2010.

NLD WOMEN'S GROUPS FORMED IN 22 TOWNSHIPS

In its drive to expand party organization, the NLD has established 22 women's groups nationwide, most recently in Rangoon, Mandalay and Tanintharyi Divisions. According to the party's Women's Affairs Coordinator, Dr. May Win Myint, newly-formed groups have been established in Kawmu, Mayangon, Hlaing, Syriam, Insein, Hlaingtharyar, Yankin, Bahan, Kayan, Thaketa and Dagon Myothit (New Dagon) in Rangoon Division, while eight groups have taken root in Tanintharyi Division and two in Mandalay Division. According to Ma Aye Aye Mar, a member of the Mandalay Division NLD, instructions have been issued by the Central Executive Committee to form women's groups in Northwest and Northeast townships in Mandalay, while NLD offices in Meikhtilar and Wandwin townships have expressed their desire to create women's groups in their townships. Formation of youth and women's groups within the NLD is part of the implementation of the party's plans to further strengthen the NLD's ranks at the grass-root level. Activities of the women's groups include regular monthly meetings where guidelines and policies of the party's Central Executive Committee, as well as submitted reports of the various women's groups are discussed.³

USDA TO BUILD HOMES FOR THE POOR

At a recent press conference held on 5 January, Rangoon Mayor and Chief of the Rangoon Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), Brig-Gen. Aung Thein Lin, announced that the USDA is planning to build 500 low-cost houses in Rangoon's suburbs as part of a plan to aid and assist the poor in rebuilding their houses. According to Mayor Aung Thein Lin, the organization plans to rebuild houses in poor neighborhoods of Rangoon charging 100 Kyats per month for construction costs. Originally drawn up as an activity of the USDA, the finances and funding for the housing project will be borne by the Yangon City Development Committee, according to city officials. The project is aimed to help the poor to rebuild their houses and only available upon request. Already 20 houses have been built in Kyeemyindaing and North Okkalapa townships while 500 single-family houses are expected for construction in South Okkalapa, North Okkapala, Thingangyun, Shwepyithar, Hlaingtharyar, Dawbon, Thaketa and Mayangon Townships in early 2010, said Mayor Aung Thein Lin.⁴

BURMA TELLS NEIGHBORS ELECTIONS WILL BE FREE

Burma's Foreign Minister has told Southeast Asian counterparts that promised elections would be held this year and would be free and fair, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretary-General said on Thursday 14 January. Dr Surin Pitsuwan said the comments were made by the regime's Foreign Minister, Nyan Win, at a dinner on Wednesday 13 January in Vietnam with his counterparts from ASEAN. "No date has

³ NLD women's groups formed in 22 townships - <http://www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/3384-nld-womens-groups-formed-in-22-townships.html> (Mizzima), 15 Jan 2010.

⁴ USDA to Build Homes for the Poor - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17589 (Irrawaddy), 15 Jan 2010.

been set, but everything is moving on course. That's what we were told." Mr. Surin said that the ASEAN Ministers "have expressed their high hope(s) that the issue of Burma will be resolved this year and that the 10 nation regional bloc could move on to the new era of ASEAN relations and cooperation with the international community." ASEAN, which has a principle of non-interference in members' affairs, has long being criticised for not taking a tougher stand on Burma. Burma's Foreign Minister, Nyan Win, remained tight-lipped on the announcement of the date for the elections.⁵

BURMA'S ELECTORAL LAWS "70 PERCENT COMPLETE"

Thai Foreign Minister, Kasit Piromya, after a meeting with his Burmese counterpart, reported that the majority of Burma's electoral laws have been completed and will be rounded off in a matter of months. At the meeting, Kasit was informed that 60 to 70 percent of the electoral and political party laws had been completed and it would take two to three more months to complete the whole process. Mathematical calculations indicate that the announced elections could take place by the middle of the year. The ruling junta has confirmed that the elections will be held this year although no specific date has been officially set. However, according to rumours and information leaked from a meeting between the head of a prominent Japanese organization and the Secretary-General of the USDA, the elections will be held in October, most likely on the 10th of October. The regime has neither confirmed nor refuted to these recent comments and as ever remains silent.⁶

ETHNIC LEADERS REJECT ELECTION

Several ethnic leaders elected in Burma's 1990 elections reaffirmed that they will not participate in the planned elections this year without a review of the 2008 Constitution and the release of all political prisoners - two demands they have been pressing for since early last year. Thar Ban, the acting Chairman of the Arakan League for Democracy said his party would not take part in the elections if the 2008 Constitution could not guarantee equality and autonomy. Pu Cin Sian Thang, of the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) said that the alliance's position was no different from the NLD's Shwegondaing Declaration and that the UNA contributed to the Declaration even though it was not publicly known. He further added, "Our participation in the election process without changing the undemocratic elements of the existing Constitution would validate the whole Constitutional process as soon as the first session of the parliament is convened," said Thang. The UNA is a coalition of 12 ethnic parties which contested and won 67 seats in the 1990 elections, and Thang is currently Chairman of the Zomi National Congress, an ethnic Chin party and member of the UNA alliance. He added that participation in the elections depended on the announcement of the Electoral Law and if the Constitution remains unchanged the party would not join the elections. Another

⁵ Burma pledges free election - <http://english.dvb.no/news.php?id=3226> (DVB), 14 Jan 2010.

⁶ Burma's electoral laws "70 percent complete" <http://english.dvb.no/news.php?id=3227> (DVB), 15 Jan 2010.

ethnic leader, Naing NgweThein, Chairman of the Mon National Democratic Front, said his party shared the same position as that of the UNA regarding the elections.⁷

DEMOCRATIC PARTY TO RECONSIDER BURMA ELECTIONS

A Burmese political party will reconsider its decision to enter this year's elections if the announcement date of the Electoral Laws does not leave sufficient time to campaign, the party chairman said. The Democratic Party, which is a party that is not aligned either to the regime or opposition groups, includes Than Than Nu, the daughter of Burma's first civilian Prime Minister, U Nu. The party's Chairman, U Thu Wei, said in a recent meeting that the groups considering running in the elections were not being given sufficient time to prepare, with the laws surrounding participation yet to be made public. "Also we expect that the Election Laws will impose a lot of restrictions and limitations which will leave more groups and people unable to participate," he said, adding that he thought there would be fewer parties contesting the polls than in 1990. Most recently, U Thu Wei had written a letter to the junta leader Than Shwe urging the announcement of the Elections Law, which includes the formation of political parties.⁸

ANALYSIS

The first meeting in election year 2010 between detained NLD pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Government Liaison Officer U Aung Kyi can be seen as a move in the right direction by both sides. Details of the meeting have not yet been disclosed. However, the need for regular meetings between the regime and the NLD is vital to the on-going political process. The decisions by NLD leaders to reorganize its aging Central Executive Committee (CEC) together with the formation of Women's Groups in 22 townships can help to promote not only the party's image but also be used as a platform to launch election campaigns. The effectiveness of the new appointees to the CEC will be tested in the coming months, while the 22 newly reorganized Women's Groups will need to expand their activities down to township and village levels to bolster the NLD organizational structure.

While the NLD is busy and occupied with organizational reforms, the regime-backed USDA has embarked on a project to build low-cost houses for the poor in some suburban areas of Rangoon Division. The initiative has been welcomed by some as a goodwill gesture to help the poor, while others have criticized it as a strategy aimed at winning support for the organization. The underlying intentions and objectives of the USDA may raise concerns for some, however providing for those in need can be seen in a positive manner.

With elections looming, many opposition parties still face a dilemma on the issue of participation. That being said, the decision to boycott the elections by the Arakan League for Democracy and the United Nationalities Alliance comes as no surprise when

⁷ Ethnic Leaders Reject Election - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17581 (Irrawaddy), 14 Jan 2010.

⁸ 'Third force' party to reconsider Burma elections - <http://english.dvb.no/news.php?id=3217> (Mizzima), 12 Jan 2010.

their demands for the revision of the 2008 Constitution and release of all political prisoners have been totally ignored by the authorities. This frustration seems now to have spread to the non-aligned political groups.

While opposition political parties and groups have been pre-occupied with campaigns and domestic reforms, the regime's representative at recent regional meetings appraised his ASEAN counterparts on preparations being implemented by the government and stated that the elections would take place and that they would be free and fair. In a meeting with his Thai counterpart, Burma's Foreign Minister Nyan Win said, that 70 percent of the electoral laws had been completed and it was just a matter of time before the election date is set. These are worrying times for opposition political parties, not only because they have to endure the constant threat of intimidation and harassment, but also due to the unpredictable manner and nature in which the whole election process is being conducted by the military regime. All that remains to be done for the time being is to await the junta's decision to announce the date of the elections and relevant electoral laws.