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By-Elections in Myanmar: Too Early to Lift Sanctions

By Alex Bookbinder

Synopsis

The victories by Aung San Suu Kyi and her party in recent by-elections in Myanmar signal a step forward in its political reform. Removing Western sanctions now would give Naypyidaw no further incentive to continue the reform process.

Commentary

AUNG SAN Suu Kyi's victory in Myanmar's recent parliamentary by-elections has been hailed internationally as evidence of substantial political change in the country. Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won 43 out of the 44 seats they contested, an overwhelming victory despite significant irregularities and intimidation throughout the campaign period. However the NLD's role in Myanmar's politics, as the official opposition in parliament, is little more than symbolic, as the party holds a mere 7% of seats in the legislature.

Although Suu Kyi's presence in parliament lends some legitimacy to the military-turned-'civilian' government, the political reforms undertaken in Myanmar since the November 2010 general election have been largely cosmetic. These reforms were intended to rehabilitate the image of the military-dominated government both at home and abroad, conceding a bare minimum to the opposition.

Window dressing?

Nevertheless the NLD's new-found role in parliament is evidence that, in some respects, western economic sanctions have worked to force Naypyidaw's hand towards political reform. India, China and Myanmar's ASEAN neighbours had questioned the wisdom of Western-imposed sanctions, and promoted "constructive engagement" of the Myanmar government as an alternative. Yet it could be argued that Myanmar's recent political reforms have been motivated in large part by a desire to improve ties with the West, and to reduce the country's dependence on its more powerful regional neighbours.

Western governments and NGOs maintain that many issues still need to be addressed if Myanmar is to achieve a minimally acceptable standard for sanctions to be lifted entirely. Just as political reforms in Myanmar to date have been cautious and easily reversible, so too should the process by which sanctions are removed.

“Democratic” Myanmar and violence

State-sponsored violence targeting ethnic minorities in the country's borderlands remains a serious problem, and is one that must be addressed before economic sanctions are lifted. Last year, the government unilaterally broke a longstanding ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) after the KIA refused to convert into a “border guard force” subservient to Naypyidaw.

KIA sources claim that fighting hit a peak in December and January, when international attention on Myanmar was focused on high-profile visits to Naypyidaw by US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and others. At least 75,000 civilians have been displaced by fighting since July 2011, according to Human Rights Watch. The military has attempted to undermine unity between armed ethnic groups by negotiating with some groups while simultaneously attacking others. Until the government makes a concerted effort to end state-sponsored violence, rewarding Naypyidaw with the removal of sanctions will be premature and send a wrong signal that such actions are acceptable to the international community.

Forced displacement and other human rights violations against civilians have increased markedly across the country since the government began its re-branding in 2010 by shedding military uniforms for civilian attire. There is a strong relationship between displacement and development in Myanmar, and this dynamic will only become more prevalent if comprehensive sanctions are lifted right away.

A major reason for resurgent fighting between the government and the KIA was the latter's opposition to the construction of the Myitsone dam project in Kachin State, a project financed by China, which, if built, will flood an area larger than Singapore and displace tens of thousands. Citing popular opposition to the project, the government announced a moratorium on construction in late September.

However, Naypyidaw's backtracking on the Myitsone project should not be seen as a victory for Myanmar's fledgling civil society. Rather, the government's announcement was intended to indicate to China that it seeks to balance its relations with it and the West, while signalling to Western governments that ‘democratic norms’ are now allegedly guiding its policy decisions. All of this may have just been political grandstanding, however: a leaked internal government memo dated 28 March 2012 that surfaced in early April, indicated that the government intends to immediately re-start work on the Myitsone project, popular dissatisfaction notwithstanding.

Sanctions: Hard pressure that works

A new law intended to make Myanmar more attractive for foreign investment, recently passed by Parliament may also be cause for concern, as it is feared that it will prioritise the property rights of big agri-businesses over those of small-hold private farmers. It, too, may result in massive displacement once the government embarks upon its planned agricultural modernisation programme. Western governments may highlight another issue that could prevent normalisation, that is the roughly 900 political prisoners that remain behind bars.

Secretary Clinton announced on 4 April that as a reward for fair play during the by-elections, the United States would relax certain sanctions restricting the export of financial services, name an ambassador, and revoke visa bans placed on some government officials. But Clinton also explained that sanctions against individuals and firms working against democratisation would remain in place. Limited concessions like these, at this stage, are a proportionate reward for the limited improvements the government has made in recent months, and would be easy to reverse if Myanmar were to backslide.

China and ASEAN have urged Western states to drop all sanctions against Naypyidaw immediately following the by-elections. This would be premature given the continuance of state-sponsored violence. The pressure created by sanctions has prompted the Myanmar government to undertake limited reforms thus far. These same instruments will likely prompt further reforms, if Naypyidaw continues to prioritise building good relations with Western governments.

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