

Writing about the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 19th century that “the most perilous moment for bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways.” As evidenced by the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, his theory still proves correct two-hundred years later.

Today in Burma, Snr-Gen Than Shwe's military junta is superficially purporting to mend its ways by calling an election. Is this a potentially perilous moment for his regime? Or is it just another sign of resilient tyranny?

Burmese history instructs that the perceived prospect of an opening in the country's closed political system, or of a political realignment, emboldens the public to rally behind opposition movements and against the regime.

For example, in 1988, Ne Win's unexpected resignation, and his support of a change from one-party rule to a multiparty system, greatly boosted the public's expectation and confidence that meaningful reform could occur and helped the opposition groups rally public support behind their causes.

But the political environment surrounding the 2010 elections may not provide a similar strategic opening for opposition groups to expand their political space. This time around, Than Shwe has taken every possible measure to send a clear signal to the people of Burma that there will be no real change in power after the 2010 elections, and the public should not entertain any false hopes.

For one thing, Than Shwe is revealing his election plan step-by-step, including the yet-to-be-announced election date, in order to show both that he is in complete control of the pace of the campaign and that the election will not be a momentous event.

In addition, the 2008 constitution, the 2010 election laws, recent Election Commission directives and the press censorship board's increased restrictions on election coverage by local journals have confirmed that the elections are not an opportunity for regime transition, let alone change. Instead, they are a sly attempt to achieve regime durability.

But election cheerleaders, including some diplomats, foreign experts, think-tank groups and, of course, domestic apologists, keep screaming that the 2010 elections could bring some form of political liberalization, and for that reason both the opposition parties and the general public should participate.

Their arguments follow three related lines of discourse: “The election is the only game in town”; “Something is better than nothing”; and “National League for Democracy (NLD) members are not the only democrats in Burma.”

The question we must ask with respect to each argument is: Will participation in the election for this reason lead to genuine political transition and economic development, or will it help provide the semblance of legitimacy the junta craves?

### **The Election is the Only Game in Town**

Wrong. To begin with, it cannot be claimed that the election is the only game in town when most of the main opposition parties have chosen not to participate. Even if the 2010 elections, and the new government based on the 2008 Constitution, were the only game in town, they would not provide the path to meaningful reform in Burma because they would not bring about the required state-building effort, a process in which all key parties—democratic opposition groups as well as ethnic resistance groups—rally together and make their voices heard.

The NLD, who won the 1990 election by a landslide, decided not to renew its party registration under the regime’s “unjust election laws” and not to contest the elections. In addition, no less than ten ethnic ceasefire groups refused to disarm and join the elections.

Several of these ceasefire groups held a meeting in May at the headquarters of the United Wa State Army near the China-Burma border, during which the groups reportedly agreed, for their own reasons, to support the NLD’s decision not to compete in the election—saying that an election under the 2008 Constitution would offer no guarantee of ethnic rights in Burma.

As the intractable conflicts between the regime and the NLD and the armed ethnic groups linger on, the center of political gravity will not likely shift toward the regime's election game plan. Especially given the fact that, according to several media reports, public interest in the 2010 election is very low.

If history serves as a guide, the 2010 elections could be compared to Burma's 1920s dyarchy elections, organized by the British colonial rulers in an unsuccessful attempt to pacify the country's nationalistic surge. The opposition parties did not deem this election the only game in town, and some boycotted the polls. When the pro-independence conflicts continued following the election, the boycott did not cost its advocates, who had held their moral high ground.

A contrasting historical example is the 1947 election, which differed significantly from the dyarchy elections because two key players—the British colonizers and the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) led by Aung San—reached a prior agreement to hold the elections as a power-sharing step toward independence.

Under these circumstances, although the 1947 election may not have been the only game in town, it was a mainstream political game. Therefore, parties such as the Red-flag Communist Party of Burma, the Karen National Union and U Saw's Myochit (Patriotic) Party that boycotted the election suffered the cost of being sidelined from mainstream politics.

Burma's history, therefore, appears to instruct that a consensus between key opposing players on the process and goal of transition is a prerequisite to making an election credible and its outcome legitimate. Only then will polls deescalate conflicts. And only then will they be "the only game in town."

There is certainly no such consensus in 2010, nor does one appear to be on the horizon.

In an article that appeared in *The Irrawaddy* online in early 2008 ( [The 2010 Election Challenges](#) ), this author argued that the incompatible goals of the military elite and the opposition, including ethnic minorities, will not be transformed by the new Constitution and the 2010 election. The regime's

imposition of the one-sided 2008 Constitution and the unfair process being played out for the upcoming 2010 elections will not likely minimize the cost of conflict for the military. The most visible costs will be the continuation of international isolation and further damage to the country's economy.

The opposition—democratic forces as well as ethnic groups—will continue to fight for the goal of national reconciliation and ethnic autonomy, but they understand that they are likely to find themselves ineffective within the new government's institutional procedures that favor the military's domination.

Therefore, the opposition groups will have to pursue alternative courses of action following the election, including public mobilization, international advocacy and possibly even renewal of guerrilla warfare in the borderlands. And the generals will use the same method of coercion against the people even after the 2010 election, so the existing grievances and public hostility towards the military will be compounded and antagonistic civil-military relations will continue.

In fact, political transition is not likely to take place within the framework of a military-imposed constitution. Even amendments made to the constitution in the hope of gradual reform will not be possible within military-dominated parliamentary debate and a new power arrangement. Such reform could happen only if the status-quo is challenged by public pressure from the outside and a negotiated settlement is reached with the military.

Thus, the NLD was right when it argued that the regime's proposed election is not the only game in town, and was right not to re-register and contest an election governed by unfair and unjust election laws that bar more than 2,000 political prisoners from the electoral process, including NLD party leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, although the election is clearly not the only game in town, it is one front being fought in the opposition's overall battle for democracy and human rights. Thus, as this author argued in *The Irrawaddy* more than one year ago ( [Burma's Opposition Must Wage Proxy Fight](#) ), the NLD was wrong in its unwillingness or incapacity to diversify its pro-democracy struggles and avoid a split within the party by setting up or at least allowing a proxy party to exist.

In this respect, the NLD itself could learn a lesson from the history of Burma's independence

struggle.

In 1936, the radical group Dobama Asiayone (We Burman Association) formed the Komin Kochi (Our King, Our People) party as its proxy to contest that year's elections with the aim of fighting against the existing order from within parliament as well as from without. Although Komin Kochin won only three seats in the election, their formation of a proxy attempt demonstrates that even the most radical opposition elements realize that it is worthwhile to diversify one's struggle, especially when it helps to hold an opposition party together.

But the NLD leadership, instead of allowing (or even encouraging) those who would like to set up a political party to contest the 2010 elections, vilified the moderates within the group and caused the split.

It seems that the NLD leadership is not strategic enough to be aware of the advantages the whole movement could gain by franchising the forms of its struggle, rather than centralizing them. Their tendency to put all of their eggs in one basket led to a strategic blunder that could have long-term consequences for the opposition.

Broadly speaking, however, it would not be fair to assume such a policy decision was solely the outcome of the NLD leadership's independent choice. In Burma's political environment, responses are shaped not only by past repression and grievances, but also by political culture, and this illiberal environment strengthens value-loaded or principle-centric cultural norms that lead to inflexible decision making.

In addition, it should be cautioned that even if the NLD leaders were strategically savvy enough to diversify the forms of their struggle, positive results would not be guaranteed.

For instance, it is widely believed that Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)'s attempts to diversify their struggles by forming proxy Kachin parties such as the Kachin State Progressive Party, the Northern Shan State Progressive Party and the United Democracy Party (Kachin State), have thus far been unsuccessful because the regime's election commission has delayed the approval of these parties.

A proxy party even informally blessed by the NLD leadership may have met the same fate. However, it should not have stopped the NLD from making a worthwhile attempt at strategic franchising, at least to avoid the split.

### **Something is better than nothing**

That depends on how the election cheerleaders define “something.”

It is understandable that people living in the pluralistic Western world get excited when they hear the word “election.” However, the junta's election will not unleash a torrent of political changes and are not a panacea that will heal past wounds. They are a ploy to prolong and legalize the military regime's rule indefinitely.

The 2010 elections will, however, contribute to changes in the format of governance. The military regime has extensive experience with dictatorial, one-party rule, but the governing format following the election will be a new experiment for them. The new government will be a hybrid with two power centers—military and political. Regardless of who pulls the strings, this could lead to either a serious internal split or miserable inefficiency of the ruling body.

In other words, there will be tensions between the regime's desire for military supremacy and the new political procedures required by the hybrid parliamentary system. Will this be a crack in their power base that the opposition can take advantage of?

Although some advocates argue that the new hybrid system is in itself a trend towards liberalization, the nature of the power rivalry within the post-2010 ruling party will not necessarily lead to a new opening for the opposition groups in the short run, or democratization in the long run.

Even if it does eventually lead to democratic reforms, the question is how long will this process take? It may be too long to have any strategic relevance for opposition movements operating within the country and abroad, and for the long-suffering people of Burma.

Since the new Constitution has placed the military atop an untouchable altar, the tragic conditions that have led to extreme poverty, forced relocation, forced labor, child soldiers, political prisoners, internally displaced persons, refugees flooding into neighboring countries, rape and other human rights violations—all of which are associated with the military's unchecked power, interests and behavior—will remain unresolved.

The 2010 elections will not even bring meaningful economic reforms, because the military and its cronies will continue to disrupt and distort the country's market economy, such as it is.

And since the elected parliament's legislative power will be restricted and because it will not be able to oversee the military or the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), no civilian mechanisms will be available to redress the continued corruption and economic mismanagement.

In addition, unless the military concedes the ceasefire status quo in ethnic areas, or makes some accommodations in its forced disarmament strategy, after the election the prospect of negotiated political resolution with major ethnic ceasefire groups will remain bleak, and therefore the risk of renewed civil war, or widespread guerrilla warfare, cannot be ruled out.

So what exactly is the “something” that is better than nothing that the election cheerleaders envision resulting from the election?

It seems obvious that these advocates (especially foreign observers) apply the O'Donnell/Schmitter textbook approach to Burma without understanding or considering Burmese history and political culture.

They claim that it is pragmatic to promote the theory that elections—no matter how flawed—have a slippery slope tendency toward democratization and therefore could be a path to change and liberalization. Then they mock the committed activists inside Burma as an irrelevant force.

But the cheerleaders' overstatement of the election's significance in the Burmese context, and

their optimistic, linear view of liberalization and follow-up democratization, is theoretically simplistic and does not conform to Burmese history.

The pro-election advocates who believe that just getting a foot in the door is an important step should pay heed to Aleksandr Gelman's warning that: "Liberalization is an unclenched fist, but the hand is the same and at any moment it could be clenched again into a fist."

### **NLD members are not the only democrats in Burma**

This is True. Not every democrat in Burma is or was an NLD member. And the emergence of political parties, no matter how limited the political space they have to operate, is something to encourage because it may lead to political competition.

But it does not necessarily follow that every new party that is not directly aligned with the regime represents the public interest and will positively influence the direction and power structure of the country.

In fact, advocating this position is tricky, because it is basically an extension of the "third force" argument.

The "third force" refers to an array of groups who claim to steer a neutral path between the NLD and the regime. Most of these groups, however, lean more toward the positions of the junta in their outspoken anti-sanction views and open support for the 2010 elections.

When the election laws were published, many old faces resurfaced and resumed their political activities. Excluding the junta-backed USDP party and its cronies-turned-candidates, most of the newly formed political parties under regime's election laws are being founded by former activists, NLD splinters and small ethnic groups.

Any attempt at lumping them together and promoting them as the new opposition, however, is at best premature optimism and at worst an ill-conceived attempt to undermine the role of committed activists from the NLD, the Shan National League for Democracy, the 88 Generation Students and the monks.

Unlike these groups, who have long struggled for democracy and human rights in Burma, the so-called “new players” do not speak out against injustices suffered by the citizens at the hands of junta, let alone represent and fight for the rights of the general public.

It is not the “emerging new players” who are struggling to combat forced relocation, forced labor, child soldiers or HIV/AIDS on the ground level. And it is not the third force parties who are calling for national reconciliation as a necessary goal for the country’s future direction. It is still the NLD and their supporters who are at the forefront in representing and fighting for the public.

In fact, third force advocates, both domestic and abroad, snipe at the NLD's grassroots struggles, claiming they are confrontational, failed stances. This is nothing more than elitist arrogance.

Moreover, the emergence of civilian players will not necessarily promote a liberal environment and values such as tolerance under the new hybrid system.

The most intimate example from Burmese history is that of the pre-war politicians, with whom the British shared power from the 1920s through the 1930s. It was U Saw, the native Burmese civilian premier, who called upon the British Governor in the early 1940s to take repressive actions against “extreme politicians” in order to avoid disorder, and later ended up assassinating Aung San and his cabinet members in 1947.

Paul Collier was dead right when he claimed that democratic politics as often practiced in the countries of “the bottom billion” (i.e. hybrid systems that allow elections with repression) tends to attract candidates with criminal records.

And those who promote the option of emerging third force players without stating clearly what it

means to be a democrat confuse the moral clarity of people's struggle against dictatorship.

### **Than Shwe's 3G Democracy**

The debate about whether participation in the upcoming election is a legitimate means to accomplishing opposition goals is both healthy and necessary, but it should not be forgotten that while pro-democracy, human rights and ethnic rights advocates are arguing among themselves, Than Shwe is not wasting any time fueling his "disciplined-flourishing democracy" with the 3 Gs of of Guns, Goons and Gas.

From killing his own citizens when it suits his purposes to the pursuit of nuclear weapons that threaten neighboring countries; from the thugs of the Union Solidarity and Development Association and Swan Arr Shin to the ex-military candidates of the newly formed USDP; and from selling off the hydrocarbon and other natural resources of his country to promote his personal interests, Than Shwe is determined to utilize all means necessary to prove de Tocqueville's theory wrong in 21st century Burma and hold onto power.

No matter if the regime is clenching or unclenching its fist, the dictator-in-chief is making sure that it is his hand at work. Some may see participation in the elections as an opportunity to sever that hand. But more likely they are simply playing into it, and they risk being crushed when the fist clenches once more.

*Min Zin is a Burmese journalist living in exile.*