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COMMENT

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Aung San Suu Kyi's shadow presidency > Myanmar's new civilian government faces numerous challenges

Myanmar has got its first civilian cabinet since 1962, including a key role for democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi. This undoubtedly constitutes a further step in Myanmar's gradual democratization process, but numerous national challenges remain.

For the first time in over five decades a civilian government formally takes office in Myanmar on April 1. The National League for Democracy's (NLD) Htin Kyaw has been sworn in as the country's new president. However, the eyes of the world are on Myanmar's new Foreign Minister, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and iconic symbol of Myanmar's democratic movement, Suu Kyi is constitutionally barred from becoming President or Vice-President herself. The clause in the constitution, created by the military in 2008, precluding persons with children holding foreign passports from becoming President or Vice-President, was explicitly added to block Suu Kyi.

Nevertheless, she has vowed to be "above the president", and rule the country through her close aide, Htin Kyaw, who is thus expected to become a proxy president. In addition to being appointed Foreign Minister, Suu Kyi will take on three other ministerial posts, namely Education, Electric Power and Energy, and Head of the Office of the President.

Furthermore, as Foreign Minister she will be a member of the National Defence and Security Council, which is dominated by the military. The parliament will likely also appoint Suu Kyi as "state counsellor". This

position, similar to that of a prime minister, is specifically designed for her.

The elected civilian government without a doubt marks another important step in Myanmar's process of democratization. The "Myanmar Spring" started after the (flawed) elections of November 2010, when military officers formed a nominally civilian government and started a process of political and economic reforms. In the space of just over five years, Myanmar transformed from a country globally regarded as an out-law state to a legitimate international political actor and a booming investment hub. Nevertheless, multiple challenges remain, including for Suu Kyi herself as the "backstage president".

A first, and rather obvious challenge relates to "the Lady" herself. Not only will she need to juggle four ministerial portfolios at the same time, wearing her Minister for the Presidential Office hat, she will also seek to steer the President. As Foreign Minister, she will aim to make her voice heard in the authoritative eleven-member National Defence and Security Council.

According to the constitution, a minister has to resign from the parliament and cannot play a direct role in political party activities.

However, if Suu Kyi is appointed as "state counsellor", she will be able to address the parliament herself. Her relationship with military soft-liner Shwe Mann, former Speaker of the Parliament, forms an additional tool to exert leverage in the parliament. Suu Kyi appointed him as head of a parliamentary commission to provide input to both houses of parliament. The vast concentration of power in the hands of one person, and the heavy reliance on relations of loyalty and power by proxy, is likely to prove both demanding and precarious.

A second challenge is how to achieve reconciliation among Myanmar's highly heterogeneous ethnic groups. In spite of a national cease-fire agreement, ethnic conflicts may continue to flare up in the ongoing struggle between the central rule dominated by the Burman majority (around 70% of the population) and minority groups seeking more autonomy.

In addition, there is the thorny issue of Myanmar's Muslim minority in a predominantly Buddhist country. This includes the Rohingya, many of whom are considered illegal immigrants and are denied citizenship. In 2015 their plight led to a refugee crisis, with thousands fleeing to other Southeast Asian countries.

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Suu Kyi herself has been criticized for failing to speak out against the violence and discrimination against this minority.

As a third challenge, the new government will need to deal with the involvement of foreign powers. Increasing recognition and legitimacy in the regional context goes hand in hand with mounting competition among Asian countries, including China, India, Japan, and ASEAN states for influence and trade links.

China, Myanmar's most important economic partner, stands out as a key player. Large-scale contracts with Chinese companies in the fields of copper-mining, hydropower, and oil and gas transport will be bones of contention. Some of these contracts have been suspended after widespread protests following the displacement of people and a significant environmental impact. The new government has stated it will review some of the Chinese mega-projects. It will need to carefully weigh up local opposition, national interest, the opinion of the military, and relations with powerful neighbours.

Last but not least, the military remains a key actor, not least because a strong role for the Defence Forces is embedded in Myanmar's 2008 constitution. The charter

guarantees that three key ministerial posts, namely Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs remain in the hands of the military. In the parliament, 25% of the seats automatically go to the military, giving them virtual veto power over constitutional amendments. Furthermore, a military hardliner will be one of two vice-presidents, and the cabinet includes five ministers affiliated with the military. Suu Kyi is acutely aware she needs military support, and has been cautiously conferring with key military leaders in the past few months.

In short, Myanmar's new government, reigned over but not ruled by Aung San Suu Kyi, faces a formidable task in terms of governance, nationwide ethnic conflict resolution, foreign involvement, and civilian-military conciliation.

From the liberal Western perspective, Myanmar is no longer an authoritarian state, but not a full-fledged democracy either. The military retains a decisive voice in the country's politics, and it remains to be seen if, in the coming years, Suu Kyi will manage to persuade the military to change the constitution and allow her to become president. Even so, most likely the adage "the nation is strong only when the army is strong" will continue to hold sway.