

The Lady of all landslides

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Aung San Suu Kyi's win is a humiliation for the army. Will it now turn nasty?

Yangon - The boisterous, joyful scenes throughout the evening of April 1st outside the headquarters in Yangon of the National League for Democracy (NLD) said it all. Myanmar's main opposition party was on course for a huge victory in the day's historic by-elections. Every ten minutes or so news of yet another unfeasibly good result would be posted up on a digital display screen facing the street, provoking even more ecstatic cheering from the huge crowd gathered outside. These were extraordinary scenes in a country that just over a year ago was a hushed and fearful military dictatorship.

Over the following days the government confirmed the NLD's landslide. The party contested 44 of the 45 seats on offer to the federal parliament in Naypyidaw. These were the first elections it had taken part in since 1990, and it won 43 of them (the government's single win came in a constituency where the NLD candidate was disqualified). The result surpassed the party's most optimistic expectations. In some seats they seem to have won over 90% of the vote, including in a hardscrabble constituency on the edge of the capital, where hardly a vote was cast against Aung San Suu Kyi.

The NLD's triumph spells humiliation for the regime. Support for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the proxy for an army that has ruled the country since 1962, was all but wiped out in these constituencies. It could not even win a seat in the government's own backyard. Four were up for grabs in the regime's gaudy capital of Naypyidaw, where perhaps half the voters are directly employed by the government. They had been promised extra goodies to support the USDP. But still, they voted for the NLD.

The victory is more symbolic than practical. The NLD won only 6% of the 650-odd seats in parliament. Its participation will make little legislative difference, and the army remains very much in charge. One NLD leader, Tin Oo, hopes that the mere presence of Miss Suu Kyi in parliament will shake things up, and that her oratory will change some minds. Maybe, but the 2008 constitution reserves a quarter of the seats for army-appointed MPs who know exactly where to take their orders from.

Rather, it is to the 2015 general election that everyone is now looking. The previous vote, in late 2010, was heavily rigged in favour of the USDP, which won most of the seats, if only because the NLD boycotted the poll. Were Sunday's by-election results repeated at the national level, the USDP would be annihilated, reduced to a parliamentary rump of its unelected military MPs. At that point, the game would pretty much be up for the army. The NLD and opposition parties from the areas of the ethnic Karen, Kachin and others would have a majority and Miss Suu Kyi, perhaps, would be president.

Though the NLD can hardly wait for that day, the prospect must deeply worry the generals and their satraps. Their reaction to these by-elections will thus be watched closely over the coming weeks. The generals may well have wanted Miss Suu Kyi to take up a seat in parliament, in order to reflect well on the reform process begun by President Thein Sein. But their own ritual humiliation was not part of the plan. They have very publicly been stripped of all legitimacy.

Mid-ranking officers in Naypyidaw are said to be “angry”. The worry is that they will now turn against Mr Thein Sein, who they may fear is leading them to political oblivion. Some factions of the army were never happy with the reform programme in the first place, let alone with its hectic pace. Defeat in by-elections could provide them with the pretext to try to stall further reforms, or maybe even to turn back the clock. Mr Thein Sein called the by-elections “successful”, and some army officers hope that Myanmar will follow Indonesia’s example a dozen years ago and take the path towards democracy. But diplomats and other foreign observers admit that the army is a closed book to outsiders.

That is why the euphoria is tinged with danger. Myanmar is entering a decisive phase in its political transition. The diehards in the army’s higher command now face having quickly to come to terms with a process that, for the first time, looks as if it is slipping beyond their control. Or they will have to act while they still can.

Miss Suu Kyi, modest in victory, has helped. She insisted her supporters not indulge in triumphalism. But now it is up to the officers whether Myanmar is truly to enjoy the “new era” Miss Suu Kyi proclaimed the day after her triumph. Everyone knows where she now stands: just outside the presidential palace.