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After landslide victory comes the hard part

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Richard Horsey, [Nikkei Asian Review](#) | 17 Nov 2015

Myanmar's people have voted overwhelmingly for change. It may have been a simple message -- some would say simplistic, given the deep problems the country faces -- but the campaign slogan of the National League for Democracy, "time for change," resonated powerfully in a country still emerging from five decades of authoritarian rule.

Party leader Aung San Suu Kyi perfectly embodied that message, given her many years of steely opposition to military rule and her family history, particularly that of her father the late independence hero Gen. Aung San. Indeed, there is an almost millenarian conviction among many in Myanmar that only she can lead them to a brighter future.

Anatomy of a landslide

With the results of all but a handful of races now final, the scale of the NLD's landslide can be quantified. The party won 79% of elected seats in the lower house and 81% in the upper house. This gives it an outright majority in both houses, even when the military's 25% bloc of unelected seats is factored in. The incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party was decimated, securing only 8% of elected seats. This means the NLD will choose the president and have full control of legislation. The only thing it cannot do is change the constitution, as the military retains a veto.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the NLD's message of change also resonated with people in the ethnic minority borderlands. In the 2010 elections, boycotted by the NLD, many voted for local minority parties. But this time around, with the exception of Shan and Rakhine states, the NLD also triumphed in these areas. Part of the reason may have been vote-splitting, as many more ethnic parties have registered in the last five years. But more than this, it seems an overall majority of ethnic voters decided to put aside identity politics and vote NLD.

Most ethnic parties fared even worse than the USDP: no Kayin or Kayah parties won a seat in the national parliament, and Mon parties secured only one seat between them. Of the seven ethnic-dominated state parliaments, the NLD has control of those in Kayah, Kayin, Mon and probably Kachin, and has a near majority in Chin, with exactly half the total seats. In the seven parliaments of the central, Burman-dominated, regions, it notched up huge majorities.

Despite much scepticism ahead of the polls, Myanmar's leaders have delivered something remarkable -- a credible and peaceful election in a country with deep political divisions and ongoing armed conflicts. The government's election commission deserves much credit, as do the president and commander-in-chief, who enabled this exercise in democracy to go ahead freely. Both have congratulated the NLD on its success, and all indications are that an orderly transfer of power will take place.

Rough road

However, difficult days may lie ahead. Although the USDP will be much reduced in parliament, the military is not going anywhere. It will continue to wield enormous power, of both the practical and constitutional variety. It appoints the ministers of defense, border affairs and home affairs -- the latter controlling the police as well as the General Administration Department, which forms the backbone of local

administration in the country. They have had prickly relations, but now Suu Kyi and the commander-in-chief will have to learn to get along.

Things could get complicated in the next few months. A lame-duck session of the old, USDP-dominated parliament convened Nov. 16 and will run to Jan. 31. President Thein Sein and his government will remain in power until March 31. Laws will be passed and executive decisions made that are at odds with the views of the incoming administration. It could be an uncomfortable transition. How to handle this period is expected to be a key subject of talks between Suu Kyi and the president, the commander-in-chief and Parliamentary Speaker Shwe Mann.

Hanging over this period of "cohabitation" is the critical question of who will be president. Although the clear winner of the election, Suu Kyi is barred from the position. But she has indicated publicly that the person she selects "will have no power" and that she "will make all the political decisions." It is far from clear how such an arrangement can work in practice. The president has considerable constitutional powers, and there would be no way for Suu Kyi and the NLD to impose their will. If she wants to control the president, she will have to choose someone willing to be a figurehead, and someone she trusts completely to follow her orders.

The appointment of a puppet president may not sit well with the military, which will still wield enormous power in the new dispensation. The armed forces clearly oppose the notion of a Suu Kyi presidency, and are unlikely to be happy about her running the country from behind the scenes. It could be even more problematic if Suu Kyi chooses a president without the stature and credibility required to effectively fulfill the functions of the office, which include chairing the National Defense and Security Council and the Financial Commission.

In addition to the difficulties of being puppet-master, Suu Kyi will have to deal with several huge challenges facing the country: tackling the peace process, managing a Rakhine State riven by sectarian tensions, containing Buddhist nationalism, steering the economy and reforming state institutions. Suu Kyi and her party will benefit from enormous goodwill, but they have little experience. And with huge popular support comes huge expectations. Meeting these will undoubtedly be the biggest challenge facing Suu Kyi when her administration takes power on April 1.