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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 several military coups since 1958 and three constitutions—the latest which is yet to be implemented, Burma remains poor and underdeveloped, despite being rich in natural resources. Peace and prosperity has eluded the country; it remains beset by internal conflicts and isolated from the mainstream of the international community.

Since 1962, successive military governments have experimented with socialism followed by a semi-market economy under pure military rule. 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.

No matter how oxymoronic it may sound however, the 2008 Constitution is likely to prove to be the Holy Grail the military has been looking for for so long.

But let us look further. Why the 2008 Constitution?

Almost all exiled Burmese political groups oppose the way the 2008 Constitution was conceived, developed and ratified—not to mention its contents. Most of the mainstream political parties inside the country are either against the Constitution or have serious reservations about it. Within the country, common people, focused on the struggle for daily survival, have been generally apathetic to the Constitution and are sceptical the election will lead to any improvements in their lives.

Burma's silent majority are desperate for change. They may nurture a small hope that the new Constitution and the first election in two decades will bring improvements—both in economical terms and personal freedoms. But the strident and vocal criticism from opposition groups against the Constitution and the upcoming election tend to drown out the more cautious voices from Burmese inside the country.

Given the current preparations to compete in the election by existing and new political forces within the country, it is clear that some people are going to try to take advantage of any opening the new polity may offer. But one thing is for sure: they all have reservations and are taking part only because they think it is the only game in town.

Against the backdrop of unresolved ethnic conflicts and deep-rooted geopolitical concerns, the military leadership will not let the country's 54 million people decide the fate of the nation.

To the ruling generals' way of thinking, any political system that they create must reflect military ideology and priorities. Clearly, the 2008 Constitution and the 2010 election are the products of such thinking. Thus, they themselves have become a "Hobson's Choice" for the Burmese people—a "take it or leave it" situation.

At the core of the 2008 Constitution is the military government's cherished notion of "*dwifungsi*"—based on former Indonesian President Suharto's self-assigned double duty of managing the country's internal governance and protecting it from security threats. Like the Indonesian army prior to democratization in Indonesia in 1997, Burma's armed forces believe they are duty-bound to both protect and rule.

This ideology has dominated military thinking ever since 1962 when the army took power from the democratically elected government of U Nu, citing the need to counter growing ethnic unrest.

The *dwifungsi* ideology prevailed during Burma's 26-year experiment with "the Burmese Way to Socialism." It ended abruptly in 1988 when students took to the streets, demanding the return of democracy; demonstrations that were brutally suppressed. The ensuing bloodbath is believed to have resulted in the deaths of around 3,000 unarmed demonstrators and the incarceration of several thousand others.

The Burmese military leaders retained their grip on power, and the belief in their "double duty" persists as the dominant force of the ideology that determines their practice.

The 1988 uprising, however, made clear that military rule alone was not capable of ensuring stability and economic development, nor did it have social and political acceptability.

The military realized that it would have to allow some form of civilian participation in governance. It 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. It has extended its rule on the pretext that it must first oversee the writing and ratification of the Constitution, a process that was finally concluded in 2008.

The military junta has never wavered from its deeply-held belief that it retains a “double duty” to the nation. For the past two decades, the junta has walked a tightrope of trying to live up to what it sees as its responsibilities of *dwifungsi* while fulfilling the 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 façade for pure military rule, but it appears to be imminent.

But will it last? How will the constitutional regime in the post-Thaw Shwe era—after his death—take shape?

New situations or conflicts may demand all or partial alteration of the Constitution. If it proves to be inadequate or unyielding, a revolution may take place.

Burma's post-colonial history demonstrates that constitutional abolishment generally occurs

every 12 to 14 years. The ghost of Burma's constitutional past may haunt the current charter's inflexible statutes.

Undeterred, all the preparations the army leadership has made since the dramatic turn of events in 1988 point to the fact that the military will lead the nation as an independent institution. It has retained a sizeable chunk of power in the 2008 Constitution.

A testament to the junta's resolve lies in a saying they have within the Burmese armed forces: "The military [officer] does not want to hear complaints about a hole in the water container; he just wants water when he needs it."

They, the ruling generals, will be undeterred. They believe they have found the right balance in mixing formulas. They believe they can afford another experiment for the next 12 to 14 years.

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