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Editor

Prof. P. K. Shajahan Ph.D.

Guest Editor

Prabhakar Jayaprakash

MYANMAR: ON ROAD TO THE FUTURE

- Kaveri

Introduction

November 8, 2015, became a historic day for the people of Myanmar. They witnessed the first substantial free and peaceful election after 25 years. The election attracted lots of attention from around the world.

Aung San Suu Kyi led the National League for Democracy (NLD) secured a decisive win in the election. If everything goes smooth, the country will witness its first non-junta backed government. This win is an attempt to bring back democracy after five decades of military rule in the country (AP, 2015).

Notably, this election also holds much importance from India's point of view not just because Myanmar is an adjacent country but also because its borders are sensitive, porous and militancy prone. The fact that the country shares its borders with two prominent countries of the South and the South East Asia i.e., India and China makes it geopolitically an important location (Quraishi, 2015; Bhatia, 2015).

Myanmar had been entrenched with authoritarian military rule and armed ethnic conflict. In addition, many Buddhist extremist groups have been propagating the majoritarian principle and often use violent measures against the ethno-religious minorities including the Rohingya Muslims (*The Hindu*, 2015).

This historic election raised hopes for minorities and many human rights advocates but we should not jump the gun. There are many questions that are yet to be answered such as when will be the transfer of power and how it will be materialized? How Suu Kyi would deal with the current political climate especially the ethno-religious question? What would be the status of the Rohingya Muslims if the democratic setup comes into place?

Intricacies in the issue of Rohingyas

No doubt that this is a big moment in Myanmar's

history. Suu Kyi's election catch phrase of "Time to Change" and her much highlighted agenda of ethnic reconciliation and peace process were excellent expression (Myint, 2015). Likewise, Myanmar's refugee problem as well as the much debatable Rohingya issue or to say "the boat people" remains a hot issue and had been brought to the centre stage of politics.

During the five decades of military rule, millions of Myanmar people left the country- legally or illegally and took refuge for better life opportunities. Many of them become undocumented migrant workers in the neighboring countries – Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and India and beyond. According to the UNHCR official records, there are 110,000 Burmese in nine refugee camps of Thailand (*UNHCR Thailand factsheet*, 2015), 142,630 in Malaysia (*UNHCR Malaysia factsheet*, 2015), 1,566 in Indonesia (*UNHCR Indonesia factsheet*, 2015), and around 18,252 in India (*UNHCR India factsheet*, 2015).

However, the case of "Ethnic Rohingya Muslims" is far more discrete since they have no place in extreme nationalist vision of Buddhist Myanmar – "Project Burmanisation – a single religion – Buddhism" which was followed by military government for the last 50 years (Quraishi, 2015). The Ethnic Rohingya Muslims constitute almost a total of 3 million populations of the Arakan state and other half are Buddhist. Since 1982, they have been not recognized as a national minority by the state. Ne Win government officially declared that Rohingyas would lose their Myanmar Citizenship if they don't prove that their ancestors lived in Burma (now, Myanmar) since 1832 (Jilani, 1999; Htut, 2003). Most failed to prove and became stateless on their own land. They had to suffer through numerous cruel military operations by Burmese government and military. And, many thousands have fled, adding to the regional refugee and migration crisis (*Human Rights Watch report*, 2000).

Some Rohingyas whom I spoke in Delhi said that since childhood, they have been hearing "democracy

would come back to Myanmar” but nothing happened till now. We were forced to leave our home land due to atrocities and prevalence of insecurity in Arakan, Myanmar. Now that Suu Kyi had won the election. We do expect change but again not sure whether conditions for Rohingyas would improve as she never raised our issues or talked about us. She rather has always remained mute which only has increased our insecurities.

Field reality

From the critical lens, the so-called historical election did not lay any ground for reconciliation with the minorities. Suu Kyi went with the winds and followed a pragmatic approach in choosing the candidates for the election. Not a single Muslim stood as a candidate for the NLD in this election and it paid her off. The situation is very grim for ethnic religious minorities and they lack options to demonstrate their grievances.

Suu Kyi has already faced many criticisms from international human rights advocates for her deafening silence against abuses faced by the ethnic Muslim minority. Almost a million Rohingya Muslims had been debarred from voting by questioning their citizenship under the pressure from the Buddhist nationalist (*BBC News Asia*, 2015; Fuller, 2015; *The Hindu Businessline*, 2015). Furthermore, about hundred hopeful candidates were disqualified from contesting elections. Hence, it is evident that the Rohingya situation will be one of the most persistent and contentious issues which the new government will face apart from development, cronyism and issue of increasing transparency in administration of the country (Pradhan, 2015).

Hurdles in the road to power

Immediately after the election results, Suu Kyi sent an invitation on November 11, 2015, to three top level officials which includes country's Commander-In-Chief along with President, Thein Sein, and House Speaker, Shwe Mann (as per the account on the Facebook page of the NLD). She probably felt

that she could materialize this opportunity to discuss the change, national reconciliation, and tranquility of state during the transition period.

However, the meeting was delayed and postponed until all the investigations of the complaints filed (around 100) by Union Solidarity and Development Party against the National League for Democracy in various constituencies is complete, till then the process will not be over. Hence, no formal announcement or meeting would take place before that process gets over (account of the Myanmar's Information Minister, Ye Htut, said on his Facebook page; Homes, 2015; *The Hindu*, 2015). Therefore, now the meeting is pushed to the end of December, 2015. This evidently strikes that the chemistry hasn't worked between the parties and there is still apathy and lack of trust.

Irrespective of the election result, military force (Tatmadaw) of Myanmar will continue to hold power since they have very secure position as per the provisions of 2008 Constitution. The military holds 25 per cent of the reserved legislative seats in the parliament. Hence, they will have power to legally block any Constitutional amendment. It requires more than 75 per cent votes to amend the Constitution. Similarly, they will hold key cabinet positions like defense, interiors, and border security. And one should not forget the fact that in state of emergency, the military has the power to control over the country (Bhatia, 2015; Pradhan, 2015; *The constitution of Myanmar*, 2008). Also, it controls large parts of the national economy. With these important portfolios, the military will always remain in a strong position in the country's governance and the overall functioning of the administration.

In this highly institutionalized military climate, Myanmar's democratic transition would face many hurdles. However, the changing perceptions of the people of Myanmar cannot be denied or neglected. They wanted change, peace, and democracy for which they overwhelmingly voted. Therefore, the results have shown a resounding rejection of military rule in Myanmar.

Dissecting the election result

The new President will not take charge before the end of March, 2016, but the “Nobel Laureate” Aung San Suu Kyi is already seen as a ray of hope. While, if we closely see or deconstruct the election then we would understand that Suu Kyi was certainly a charismatic attraction among the electorates. She campaigned on the ground of a positive change, a change to real democracy and peace. So it was clearly a vote for her and her vision of democracy. Secondly, it was a decisively vote against military and autocratic regime. Hence, when the people of Myanmar went into the polling booths they voted against Thein sein, Thein Swe and Shwe Mann of military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party.

When National League for Democracy fought at 80 per cent of the seats, no international observer, experts or academicians predicted this win or to say that Aung San Suu Kyi would get a landslide victory with 2/3 plus (Homes, 2015). The reason could also be that there are no opinion polls and the fact that country has no great history of elections as we all know that this was the third election after independence in 1948 and probably the most democratic one.

Before elections, Suu Kyi in an interview to Karan Thapar clearly and proudly said that she will be the next President of the country. Many remained stunned by her statement and sheer staggering confidence (*India Today*, 2015). However, her assertion continues notwithstanding, the article 59F

of the Constitution, which refrains her to become the President of Myanmar. The Constitution clearly debars anyone from the office of President if he/she has spouse or children who are foreign nationals (*Constitution of Myanmar*, 2008). Hence, this will directly affect Suu Kyi whose late husband was a British, as well as her two sons.

Now it will be interesting to see what will be her strategy to clinch the position of the President. Whether, she will pressurize military to agree for a constitutional amendment or will surpass the constitution. She may go for a compromise with the existing provisions and nominate someone from her party. While, some feels that she may go for the post of speaker.

Conclusion

I personally feels that being a speaker, she will face constraints as well as confined to the houses under Myanmar's complicated parliamentary-presidency system. Hence, she will neither be able to defend the government nor lead the peace process as claimed. Thus, it's clear that the transition has just begun and road ahead has many challenges. The military's involvement in politics won't end. The NLD will bend and convince the military to cooperate. Whatsoever will be the case, the spotlight will remain on Myanmar for the next coming few months to observe Suu Kyi's steps to democratization, establishing ethnic harmony and peace in the country.

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About the author

Kaveri is a Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) student at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

She may be contacted at kaveri.urmil@yahoo.com.