

The Burmese people have had tough luck with elections. No elections they have had so far has been free, fair and inclusive. The elections, even in the so-called “constitutional era (1948-1962),” were little short of “procedural democracy” for two reasons—the civil war had disenfranchised much of the population and the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) government had admittedly abused its power to win all the elections.

As such, the demise of Burma’s “constitutional era” can be attributed not just to extra-parliamentary factors such as civil war but also to the League’s parliamentary politics which were exclusive in the beginning and factionalist in the end. Following the 1951-52 elections, the AFPFL was made aware of its democratic deficits but, having to defend itself in the civil war of all against all, it missed the chance to improve the electoral system and parliamentary democracy.

In 1958, Premier Nu admitted that he was wrong to have “put the cart before the ox,” meaning that his government began large-scale development and welfare programs before they achieved lasting peace, the most crucial prerequisite for any country’s development.

The same year Nu’s relinquishing of state power to the “caretaker government” led by the military chief General Ne Win is seen as a “dress rehearsal” for the Burmese armed forces’ future interventions in the country’s politics.

The AFPFL politicians who had emerged from the Thakin movement in the 1930s had worn each other out politically and personally by the end of 1950s. This led to the polarization and implosion of the League, the polarization of society, and finally to the 1962 military coup by the “Revolutionary Council” led by Ne Win.

As it would turn out, Ne Win’s coup benefited neither side of the Cold War. Neither would it help Burma since Ne Win’s regime did not fare better than the AEPFL in containing the civil war and improving the country’s economy. Locally it was met with mixed reactions. At the forefront of the opposition to Ne Win’s junta were radical student organizations, Communists and a few brave intellectuals, in addition to the politicians and hereditary leaders whose power had been robbed.

On the other hand, many politicians who were marginalized during the AFPFL years welcomed Ne Win’s move even if they were anxious about his planned one-party socialist state.

Ne Win's civilization of his junta, the formation and strengthening of a nationwide Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), took 10 years. One of the most significant steps in the process was the drafting and approving of the 1973 constitution. Out of almost 29 million Burmese people in 1973, there were almost 14.7 million eligible voters. More than 14 million, including the overseas Burmese, voted in the 1973 constitutional referendum.

The countrywide approval rate for the BSPP constitution was doctored to be 90.19 percent. Yet Ne Win's regime made no pretense of its status in ethnic areas when it revealed that the approval rate was just 66.4 percent in Shan State and 66.8 percent in Kachin State. The referendum did not happen in "black and brown areas (conflict zones)" where about 150 people were kidnapped and 11, killed by the "rebels."

The January 1974 election to the unicameral 451-member "People's Parliament" went relatively quietly because there was no opposition party. All of the candidates in the 451 constituencies were the BSPP nominees. In all but one constituency, ballots were cast successfully. In some ethnic areas, the people did not know who they elected. The Revolutionary Council officially ceased to exist in March 1974 when Ne Win handed over the power to the newly elected 450-member People's Parliament, which formed a 28-member State Council, which in turn selected Ne Win to its chair.

Apart from a handful of dissidents and some citizens who chose to "vote with their feet" by leaving the country, the Burmese people by and large had participated in Ne Win's subsequent sham elections and contributed to the mismanagement of the country until one day in August 1988, when people decided enough was enough. The moment all the Burmese people revolted in unison, the seemingly monolithic socialist regime cracked.

On September 11, 1988, the BSPP, under enormous pressures of a nationwide people uprising, held an emergency meeting, formed an election commission and promised a multi-party election in three months. By that time, the people's demand, an immediate regime change to be followed by a "democracy government," had far outweighed what the BSPP could offer.

A week later, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), claiming that the army needed to "establish law and order to hold elections so that political change can take place," replaced the BSPP. The restoration of law and order was particularly harsh and bloody.

The tragedy of the failed uprising is that it resulted in the death of at least 2,000 protesters and the displacement of at least 10,000 individuals who fled to the border areas while it ushered in a new era of military rule that would later become the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

From October 1988 to June 1989, the SLORC issued a series of election commission, party registration and election laws. The laws disqualified parties and candidates with connection to “foreign powers” and insurgent groups. In February 1989, the SLORC’s election committee announced that the election was scheduled in May 1990, giving political parties a fourteen-month campaign period. The actual election date, May 27, 1990, however, was decided much later by the SLORC in November 1989.

A total of 235 parties were registered for the 1990 election. Many of the parties were said to be after political party prerogatives such as four telephone lines per party and petrol allocation by the SLORC.

After a total of 102 parties backed off from the election on their own volition, and 40 parties were disqualified for one reason or another, 93 parties remained to contest in the election. The BSPP was transformed into the National Unity Party (NUP) to contend the major opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) founded by Aung San Suu Kyi.

As early as in 1989, Suu Kyi knew that her party was being systematically sabotaged by the SLORC. In reality, the SLORC took every measure to keep the NLD from winning the election. In the run-up to the 1990 election, the whole country remained under martial law by which a grouping of more than five on the street was illegal and civilian courts were replaced by military tribunals in most parts of Burma.

More than once, Suu Kyi’s life was threatened on her campaign trips for criticizing the BSPP/SLORC and Ne Win. In 1989 alone, no less than 4,000 NLD members and supporters were arrested. By July 1989, the party leaders Suu Kyi and Tin Oo were under house-arrest. Numerous other opposition figures, from former Premier Nu to student leader Min Ko Naing, were also incarcerated.

Other measures by the SLORC to tighten its grip on the electoral process in 1989 included issuing citizenship identity cards to every Burmese aged 18 and above and checking the

citizenships of political candidates. Citizenship identification meant that thousands of Burma-born immigrant Chinese and Indian were disenfranchised.

The 1990 electoral politics were literally amyothar naingan yay or politics of men — out of a total of 2,296 candidates for 485 seats, only 84 were women. Out of about 20.8 million eligible voters, more than 15 million (72.59 percent) cast ballots on May 27, 1990. The people, who had not seen a multi-party election in 30 years, simply believed they were voting for a regime change.

Ballots were reportedly voided in several constituencies country wide, especially in rural areas, where improperly marked ballots were declared invalid by electoral authorities. The SLORC announced that 12.3 percent of all the votes were voided, one in every eight votes in some constituencies.

The NLD “fought the election under the most arduous conditions” and managed to win 59.87 percent of all the votes cast. The first-past-the-post-voting system meant that the party swept 392 out of 485 parliamentary or assembly seats, compared to 10 seats won by the NUP, which got 21.16 percent of all the votes. Candidates from 19 ethnic minority parties and six independents captured the remaining 83 seats.

As it transpired, the SLORC/SPDC never had any intention of transferring power to the NLD. Instead the SLORC/SPDC began systematic operations against the NLD, using Fabian tactics to wear the party out in twenty years time, until the party decided to boycott the 2010 election and ceased to be a “legal party.”

Since the SPDC hopes that its electoral process would channel public discontent to procedural democracy, Suu Kyi’s decision to boycott the SPDC’s 2010 election may be a vital move for her party’s identity and continuity as an opposition movement.

On the other hand, there are a number of dissidents, including former NLD members, who at great personal and political risk, wish to probe the SPDC’s legislature politics.

Their motives are little appreciated, especially in light of the NLD's boycott.

While liberal toleration of different political positions remains low within the Burmese democracy movement, the regime has consolidated its power and transformed its 24-million strong mass organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), into a mass political party, the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP), with the sole purpose of protecting the military oligarchy and winning future elections.

As if this were not enough, the SPDC has since 2003 encouraged the countrywide formation of Swan Arr Shin vigilante units that could intimidate the opposition.

Burmese electoralism, and Burmese political culture for that matter, has always been characterized by the elimination of one opposition by another, a zero-sum game historically. It is widely expected that the USDP will be aiming for near-hundred percent seizure of the available 438 parliamentary seats in the 664-member bicameral legislature.

Yet the USDP's total success cannot be ascertained. As German political historian Hans-Bernd Zöllner pointed out, charismatic leadership is an essential element in the electoral success of any Burmese political party in history. It was the charisma of Aung San, Nu, and Suu Kyi that was behind the sweeping success of their parties in 1947, 1960 and 1990 elections respectively.

The USDP, which lacks both legitimacy as a state-backed party and charismatic leadership, may face more challenges than they have taken into account in the future, when faced with an opposition from both within and outside the electoral process.

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