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Myanmar's 'Civilian' Government: One Month On

By Kyaw San Wai

Synopsis

One month into office, President Thein Sein's government has been sending mixed signals on reform. Many challenges remain for the fledgling government. How should ASEAN respond to this "new" face of the ruling elite in Myanmar?

Commentary

SINCE BEING sworn in, President Thein Sein has made a number of speeches stressing the need to develop and cooperate. We now wait to see if the words are translated into action. Events inside the country signal a mix of old and new approaches to address Myanmar's chronic problems. The military junta has been officially disbanded but many doubt that it has truly relinquished power. Parliament is dominated by the junta's proxy party – the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

Before disbanding, the junta introduced compulsory National Service and allocated 30% of the national budget to the military, compared to 11% for social services, education and health combined. Although the military continues to receive a large portion of the first-ever revealed budget, it is a decrease from past estimates; education and health spending roughly doubled, albeit from previous meagre levels. Dissident groups have been quick to point out that the new government has not actively addressed crucial issues.

Yet, the new Parliament exhibits a level of accountability unseen for several decades. Dissenting opinion is now represented in government, which for years had operated on the army's mentality of unquestioned loyalty. Some analysts also predict an eventual split between the USDP and the military over clashes of interest. Given Myanmar's political climate, the new administration is most unlikely to bring about rapid or radical change.

President Thein Sein

President Thein Sein hails from the Army and is an ardent loyalist of former junta supremo Senior General Than Shwe, who reportedly lingers as the power behind the throne. U Thein Sein was the regime's prime minister since 2007. Some observers portray him as indecisive, incapable and unlikely to pose any threat to Than Shwe while others describe him as of high calibre and incorrupt. Thein Sein was allegedly unwilling to be president due to his health and a few have stated he might not survive the term.

He has made a number of carefully-worded speeches calling for open government, reform and national

reconciliation. The junta's long-time critics have pointed to what they describe as lack of concrete developments in the first month of his presidency. However, a cautious optimism exists that Myanmar is slowly carrying out much-needed reforms under President Thein Sein.

Western Responses

Western states have sent mixed signals concerning Myanmar's new administration. The European Union has displayed a more flexible approach while the United States and United Kingdom have pursued the same tack as before despite a semblance of accommodation. President Obama nominated Derek Mitchell as his special representative to Myanmar to coordinate US policy towards Myanmar. The EU has eased travel restrictions on civilian cabinet members and lifted a ban on high-level visits by EU officials to Myanmar although other sanctions were extended.

The US has stated that it is unwilling to work with ASEAN should Myanmar assume its chairmanship in 2014 -- Myanmar forfeited its turn in 2006 after rumblings from the West. Some lawmakers are also pushing for a probe into possible crimes against humanity. The US continues to fall back on megaphone diplomacy, allowing dissidents and lobbyists a big say in bilateral relations.

Silver Lining

A silver lining is, however, emerging in the regimented Myanmar practice of 'disciplined' democracy: the national budget and government accountability are being discussed -- actions non-existent in Myanmar only six months ago. A mixed central cabinet of civilian and military, new and old appointees, alongside regional parliaments and ministers, now form the backbone of the legislative branch of the Burmese government.

A symbolic act is the appointment of Sai Mauk Kham, an ethnic Shan doctor albeit from the USDP, as the Second Vice President. The media remains heavily regulated but the government announced the relaxing of censorship of apolitical journals. In a rare move, U Myint -- a close friend of opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi and former United Nations official -- has been appointed chief economic adviser.

An official has disclosed that some prisoners would be granted amnesty, although it is unclear if it includes political prisoners. The new government has also been praised for its response to the recent earthquake in the north-east of the country, compared to the response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

Future Challenges

Fragile ceasefires between the Army and ethnic minorities are under tremendous strain. Hydroelectric dams being constructed by Chinese companies are deeply resented by the local ethnic Kachins who fear flooding of land sacred to them. Most of the generated electricity would be sold to China. Although President Thein Sein has stressed the need for cooperation with the ethnic minorities, a long-term *modus vivendi* remains to be worked out with the various ethnic groups, most of which had engaged in armed rebellion against successive governments.

An arduous process of national reconciliation is needed after human rights violations in the name of national unity. Uncertainties continue about Myanmar's alleged nuclear ambitions and shady connections with North Korea. The question of internally displaced persons and refugees also remain to be answered.

Puppet Show or Baby Steps?

It is still too early to decide if Myanmar's new parliament is a puppet show or honest 'baby steps' towards the eventual devolution of power. Many of the changes to date have been symbolic and recent Burmese history is replete with false dawns. Dissident groups remain acerbic and describe the new government as merely old wine in a new bottle.

Justified as they may be, this would do little to encourage moderates and reformists within the new administration to change the government's approach to issues regarding human rights, ethnic tensions and democratic reform. The direction, depth and pace of reform rest on how much President Thein Sein's administration is truly inclined to embrace change. Equally important is how far the Army would tolerate it.

The upcoming ASEAN summit in Indonesia is not Thein Sein's first. But it would be a crucial barometer of regional perceptions of the new administration. It is also a test of ASEAN's resolve to see Myanmar undergo genuine transition. Myanmar's aspirations for the ASEAN chairmanship could be put to good use as ASEAN's bargaining chip for reform in Myanmar.

Kyaw San Wai is a Research Analyst with the External Programmes at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. A Myanmar national, his research interests include ethnic politics and civil society in modern Burmese politics.