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In the “*Divine Comedy*,” Dante Alighieri noted that fortune-tellers are assigned to a very low circle of hell. Fortunately, there is no need to endanger one’s next incarnation by engaging in predictions of the results of Burma’s planned 2010 elections—the focus of events in Burma for the entire year. Whatever the result of the still unscheduled election, ultimate power will continue to rest with the military, for constitutional changes without military concurrence are impossible.

Military authority then will only in part be in uniform, as many former officers will be dressed in mufti as they retire to run for political office; many will be elected. Opposition voices in the two houses of the Burmese legislature at the national and local levels will be heard, but they will operate within strictures that cannot challenge major national issues. As Snr-Gen Than Shwe said, democracy of the “discipline-flourishing” type he advocates is like a new well that first produces muddy water, and the military will be its filter for some time.

It is certain that the various minorities—about one-third of the population—will be less than pleased with the election, which will legitimate the 2008 Constitution. Vocal elements among the minorities have sought greater autonomy and some form of “federalism,” a word and concept that has been anathema to the military leadership for two generations.

Although Burmese constitutions note the protection of local cultures, rhetoric has no relation to the reality of cultural conformity so effectively required. Some small groups will have more capacity for local decision-making, but they will be denied any semblance of national power.

As 2010 ends, the mixed reaction to these events needs no fortune-teller. The government will declare the process a success, and many Burmese will feel they at least have a weak voice in governance. Others will silently complain that the results are less than what was desirable or what was needed. Foreigners calling for “free and fair elections” have not defined their terms, so internationally there will be dissatisfaction in some states and institutions, and acceptance, somewhat reluctantly, in others.

The only fortune-teller needed is one to determine the most auspicious date for the election.

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