

AUNG NAING OO asks if Burma's new Constitution has finally succeeded in justifying the armed forces' claim to a dual role as defenders and rulers of the nation.

The new Constitution seeks to justify a military role in politics, but unless things improve after the election, it will be at best a temporary extension of a failed political experiment



In a vibrant region that has achieved significant economic development in recent decades, Burma could have done better, at least economically. It has not.

After two military coups and three constitutions—the latest of which has yet to be implemented—since achieving independence in 1948, Burma remains poor and underdeveloped, despite being rich in natural resources. Peace and prosperity have eluded the country, and it remains isolated from the mainstream of the international community.

Since 1962, successive military governments have experimented with socialism and a semi-market economy. But they have yet to find a polity that will provide them with the system they seek—a semblance of civilian rule, a dose of democracy, a robust market economy and military dominance.

Now, however, the military believes that it has found its Holy Grail in the 2008 Constitution.

Almost all Burmese political groups, both inside the country and in exile, oppose the Constitution and the way it was conceived, developed and ratified. The people are also skeptical—few expect the Constitution or the coming election to improve their lives.

But at the same time, many still nurture some hope of change for the better. However much opposition groups decry the entire process as a sham, some people will try to take advantage of any opening the new polity may offer, if only because they think it is the only game in town.

“Take it or leave it” pretty much sums up the choices on offer. Against the backdrop of unresolved ethnic conflicts and deep-rooted geopolitical concerns, the military leadership is not about to let the country’s 54 million people decide the fate of the nation. All the generals want at this point is an endorsement of a political system that reflects military ideology and priorities, no matter how halfhearted. And it looks like they may get it.

At the core of the 2008 Constitution is the military government’s cherished notion of “*dwifungsi*”—the term used by former Indonesian President Suharto to describe the “dual function” of the military as both defender and ruler of the nation.

This ideology has dominated Burmese military thinking ever since the army took power from the democratically elected government of U Nu in 1962, citing the need to counter growing ethnic unrest. It prevailed both during the 26-year period that the country was ruled under the disastrous experiment known as the “Burmese Way to Socialism” and in the more than two decades since the current regime seized power after crushing a nationwide pro-democracy uprising in 1988.

It was that massive outpouring of anti-regime sentiment that made it clear to Burma’s rulers that the country could not be governed by military might alone. The generals realized that they would have to allow some form of civilian participation in governance. They therefore promised elections. But when the National League for Democracy won a landslide victory in the 1990 polls, the shocked generals repudiated the results.

Since 1990, the military has embarked on a different path, deciding that it must first oversee the writing and ratification of the Constitution—a process that took a total of 15 years. But at no point during this time has it ever wavered from its belief that it is duty-bound to rule the nation, even as it strives to fulfill its promise of a return to civilian rule.

The 2008 Constitution is the generals' cup into which the oil and water of these contradictory theories can mix.

This semi-civilian rule may be perceived at home and abroad as little more than a facade for military rule, but like it or not, it looks set to come into force in the very near future. The only question, then, is not whether it will become Burma's new political reality, but how long it will survive once it does.

New situations or conflicts may demand a total or partial alteration of the Constitution. If this proves impossible, a revolution may take place. The ghost of Burma's constitutional past may haunt the current charter's inflexible statutes.

For the time being, however, the regime seems to believe that the new Constitution will last at least as long as its predecessors. Even if this doesn't guarantee the military a permanent role in politics, it will give it a new lease on life—and after decades of struggling to justify military rule, this may be the best the generals can hope for.

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