

Burma's top generals are exchanging their uniforms for longyis in the clear hope that the world will be fooled into thinking that a civilian, non-military government is taking power after the general election.

Veiled and well-founded skepticism marked the US reaction to the Burmese military government's announcement last week that "Prime Minister" Gen Thein Sein and 22 other military officers had resigned from their posts in order to contest the general "election".

A belief in Washington that the regime has long proved incapable of acting in good faith when it comes to making genuine changes was barely concealed. The US State Department's Phillip Crowley rhetorically asked whether the resignation meant that the regime "opens up" or whether it simply amounts to "wolves changing to sheep's clothing."

But we Burmese, whose country has the world's highest mortality rate from venomous snake-bites, have a more culturally appropriate characterization of these resignations than Crowley's: "snakes shedding skins."

As a matter of fact, the resignations on 26 April were nothing more than obedience as military subordinates to Sr Gen Than Shwe's order to play a different role in the junta leader's election game.

What these men in military uniform relinquish in titles and attire is categorically less consequential than what they retain. That is, their corporate sense of political entitlement to rule the country in perpetuity, as its militarist collective psyche.

Furthermore, these men, in mufti or general's tunics, are uniformly afflicted with a superiority complex vis-à-vis the Burmese public while, conversely, suffering quietly from an inferiority complex and attendant resentment vis-à-vis the West and western-educated Burmese—Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, for instance.

Both these pathological complexes have long been institutionalized under successive tin-pot dictators since the late Gen Ne Win. They are endemic within the military.

This corporate outlook, conditioned through a half-century of systematic intra-military propaganda at officers' training schools and academies, will remain the psychological bedrock on which will rest what I call "military apartheid" disguised as a Constitutional Rule under the tutelage of the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, or "Discipline Flourishing Democracy" as the regime likes to put it.

As long as the emerging military apartheid with a civilian façade retains all the pathological ingredients of its former self, in terms of both the officer corps' psychological make-up and the military's institutional relations and behaviour vis-à-vis the civilian public and other national institutions (such as judicial, legislative, executive, commercial, and societal), neither the votes in Than Shwe's election nor the resignation en masse of top generals will bring about changes the people desperately need.

The regime's electoral design and its Constitution offer absolutely no prospect for bringing about improvements in food and human security, greater political and civil rights, genuine popular participation in politics, the rule of law, reconstruction of the moribund economy, reversing the trend of Burma becoming a "resource curse," ethnic equality and reconciliation.

To be sure, the election and politics alone cannot deliver on basic food and human security and developmental necessities. But the election, if it is broad-based and credible, can help lay the foundation for a better political economy which can potentially facilitate the realization of other developmental, human security and humanitarian goals.

Objectively speaking, Burmese generals have a long and ignoble history of cheating the public since 1958 when it comes to constitutional rule and elections. The attempts by the ruling mob to rig this year's election are matched only by the dishonourable record of election-meddling by their past bosses.

The problem isn't simply that individual officers, who have swapped their military titles for the honorific "U" and their uniforms for longyi, may continue to behave, which they undoubtedly will, as if they were entitled to order about every civilian citizen with whom they come into contact in their new line of assignments, be it legislative, judicial, commercial or executive.

To be fair to them, some of these ex-officers may even be personally likeable, decent, good-hearted and family-oriented.

But these positive personal attributes amount to little when it comes to their militaristic modus operandi and their core interests — wealth accumulation, monopoly of power, status and privileges.

Even in the unlikely event that 23 freshly-minted civilians, including former general and now U Thein Sein and his fellow ex-soldiers, are able to erase the psychological stains of their old selves and start behaving in a manner befitting nation-building democrats and civilian politicians, the military has no shortage of junior officers who will whip them into line if their new-found democratic thoughts and behaviour become a threat to the military's monopoly control of power, politics and class privileges.

At the moment, more than 1,000 Burmese military officers are receiving advanced training in various military sciences and weapons technologies in Russia alone, not to mention thousands of serving military officers who hold numerous command posts, with different vested interests, in the estimated 400,000-strong Tatmadaw (Armed Forces).

The country's woes are primarily institutional in nature, whether the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw is named Ne Win, Than Shwe or Shwe Mann. This is contrary to the conventional wisdom that Burma is a personal fiefdom successively ruled by tin-pot military rulers with their certifiable socio-pathological traits.

We used to say things would get better once the ageing despot Ne Win was gone. Now we are hearing life will improve in post-Than Shwe Burma.

When will we ever learn?

The painful truth is the Tatmadaw, most specifically its most powerful branch, namely the Army, has long swallowed the State, since General Ne Win's coup in 1962.

What distinguishes the Tatmadaw from other armed forces which have willingly or inadvertently acted as the main power base for autocratic military rulers—from the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand to Chile, Portugal, Brazil and Argentina—is the fact that the Army is the State in Burma.

However patriotic, as a self-styled nation-builder, Burma's military is a complete failure. Its record of 50 years in power speaks for itself.

This Army-State has destroyed, with varying degrees of absoluteness and success, all constituent entities that necessarily make up a typical political economy of a modern nation-state, that is, judiciary, legislature, administration, political parties, economy and citizenry. It is least-equipped both intellectually and psychologically to now rebuild these institutions.

In the politics and process of national reconstruction, Aung San Suu Kyi and 2,000 plus dissidents behind bars matter, and they matter immensely. Their unhindered participation in "politics as public service" can, and will, bring credibility to the nation-building process, unleash a national sense of hope and optimism, release the public's social energies, repair foreign relations, mobilize expertise and resources the country desperately needs, and, last but not least, facilitate ethnic reconciliation.

The faddish discourses of "space", real or imagined, are woefully inattentive to or deliberately oblivious of a certainty that this near-totalitarian Army-State will immediately shut down any space the minute it becomes too autonomous or threatening to the military's core interests: near-monopoly over life, liberty and property of the citizenry.

Come polling time, the Burmese public will remain acutely aware of the "election without teeth," where they will be damned if they vote and damned if they don't.

If, on the one hand, they turn up to vote even remotely acceptable candidates, their electoral participation will afford the generals the opportunity to proclaim the election "a success." on the other hand, if the public don't turn up to vote, the cheaters in power, in mufti or still in uniform,

will “confiscate” their votes, giving them away to pro-military candidates, and still declare a landslide for their Peace and Development Party.

Tragically for the Burmese electorate, whatever the outcome, the generals' election will be hailed as a sign of progress, indication of the country “moving in the right direction”—not just by the regime's partners in Asia (such as China, India and ASEAN countries), but also by Western governments and UN agencies, which are longing to wash their hands of Aung San Suu Kyi's ineffectual opposition and revert back to business-as-usual with the Burmese regime.

Indeed, Burma still has much more oil to drill, more gas to pump, more trees to fell, more minerals to mine. The global “humanitarian” industry is not alone in waiting to expand its business in Burma. The anti-Chinese western security and commercial establishments, from London and Washington to Berlin and Paris, would like to revive their once cosy Cold War ties with the Burmese generals.

These are commodities and strategic ties which the democratic opposition, however noble, is in no position to trade with these global players.

They are in reality the “stuff of pragmatism,” the pursuit of which is the *raison d'etre* of international non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations and national governments.

The power of such discursive terms as “political pragmatism” or “political realism” is such that it enables the “international community” to hold its collective nose and get with the generals' programme in Burma.

Bye Bye Democracy! Hello Army-State!