

POLITICAL MONITOR NO.42

OFFICIAL MEDIA

AMNESTY GRANTED TO 41 PRISONERS

President Thein Sein granted amnesty to 41 prisoners who were on the list of the committee for scrutinizing remaining political prisoners and who have served their terms to a certain extent in prisons/work camps. The amnesty was granted in accord with Section 204 (a) of the Constitution and Section 401, subsection (i) of the Code of Criminal Procedures and is aimed at enabling those released to serve the national interest and work hand in hand with the people. According to the Former Political Prisoners Society (FPPS) group, nearly all of the prisoners included in the amnesty were jailed under Article 18, Burma's contentious Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Processions Law, for participation in unauthorised demonstrations.¹

LAOTIAN PRESIDENT VISITS BURMA

Laotian President Keosaychay Sayasone called on President Thein Sein on 9 December in Naypyitaw and discussed matters to promote bilateral trade and cooperation in culture, tourism, agriculture and border security issues. President Sayasone also held talks with Speaker of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and Pyithu Hluttaw Thura Shwe Mann and had cordial discussions on promoting ties between the two countries in social and economic sectors, development of human resources cooperation and amity between two governments and peoples. During the visit, the two sides also discussed issues related to the building of the Burma-Lao friendship bridge across the Mekong and is expected to be completed in March 2015.²

AMYOTHA HLUTTAW SPEAKER VISIT TO INDIA

Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker Khin Aung Myint called on Indian President Shri Pranab Mukherjee on 5 December and said that Burma and India share a deep commitment to strengthening their friendship, mutual understanding and cooperation throughout the successive years. He highlighted inter-parliamentary relations were also strengthening ties between the two countries. Speaker Khin Aung Myint also met Indian Vice-President and Speaker of the Rajya Sabha Shri Mahd Hamid Ansari and expressed thanks for providing personnel of Hluttaw Office with parliamentary courses and India's assistance to the development of health and transport sectors in Burma. He also called on the Speaker of the Lok Sabha Smt Meira Kuma and explained the ongoing peace process and constitution review.³

¹ Amnesty granted –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM2013-12-12-ocr.pdf> (NLM) 12 December 2013 (p. 16) /

Forty-one political prisoners released –

<http://english.dvb.no/news/forty-one-political-prisoners-released-burma-myanmar/35182> (DVB) 11 December 2013

² Laotian goodwill delegation arrives in Nay Pyi Taw –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-12-10.pdf> (NLM) 10 December 2013 (p. 8) /

President U Thein Sein welcomes Laotian President at Presidential Palace –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-12-10.pdf> (NLM) 10 December 2013 (p. 1) /

Speaker of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw & Pyithu Hluttaw meets President of Lao PDR –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM2013-12-12-ocr.pdf> (NLM) 12 December 2013 (p. 8)

³ Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker meets Indian President, Speakers of Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs16/NLM-2013-12-09-red.pdf> (NLM) 9 December 2013 (p. 1 & 8)

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS BEGINS AT CHAPTER ONE

The highest number of recommendations sent to the parliament's Joint-Committee for Reviewing the Constitution (JCRC) suggested amending Chapter One of the constitution, according to a press statement by the joint-committee. In October, the JCRC called on the executive, judicial and legislative sectors, as well as political parties, civil society groups and individuals, to send in suggestions on amending the 2008 constitution.

According to a press release issued by the JCRC on 6 December, the committee said that as of 5 December it had received 440 letters with a total of 2,512 recommendations, 590 of which suggested amendments to Chapter One: Basic Principles of the Union. However, the statement gave no indication of which articles within Chapter One the suggestions had targeted. Basic Principles of the Union is a far-reaching document, which lays out principles for everything from the name of the country to sovereignty and governance to the role of the military.

Zaw Myint Maung, a lower house MP and JCRC member, said the committee has yet to formally review the recommendations. The JCRC is expected to release a comprehensive report on the recommendations early next year. "For now, the committee is detailing only the chapters of the recommendations it has received," he said.

Lawyer Aung Thein of the NLD, a member of the opposition party's Constitution Amendment Committee, said the constitution's Chapter One: Basic Principles of the Union is a fundamental part of the constitution and thus must be amended. "Chapter One is an underlying part of the constitution and its amendment should be the starting point for the amendment of the whole constitution."

To date, the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party, the NLD and the Burmese military have not yet sent in their recommendations to the JCRC. The deadline for submitting recommendations is 31 December.⁴

TURNING A BLIND EYE TO AMENDING OF CONSTITUTION MAY BE A CRIME – UNION ASSEMBLY SPEAKER

The Union Solidarity and Development Association's chairperson Thura Shwe Mann equates turning a blind eye to the amending of the constitution to committing a crime. He made the statement during a meeting with USDA party members and locals at Shwepyithar Township in Yangon Region on 6 December. "Avoiding from doing good may cause wrong. If people said our constitution has been changed from some time and don't need to amend anymore, if we turn a blind eye on amending the constitution, it may affect the peace and development of our country in one way or the other. It may cause difficulty in national reconciliation. We don't want anything to turn back from democracy. Or amending must be made because ours is a democratic country and the constitution must be amended, that is also affected the peace and stability of the State. We have to be very careful in these two things," he said. Shwe Mann added that amending of constitution will depend on more stable environment, peaceful atmosphere for reconciliation, and the momentum for democratisation.⁵

⁴ Constitutional reforms begins at Chapter One – <http://english.dvb.no/news/constitutional-reform-begins-at-chapter-one-burma-myanmar/35085> (DVB) 9 December 2013

⁵ Turning a blind eye for amending of Constitution may be a crime – Union Assembly Speaker – <http://elevenmyanmar.com/politics/4356-turning-a-blind-eye-for-amending-of-constitution-may-be-a-crime-union-assembly-speaker> (Eleven News Media) 8 December 2013

PRESIDENT, HLUTTAW SPEAKER AND AUNG SAN SUU KYI INVITED TO ATTEND PEOPLE'S FORUM

President Thein Sein, Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker Thura Shwe Mann and National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi have been invited by a civil society group to attend a people's forum in Yangon later this month. The three-day event, beginning on 28 December, is being organized by the Myanmar People's Forum Working Group. The forum will be the first event of its kind in Burma, though the President, Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker and NLD leader have yet to confirm their attendance.

The coordinator of the forum Kyaw Lin Oo said such a meeting could also pave the way for the meeting requested by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on 23 November of herself, the President, Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker Thura Shwe Mann and the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. "It would be great if a meeting of the three prominent identities during the forum could help to bring about the four-way meeting," he said. About 350 people from civil society groups have been invited to attend the forum, which will discuss topics such as peace, development, justice, human rights and democratic reforms.⁶

SENIOR CPC OFFICIAL WANG QISHAN MEETS USDP DELEGATION

Senior Communist Party of China (CPC) official Wang Qishan met with a delegation from the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) on 6 December to promote bilateral ties. Wang, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and secretary of the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, called on the two sides to strengthen their neighbourly friendship.

Stressing the CPC's leadership role in realizing the Chinese dream of reviving the nation, Wang said that the CPC will comprehensively deepen reforms and is confident in the path, theory and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The CPC is willing to constantly promote friendship with the USDP and enhance bilateral exchanges on governance experience, Wang said.

U Htay Oo, vice chairman of the USDP, said that the USDP is willing to strengthen friendship with the CPC and deepen bilateral pragmatic cooperation to constantly consolidate relations between the two countries and parties.⁷

NLD DELEGATION VISITS CHINA

Ten members of National League for Democracy (NLD) made a goodwill visit to China from 8 -15 December at the invitation of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. NLD Spokesman Nyan Win, who lead the delegation, said this is the first invitation Burma's main opposition party has been received by the Chinese government. Other members of the delegation included economist Myo Myint, Kyi Kyi Win and several NLD youth members. The group traveled to Beijing, Shanghai and Kunming, where they met representatives of various organizations, including the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as other government officials, lawmakers and civil society leaders. They were also briefed in Beijing by executives of the Chinese company Wanbao involved in the controversial Letpadaung copper mine project. NLD spokesperson Monywa Aung Shin said "Though the political systems being followed by the two countries are different, we should learn about economic reforms and technological and agricultural development from China."⁸

⁶ President, Hluttaw speaker, NLD leader invited to attend people's forum – <http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/politics/item/10723-president-hluttaw-speaker-nld-leader-invited-to-attend-peoples-forum> (Mizzima) 10 December 2013

⁷ Senior CPC official Wang Qishan meets USDP delegation – <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8477534.html> (China People's Daily) 7 December 2013

⁸ NLD delegation departs for China – <http://english.dvb.no/news/nld-delegation-departs-for-china-burma-myanmar/35072> (DVB) 8 December 2013
NLD Delegation Returns From First Trip to China –

KNU URGES ALL SUB-GROUPS TO UNITE AS KAREN FOR CENSUS

The Karen National Union (KNU) has urged the various ethnic sub-groups within Karen state to register in the 2014 nationwide census as “Karen” when identifying their ethnicity in the questionnaire. KNU general-secretary Pado Saw Kwe Htoo Win, said that the Karen rebel leadership concluded that it is necessary for all ethnic sub-groups to be listed as simply Karen in order to calculate the precise population of their ethnicity. Speaking at the conclusion of the KNU’s Permanent Central Committee meeting in Hpa-an district from 2-7 December, he said. “We are assuming the duty of carrying out the census in our territories and are appointing personnel for the task. We believe that the ethnic sub-groups should not register under any other name than ‘Karen’ so that we can get the precise number of the Karen population.”

The Kayin People’s Party (KPP) also announced that it wanted to remind all Karen people to list themselves as Karen or Kayin, as opposed to any of the smaller sub-factions of the Karen on the list of the 135 recognised ethnicities in Burma. The KPP said it had proposed to the regional government in Irrawaddy division that it be allowed to provide assistance to the large Karen population in the delta to ensure they register correctly for the census. KPP deputy-chairman Saw Say Wah said “We are also reminding Karen people to use the titles ‘Saw’ for men and ‘Naw’ for women, instead of the Burmese equivalents, ‘U’ and ‘Daw’.”

Another Karen political party, the Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party, has said it is cooperating with the immigration authorities and the Norwegian Refugee Council to issue ID cards to locals who were yet to acquire one, according to the Karen News.

Burma Immigration Minister Khin Yi previously announced that the nationwide census will be carried out from 30 March to 10 April 2014, and will ask each citizen to select which of the 135 recognised ethnic groups in the country he or she belongs to. The recognised sub-groups of the Karen are the Kayinpyu, the Pa-le-Chi, the Mon-Kayin, the Sgaw, the Ta-Lay-Pwa, the Paku, the Bwe, the Monnepwa, the Shu, and the Monpwa.⁹

SEVERAL LANDMARK WOMEN’S FORUMS HELD IN YANGON

In addition to the Women’s Forum supported by the French Embassy that was held in Yangon from 6-7 December, it was preceded by several other key women’s forums organized by Burmese civil society recently. The Second Women’s Forum: Voices of Women (29-30 October) was attended by more than 270 women and men including MPs, members of political parties, representatives of CSOs and media. 14 panelists gave presentation on 3 main topics: women & politics, women & economy, women & media, and the participants unanimously called for the Government to comply with the obligations in CEDAW, Beijing Platform for Action (1995) & UN Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, & 1888 and effectively implement the National Strategic Plan for the advancement of Women (NSPAW: 2013-2022) launched on 3 October. The Third Congress of Women’s Organization Network (WON) (31 October) was attended by more than 100 women and men. The Congress started with award-giving ceremony in which 6 prominent women for their contribution to the community and nation building. The National Women’s Dialogue (9-11 November) was opened by the award-winning documentary about peace movement in Liberia, “Pray the Devil back to Hell”, which earned the social worker Lema Gbowee the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize together with its first woman president. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. At least 290 women and men from different states and divisions attended, including MPs, CSOs and INGOs inside and outside Burma, youth, the disabled, people

<http://www.irrawaddy.org/latest-news/nld-delegation-returns-first-trip-china.html> (Irrawaddy) 16 December 2013

NLD delegation briefed by Wanbao in Beijing -

<http://www.mizzima.com/mizzima-news/myanmar/item/10746-nld-delegation-briefed-by-wanbao-in-beijing> (Mizzima)

17 December 2013

⁹ KNU urges all sub-groups to unite as Karen for census –

<http://english.dvb.no/news/knu-urges-all-sub-groups-to-unite-as-karen-for-census-burma-myanmar/35138> (DVB) 10 December 2013

from different religions/faiths, business entrepreneurs, and donors. 4 topics were discussed by 13 panelists on Burma's development & women on NSPAW, women's participation in public life and politics, women's security, preventing violence against women, women's roles in conflict prevention and peace building, especially highlighting the important role of women in peace process.¹⁰

ANALYSIS

The visits to China by the delegations from the ruling Union Solidarity and Development (USDP) and opposition NLD parties show signs that Beijing is seeking to strengthen ties with the two main political parties in Burma. At a time when Chinese-backed projects in Burma are being targeted by protests as well as anti-China sentiments surfacing among the grass-roots in Burma, the NLD's visit can be seen more as an attempt to gain support. But more importantly, could pave the way for the Chinese government to become more involved in the on-going democratic process. And to show its goodwill, China will need to take into consideration developments on the ground and also understand the changing political context of its engagements. Regardless of the outcome, the visit will have served as an opportunity for promoting and further strengthening of ties between Beijing and the NLD. China will now need to find a middle ground in dealing not only with the government in Naypyitaw but also in maintaining its special 'paukphaw' friendship status and thus becoming a key player in the Burmese democratic reform process.

The KNU and KPP call for all Karen sub-groups to register as simply Karen or Kayin underlines the concern all ethnic groups have with the official listing of 135 'races' that the government is using as the basis for the 2014 census. The list has many serious flaws. For example – Pwo Karen, the major sub-group like Sqaw, is not listed while minor sub-groups of both the Sgaw and Pwo are listed.

¹⁰ VOA Burmese News, Women Rights and Leadership Forum in Yangon, VOA Myanmar News - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHk0nXMNpQo> (VOA via Asia Hot News on Youtube) 29 October 2013
RFA Burmese on 30 Oct 2013, Voices of Women Forum in Yangon – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDDAOGel-i0> (RFA via AsiaFirstNews on Youtube) 30 October 2013
the National Women's Dialogue: Peace, Security and Development in Myanmar was held – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58gkOmPiex0> (Mrtv English Channel on Youtube) 10 November 2013
Women Talk: Peace, Security, & Development - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loZ8smTqnts> (Mrtv English Channel on Youtube) 11 November 2013