

**A call for a third political party in Myanmar** by  
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The historic national election in Myanmar held in 2015 has not met voter expectations. Frustrated by the poor performance of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the ruling party, and its undemocratic mode of governance, the call for an alternative third party to run in the next general election has gone out to prevent the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) from coming to power again.

Myanmar's nascent electoral politics, which emerged in late 2010 after a half-century of two consecutive military regimes, has been dominated by only two parties at the national level. First is the USDP, composed largely of many powerful retired and former military officers. It was in power for the previous five-year term. Second is the NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel laureate and democracy icon who was placed under house arrest for fifteen years by the military dictators.

The NLD witnessed a landslide victory in the 2015 election, the first free and fair electoral process in 25 years. It occupied the majority of seats in both houses and was easily able to form the new government. However, the constitution prohibited Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming the president of Myanmar because her late husband and children are foreign citizens. She assumed the newly created role of state counsellor, similar to a prime minister, while her confidant, Htin Kyaw, was chosen as the president. When it comes to making policy or acting as head of state, however, Aung San Suu Kyi holds sway. It is well known that she sits "above the president." This situation is not tenable in the long run.

The people of Myanmar put a lot of faith in the NLD when they came out to vote. Urban elites, intellectuals, and the expanding middle class collectively believed that the NLD would make real changes to end the decades-long military dominance and start a new, open, democratic political process. Under new leadership it was hoped that the economy would improve and government institutions would function well in modernizing the country. Among people attuned to political events, there is now a widespread feeling that the expectations of the electorate have not been realized. The NLD-controlled cabinet and parliament have yet to make much significant progress. The NLD governs by making deals with the military, while turning a deaf ear to the calls for change from a chorus of democratic voices. Many of the "88 Generation" student group leaders who fought for democracy along with the NLD

starting in 1988 now feel that they have been abandoned by the ruling party, their former compatriots. Indeed, leaders of civil society organizations (CSOs) have complained that the space for civil society is narrowing under the new government. It is extremely difficult to work with the NLD-dominant Union Parliament. Some government officials view CSOs as troublemakers because they think these organizations simply make unconstructive noises about what the protesters see as critical issues. Officials fail to appreciate that CSOs play a critical role in making the transition to democracy move toward success.

Similarly, Myanmar's economy is deeply affected by the NLD's muddled economic policy, which in turn has led to financial uncertainty among local and foreign investors. The capacities of the three most important financial institutions – the Central Bank, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Planning and Finance – are not strong, according to many experts in the field of finance.

While the NLD government's foreign policy has been rather successful so far, its viability is uncertain. Most worrisome is the way the NLD makes policy: everything is decided by one person, namely State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. In addition, the party's rigidly centralized structure has concerned many analysts.

Considering the current electoral situation, formation of a third political party that is able to campaign nationwide is needed for two reasons. First, the democracy-authoritarian cleavage is rooted in Myanmar political culture, and it encourages some voters to align with the USDP, whose simplistic nationalist and inward-looking rhetoric appeals to them. On the other hand, the NLD is at the forefront of a more complex, some would say chaotic, democratic movement. However, political elites, intellectuals, and the middle class are all palpably upset with the undemocratic nature of the NLD. "The Lady's" (Aung San Suu Kyi's) "undelegated" power, the party's overly centralized structure, and the unwillingness of the party leaders to listen to the opinion of people with expertise has led to an impasse that stands in the way of democratization and economic progress in today's Myanmar. Voters deserve an alternative choice in the next national election to be held in 2020, and perhaps a third party would be better able to complete the agenda of the NLD in making democracy function in Myanmar in place of the sclerotic NLD.

Second, the essence of the presidential democracy, which Myanmar practices, is the system of checks and balances between three pillars. The NLD in effect took control of both the parliament and the executive branch. Hence, some analysts claim that the NLD parliament is merely a rubber stamp for the wishes of the executive arm and their proposals. Local newspapers have reported that junior lawmakers from the

NLD were warned by their more senior colleagues to stop asking tough questions and tabling proposals that made the government look bad. It is very unfortunate that the system of checks-and-balances is dysfunctional in Myanmar. To make democratic institutions strong, a third party is needed, as it can function as strong opposition in the parliament and make way for a true separation of the executive and legislature.

The NLD's undemocratic nature and the USDP's authoritarian tendency have placed democratic forces in a situation where the only option is to create a third party. However, to avoid repeating the mistakes of the NLD, a third party should take the following suggestions into consideration.

First, the party membership should be big enough to be able to campaign nationwide. In the previous election cycle, more than 90 parties had registered with the Union Election Commission, but unfortunately, the majority of them are regional and ethnic-based parties. There is no way for them to compete with the NLD and the USDP in terms of funding and organizational capacity. Therefore, the proposed third party must ensure that it is not going to be another small and overlooked party.

Second, the new party policies should be inclusive and incisive. Political parties in today's Myanmar are built around a party leader or a group of leaders with no clear political positions. To break that tradition, a third party should outline its political beliefs and principles in a party manifesto. What is its economic policy? Where does it stand on ethnic issues? Does it support freedom of speech and expression? What would it do to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor? The point is that the emerging party should be formed based on political beliefs and an ideology – a progressive agenda. Problems and the policies to solve them should be the focus, not the question of who will be the leader(s). Party leaders come and go, but the party platform remains.

Third, building a strong, democratic party institution is important. The party should be structured in a decentralized way and should be run in a democratic manner. The process of making decisions must not come from only one person or a group of party leaders. Otherwise, the “chairman-of-everything” will control the party in autocratic fashion. External experts should be consulted on subjects where the party lacks expertise. Ordinary members must be given the right to make proposals and raise important questions and should be encouraged to criticize the party policies and its leadership. In short, creating a decentralized, democratic party is as important as winning the election itself.

Finally, and most critical, recruiting a new generation of those willing to serve the needs of the people is required. There is a misconception in Myanmar that politics is a game to be played only by former political prisoners, student activists, and old-fashioned politicians because they have experience and they have sacrificed so much by being imprisoned for so many years. This reasoning is true to some extent, but a broader base is needed. More important is cultivation of a set of political skills, such as knowledge of the big issues the country faces, understanding global politics, the ability to deal with the international community, and other matters that will promote participatory democracy. New ideas, some would say

new blood, is required for the politics of the new age. A third party therefore must create an environment that is attractive to young professionals, intellectuals, and recent students of politics. They need assurance that their service to the nation is critical and that it will be rewarding.

In conclusion, a third party holds the promise of bringing democratic institutions to life by providing a check-and-balance against the NLD and the USDP function. It is critical that a third party has a vision of the future based on clearly enunciated political beliefs and ideologies. It must construct strong democratic party institutions and prioritize recruiting a new generation of politicians dedicated to serving the people; in short, “a government for the people” is needed.

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