

Five years of democratic government has delivered little of Myanmar's hopes for economic reform and social progress. Yet the overwhelming popularity of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) appears likely to again return her party to Government in elections on 8 November.

In 2015 ASSK's National League for Democracy (NLD) won 77% of the seats contested, boosted by the unexpected support of minority ethnic groups across the country. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a vehicle for military-backed candidates, won only 10% of seats – though the military itself takes another 25% of total seats and three key Ministerial posts through a quota required by the Constitution it authored in reforms that began in 2008.

Popularity in Myanmar is two edged. The numbers are with the majority ethnic Bamar, who constitute about two thirds of the nation. Yet the critical issues are generally related to minorities – and to the military, known as Tatmadaw. Drug trading, illicit mining and illegal forestry are central to much of the violence.

Myanmar's civil war is the world's longest, a continuous conflict since 1948. Standing armies of the Arakan, Shan, Ta'ang, Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Kokang and Chin peoples have at times engaged in peace discussions and the United Wa State Army – remnant of the Communist Party of Burma and the largest force – recognises the nation state but is not yet a party to the peace talks and is not officially recognised by the Tatmadaw. The relatively new, insurgent Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army is led by a Pakistani who lived at one time in Saudi Arabia and is regarded as a terrorist organisation. While there are 17 parties to Myanmar's official peace negotiations, the ARSA is not one of them.

Internationally, high expectations for Daw Suu and her Government have crumbled, largely on the evidence of Myanmar's harsh treatment of Muslim minorities and the flood of 700,000 refugees to neighbouring countries. But this is not a handicap to her election prospects. Domestically, the Rohingya plight is remarkably uncontroversial. Religion, history and the violence of Islamist terrorists in southern Thailand weigh heavily in the predominantly Buddhist population – views that ASSK has reflected in public defence of Myanmar's approach.

Domestically, the NLD's failure to deliver significant social and economic reform has alienated many urban supporters. Land reform designed to promote larger scale agriculture has alienated rural people, especially those in ethnic minority areas whose occupancy is traditional and undocumented – and often subject to dispossession.

Land issues have been a factor in an escalation of violence in some areas and a lack of progress on the wider peace agenda has stimulated further opposition. It is likely that the NLD will lose the support it had in 2015 from minorities, many of whom are openly critical of its weak administration and often insensitive dealings with ethnic minority issues and leadership.

Myanmar's elites – or at least those not aligned with established oligarchs and military cronies – may have cast around for alternative leaders, but none so far has emerged. Ko Ko Gyi, a prominent campaigner of the 1988 democracy protests who spent 14 years in jail for his efforts, has emerged at the head of the People's Party. While he is very highly regarded, Ko

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Ko Gyi has not convinced fellow veterans of the “88 Generation Students Group” to engage in politics and is unlikely to challenge the popular aura of ASSK. A very different option has emerged in Shwe Mann’s Union Betterment Party. Once number three in the junta, the former general was punted – along with his factional supporters – as head of the military-backed USDP and appeared for a time to be close to ASSK. Shwe Mann’s interests are widely presumed to be aligned with the remnant cronyism of the military.

While the first truly elected Government in more than 60 years has yet to deliver anything of substance, the military has stayed its course from brutal junta to at least one step from control. Thein Sein, the former General who as USDP-appointed President oversaw Myanmar’s democratic transition, ensured that the Tatmadaw had a few years of heavy funding that allowed a major upgrading of capability and equipment. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who succeeded Than Shwe as military head after Thein Sein and Shwe Mann had been drafted into politics, is said to have followed a progressive approach in modernising and reducing the size of the military, improving training and returning conscripted “child soldiers” to their villages.

Min Aung Hlaing passed the Tatmadaw’s mandatory retirement age last year, but was allowed to extend his tenure until July 2021 to allow for the election and installation of the next Government. Lately, it has been widely suggested – and he has not denied – that he will pursue a political career on retirement. During a recent visit to Russia the Senior General made a surprisingly political remark during a television interview on a State-run station, asserting that “strong forces” were behind terrorist groups on Myanmar’s borders. A military spokesman said the reference was to a “foreign country”, which recalled reports in January during a State visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Questioned by Min Aung Hlaing about Chinese arms supplied to various militarised ethnic groups, President Xi reportedly said he would look into the issue.

Myanmar’s broader relations with China are complex. Chinese projects in the country – operating under the umbrella of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) – have met persistent obstacles since reform began in 2011. The military’s instinctive concern of foreign dominance, policy concerns over “debt traps” and localised environmental and social issues all contribute to Myanmar’s wariness. When Xi visited Naypyidaw in January this year, only 9 of 40 proposed Chinese projects had actually commenced.

On the other hand, China has been a key investor and supporter of Myanmar on the Rohingya issue in international forums. Chinese funding – even if stalled – has helped to plug the shortfalls in Western investment. ASSK has been accused of obsequiousness in her relationship with Xi and is no doubt keen to maintain positive relations with China as one few international supporters she retains.

Given the popular support for Daw Suu – The Lady, as she is widely known – the probable outcome of the 2020 election is something akin to the status quo. Though it does appear likely that significant elements of the urban vote and large blocs in ethnic minority areas will go to independents and ethnic parties. Shwe Mann, who claims to have campaigned in two thirds of rural towns, paints a picture of his UBP taking 50% of the vote to win Government. A more credible possibility is a diverse Parliament with a large NLD element, making a potential coalition – supported by the military bloc – that could legislate its preferences and choose an independent President.

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Half a century of exploitation and repression left one of Asia's richest and most vibrant nations in a decrepit condition, so bad that many in the military are said to have pressed for reform out of national embarrassment. Certainly, the Tatmadaw is nationalistic to its core. The evidence so far is that its leadership has stuck to its script on reform, but effective NLD leadership did not emerge under ASSK's term. Of the evident options, potential succession from within the NLD is largely unknown – so tight has been ASSK's grip on even minor processes. Beyond the NLD, Shwe Mann is an unlikely bet – and a potential throwback to cronyism. Ko Ko Gyi and other independents and ethnic groups do not have the breadth to form a solid bloc.

So, at this stage, Myanmar is a democracy in search of leadership. Many in Myanmar have begun to look to the military and the first cab off that rank may be Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.



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