

Naypyidaw, a remote town located halfway between Burma's two main cities, Rangoon and Mandalay, has been the country's administrative capital since junta chief Snr-Gen Than Shwe deemed it so on Nov. 6, 2005. Five years less one day later, as per the 2008 Constitution, Naypyidaw will become a "Union territory" directly governed by the president after the election on Nov. 7.

The political structure of Burma will change after the election; however, the question is: will the political dynamism of the country shift from its old capital, Rangoon, to the new capital whose name translates into English as "The Abode of Kings"?

Traditionally, Rangoon has played the pivotal role in Burmese politics, as well as serving as the country's economic hub ever since colonial times. However, its status was degraded by the military junta when it packed its governmental and administrative bags and moved 200 miles north to an undeveloped site just two miles from Pyinmana.

The construction of the new parliament continued apace with the construction of eight-lane avenues, an international airport and a 24-hour electricity supply, as well as the migration of government officials and their families to the town.

Five years later, Burma's would-be modern metropolis will undergo the transition from a synthetic ghost town to a hive of parliamentary activity. Officially, it will become Burma's first civil administration in two decades.

The new parliament is composed of 31 buildings, as well as presidential mansions for the future president and two vice-presidents.

Synthetic, soulless and desperately devoid of social interaction, Naypyidaw has failed to persuade the staff and families of the United Nations agencies and foreign diplomatic missions to relocate their headquarters and embassies, severely undermining its integrity as a capital city.

The fact is that most ambassadors, diplomats, INGO heads and their families are accustomed to living the high life in whatever country they are assigned. They circulate at cocktail parties, dine at the best restaurants in the city, send their children to the best international schools and constantly receive invitations to glamorous society events.

A far cry from a life in bureaucratic Naypyidaw.

When the Union Election Commission opened its doors for political party registration in March, it was unsurprising that every major national party, bar one, had its headquarters in Rangoon. The exception was, of course, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which based its headquarters in Naypyidaw.

Asked about the political polarization of Rangoon and Naypyidaw, Chan Htun, a veteran politician and a former ambassador to China said: "I see Rangoon continuing to serve as the center of the democratic movement due to some key factors, such as population density, the

home of the political parties and the well-established transportation networks linking the country, while Naypyidaw emerges as the fortress of the ruling party.”

But could political tensions between the two cities spill over in the future?

“I don't think so,” said Wun Tha, an elected representative of the National League for Democracy in the 1990 election who currently works as a journalist. “Tension usually raises its head in a formidable situation, for instance, the growing strength of an opposition group threatening or seeking confrontation with the ruling party. What we are witnessing now is the would-be ruling party, the USDP, leaving all the other parties far behind in the race. It feels no threat.”

In the newly emerging political landscape, the leadership of the USDP have chosen isolation in a Naypyidaw where they will quickly fall out of touch with the everyday needs of the people, not to mention their own members in more than 400 branches across the country.

How can Naypyidaw expect to become the heart of the country when it has no soul? It seeks to impress with modernity and money and power, but it lacks cultural, historical, religious and societal roots. Unlike Rangoon, it is not a source of pride to the people of Burma.

Shwedagon Pagoda, the country's most sacred and well-known monument, has stood like a father overlooking Rangoon since the 6th century AD. Like a cheap counterfeiter, Than Shwe tried to imitate the kings of old by ordering the construction of a replica Shwedagon in the new capital.

“Than Shwe considers himself a king,” said Chan Htun. “He built the pagoda as a display of power and as an attempt to create a legacy.”