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Burma on edge of democratic change

Lance Woodruff | Mar. 20, 2012

Aung San Suu Kyi campaigns in Kalaw, Burma, March 1. (Photos by Newscom/ABACAPRESS/Christophe Loviny)

BANGKOK, THAILAND -- Longtime Burma watchers here are in a wait-and-see mode as diplomatic and business enthusiasm builds for the new civilian-garbed, military-installed government of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. They wait to see the results of the April 1 by-elections to fill 48 seats in the 440-member parliament.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the symbol of hope, democracy and positive change in this long-troubled country, is leading her National League for Democracy to run in the elections. Whether those elections are free and fair, and how the parliamentary landscape unfolds after that, have everything to do with the lives and well-being of 60 million people.

Headlines coming from Burma cause many experienced observers of the Southeast Asian nation to do a double take: ?Burma?s President Thein Sein pledges healthy democracy,? ?US poised to restore full ties with Burma,? ?Peace in Myanmar is possible within three months,? ?All roads lead to Burma.?

After 50 years of direct military rule, the ruling army junta turned over power last year to Thein Sein?s Union Solidarity and Development Party, which, though ostensibly civilian, is composed largely of retired army officers. Over the last 11 months, Thein Sein has introduced political, economic and social reforms that can only be described as sweeping.

Most importantly, the new president convinced Suu Kyi that he is for real reform and invited her to help shape Burma?s future. Suu Kyi?s National League for Democracy won a landslide victory in 1990, the last true election in Burma, but was never allowed to take power.

The military consolidated power through the 1990s with heavy repression and a super-efficient police state. Thousands of citizens were imprisoned for political activities and millions were displaced when entire villages were forced to relocate to increase border security or were pressed into labor gangs for massive public works projects.

The country seems poised on the edge of wide-ranging democratic change.

The Myanmar media is now freer than that in Malaysia or Singapore, a government information ministry official asserts with some justification. Suu Kyi, who has spent most of the last 20 years in house arrest, is now regularly featured in state media, a feat opposition leaders in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore can?t match.

Hillary Clinton led the international community into isolated Myanmar late last year with promises of a lifted embargo, restored aid and connections with international development institutions that were frozen or never established during the country?s 50 years of direct military rule.

The government says it is making peace with the country?s multiple ethnic groups, many of which have been at war with the central government since independence in 1947. But in June, the army launched large-scale attacks against the Kachin ethnic minority in the nation?s jade- and timber-rich northernmost state, adjoining China.

Thein Sein ordered the army to stop fighting and draw back in December. The army?s lack of response has caused some observers to wonder whether the civilian authority is in control.

In a major parliamentary address March 1 Thein Sein promised to continue reforms. He called on foreign investors to support the country ?while democratization is in its infancy.? He said that economic reforms will be key to keeping democratization on track, pledging to cut the poverty rate from 26 percent of the population to 16 percent by 2015.

Part of the economic goals is to attract back the estimated 2 million to 3 million Myanmar nationals living and working in Thailand -- mainly illegally.

Wars of the Burman ethnic majority-led army against ethnic minorities have characterized the life of the country since Britain granted it independence in 1947. When the military under General Ne Win carried out a coup against the democratically elected civilian government of U Nu in 1962, it expelled many ethnic Indians and Christian missioners, both Catholic and Protestant; made life difficult for ethnic groups of Muslims; and nationalized church-run schools and hospitals.

Suu Kyi is reaching out to all, attending a worship ceremony for the 100th anniversary of Yangon?s Roman Catholic St. Mary?s Cathedral in December, and dressing in Kachin women?s distinctive traditional costume covered in silver discs and tinkling ornaments.

Myanmar neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, representing nine countries, are anxious to reap rewards from investment in the newly opening country, especially as international sanctions and embargos are lifted.

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