

Nov 30 2010

Myanmar 2010 Elections: Outcomes and Implications

LSE Ideas

By Dr Jürgen Haacke

This event served to discuss the political situation in Burma/Myanmar after the elections of 7 November as well as the release from house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi six days later. The chair, Dr Jürgen Haacke, briefly reminded the audience that the elections were part of the military regime's roadmap to a so-called 'discipline-flourishing multiparty democracy'. He also outlined some of the core features of the political system that the 2008 Constitution sets out, highlighting among other the ways in which military leaders are keen to play a role in the country's national politics, not least by retaining significant influence in both the executive and legislative branches of government. Bo Bo Lansin, a consultant editor of Mizzima News, used his introductory remarks to focus on the results of the elections and the various reasons why these should be seen as having been seriously flawed. In particular, he pointed to the phenomenon of advance votes for the junta that produced unfavourable outcomes for candidates from opposition and ethnic parties. Derek Tonkin, a former UK diplomat and now Chairman of Network Myanmar, discussed the ineffectiveness of existing sanctions and the role that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would likely now play, not least as a possible mediator between Burma/Myanmar and the international community on the issue of sanctions.

The ensuing discussion focused on two broad themes: the current domestic political situation and the issue of sanctions. In relation to the former the audience for instance asked the panellists whether they thought the elections constituted a successful exercise in the re-branding of Myanmar and the ruling junta. Other questions focused on the state of the National League for Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's relations with other leaders of the pro-reform and pro-democracy camp. In response, Bo Bo Lansin spoke about the current fluidity of Burmese politics, focused on the significant legitimacy issues faced by the military junta and also emphasised the tensions between Naypyidaw and a number of ethnic nationalities. Derek Tonkin pointed out that in previous months and years neither members of the business community nor the armed forces had rejuvenated NLD party ranks. Panellists pointed to past problems of factionalism within the NLD, while highlighting Daw Suu's stated preparedness to work with other political leaders.

The question arose whether human rights organisations working on Burma/Myanmar should expect that Western governments would follow their advice of now putting more pressure on the regime. The panel thought that this was unlikely without the governments first consulting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on this issue. Derek Tonkin pointed out that Daw Suu has argued that if the people of Burma wanted sanctions to be lifted, she would consider it. It was moreover noted that the US government is clearly interested in persisting with pragmatic engagement, a position reflected in the remarks made by State Department speaker Phillip J. Crowley on 15 November 2010.

There was agreement that sanctions imposed on Naypyidaw have hitherto failed. Derek Tonkin distinguished between three broad categories of sanctions: the blocking of funding by Western countries from international financial institutions (which leaves Burma/Myanmar with less than a quarter of development assistance received by neighbouring Laos or Cambodia); the official discouragement of trade, investment and tourism; and statutory sanctions specifically targeting regime representatives and associated cronies. He recounted how the European Union had on one occasion – mistakenly – imposed sanctions against a significant number of private businesses with no obvious connections to military or 'crony' interests. He suggested that the regime's leadership was at best inconvenienced by targeted Western sanctions. Also, by employing sanctions Western countries had undermined any influence with the military they might once have enjoyed.

Given the political realities and the challenges facing Aung San Suu Kyi and, more broadly, the country's pro-reform and democracy camp, Bo Bo Lansin and Derek Tonkin both remained sceptical concerning the more immediate prospects for significant political change within Burma/Myanmar.

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