

POLITICAL MONITOR NO.9

OFFICIAL MEDIA

THEIN SEIN MEETS LEADERS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF 65 POLITICAL PARTIES

President Thein Sein met leaders and representatives of political parties at Yangon Region Government offices on 29 March. In his opening address, the President praised the 65 political parties that were taking part in the country's democratic transition and stated that Burma was now at an important transitional period. Since taking office his government had prioritized three main tasks: to achieve political reform and national reconciliation; national level development and the creation of a better society for the next generation.

In his meeting with the representatives from the political parties, Thein Sein said that efforts are being exerted to hold a political dialogue with all the ethnics for the emergence of the Union that guarantees mutual respect and equality inspired by the national races. He said that political dialogue is now under preparation and urged the participants meeting to decide on the way forward to achieve a political dialogue and also the issues to be discussed and stated that the door is kept open to discuss all matters except matters related to secession from the Union.

Regarding the constitutional amendment, Thein Sein voiced his support on the basic principal of amending the constitution in order to be in harmony with political, economic and social needs of the country and that such critical issues should be resolved through cooperation and dialogue. He called on all political parties to join hands with the government stressed the need for cooperation and coordination for ensuring a better outcome and a smooth transition urged those present to cooperate with the government in the coming political dialogues for the sake of the country and its people.¹

CENSUS TAKING PROCESS BEGINS IN REGIONS, STATES

The national census taking process kicked off in all regions/states, villages/wards and townships on 30 March. The census will be taken in 80,985 areas across the nation and over 100,000 volunteers will participate in the process. Officials have already distributed more than 14.8 million copies of census forms, manuals, equipment and documents to the respective States/Regions, Districts, Townships, Ward and Village administrative offices. Officials have prepared 41 questions for households and 11 questions for organizations and the census will be conducted till 10 April.

The census was conducted twice during the monarchical era of King Thalun and King Bodawpaya. The United Nations Population Fund-UNFPA and several donor countries have provided both technical and monetary assistance, to support Burma's first census in over three decades. The last census in taken was back in 1983. During the British colonial era, the census was taken in 1872, 1881 and 1891. After the nation regained Independence, the government conducted the census in 1953, 1954, 1973 and 1983.²

¹ Nationwide ceasefire agreement is aimed not only at reaching durable stage in ceasefire process but also paving the way for holding political dialogue –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-30.pdf> (NLM) 30 March 2014 (p. 3 & 8)

² As census begins, Immigration and Population Ministry takes data of President's family –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-31.pdf> (NLM) 31 March 2014 (p. 1)/

Census taking process commences in Magway Region –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-31.pdf> (NLM) 31 March 2014 (p. 2)/

Census taking process begins in regions, states –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-31.pdf> (NLM) 31 March 2014 (p. 3)/

Census taking process launched across the country –

<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs17/NLM2014-03-31.pdf> (NLM) 31 March 2014 (p. 8)/

MPS TO PARTICIPATE IN SETTLING LAND CONFISCATION ISSUES

Speaker of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Thura Shwe Mann has pledged to deal with complaints related to the land confiscation issues in his constituency. During the meeting with local authorities of Zeyathiri Township in Naypyitaw on 1 April, Shwe Mann said he will participate in settling the land confiscation issues in his constituency as a member of the parliament constituency, stressing the need to settling land management issues in accordance with rules and regulations. The Speaker said that President Thein Sein has urged MPs to assist in dealing with land confiscation issues in their respective constituencies to that the cases can be settled correctly and smoothly. The meeting was also attended by legal experts from the Legal Affairs and Special Cases Assessment Commission.³

INVESTIGATION COMMITTEE LAUNCHES PROBE INTO RECENT COMMUNAL UNRESTS IN SITTWAY, RAKHINE STATE

The Investigation Committee for recent riots in Sittway clarified local authorities on 30 March its organizational set up and main duties for probing into the riots. The committee inspected the locations where the violence took place and met with responsible personnel from UN/INGOs. The committee was formed on 28 March to investigate and take action against those who destroyed the residences and offices of the Malteser International and the workers of UN agencies. On 1 April, the committee officials supplicated on incidents of destruction and riots in Sittway, census taking process and religious affairs to six venerable monks at Pathein Monastery in Sittway and met with those from Rakhine Social Network, Women's Network, Arakanese National Party (ANK), owners of destroyed houses and departmental officials during the investigation.⁴

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

SHAN MPS SWITCH POLITICAL PARTIES

Three MPs from the Shan National Democratic Party (SNDP) known as the "White Tiger" Party, Sai Than Maung of Kyaukme constituency, Sai Jarm Pey of Mongyai constituency and Sai Win Myat Oo from Mongton constituency, have switched to the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD).

At a press conference held in Taunggyi on 27 March, MP Sai Jarm Pey of Mongyai said: "Whatever party we join, we are Shan, but the leader is very important. When our party leader (Sai Aik Pao, the chairman of SNDP) called for 14 states, this was not acceptable." The SNLD has made its standpoint clear that it calls for a genuine federal union based on 8 states. MP Sai Than Maung of Kyaukme, said: "After leaving the SNDP party, I feel free like being released from the prison. Before I quit, it was like we were under a dictator. One man controlled everything. We couldn't do much for our people. That's why we quit the party." MP Sai Win Myat Oo of Mongton said: "If we have two Shan political parties contesting in elections, the people will be confused. In the beginning, the plan was that the two parties would cooperate, but our chairman was saying that in politics we can't give in to anybody, or our votes will be divided. For me, I will join with SNLD."

A survey conducted in 2012 showed that 90 percent of people were calling for the two Shan political parties to merge. The two parties have set up merger committees, each comprising 5 members. The SNLD committee is headed by SNLD's Vice-Chairman Sai Saw Aung, and the SNDP's is headed by SNDP's Vice-Chairman Sai Hsawng Hsi. Both committees have sent merging letters back and forth to

2014 National Census kicks off in Mongphyat, Shan State (East) –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/2-april-14> (NLM) 2 April 2014 (p. 4)/

³ MPs to participate in settling land confiscation issues –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/2-april-14> (NLM) 2 April 2014 (p. 2)

⁴ Investigation Committee launches probe into 26-27 March riots in Sittway –

<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/content/2-april-14> (NLM) 2 April 2014 (p. 3)

each other and made appointments about the date and place to meet, but so far meetings have not yet taken place.⁵

UN SPECIAL ENVOY URGES GREATER KIO COMMITMENT TO PEACE

The UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor Vijay Nambiar met with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in the armed group's Laiza headquarters on 2 April. Nambiar spoke with KIO leaders including the organisation's president Lanyaw Zawng Hra and a technical advisory team made up of party members and civilians. The meeting was facilitated to discuss the ceasefire, especially as clashes between government troops and the KIO's armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), continue to mar the peace process. The mediator in ceasefire discussions between the KIO and the Burmese government, San Aung, said that three separate battles raged as the UN delegate urged greater sincerity on the part of the KIO in regards to peace talks with the government. "The KIO leaders said their group was engaged in three clashes concurrently as they held their meeting with the UN official, two of which were provoked by the government forces assaulting KIO positions," he said. According to Kachinland News, the Burmese army is committing further troops to the conflict against the KIA in southern Kachin and northern Shan states. The KIO officials also informed the UN envoy that such "clashes signify a weak effort in building confidence among the troops and that the Burmese Army needs to be magnanimous and participate more in the trust building." The KIO perceive the government to be reluctant to engage them in political dialogue and retain fears that the peace process will stall after the signing of a nationwide ceasefire pact. Nambiar pledged that he would stay involved in the process until peace is achieved, a statement welcomed by KIO chiefs.⁶

BURMESE ACTIVISTS LAUNCH ANTI 'HATE-SPEECH' CAMPAIGN

A group of Burmese activists, including former political prisoners, are launching a campaign on 28 March to tackle the 'hate speech' against Muslims that has engulfed social media and spread into Burmese society. Panzagar, literally "flower speech", is a movement set up by Nay Phone Latt, a blogger and executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) who spent nearly four years in jail for writing about the monks' protests in 2007 that ended in a bloody crackdown. "During the military regime, we fought for freedom of expression and now we can say that we have freedom of expression to some extent," but with free speech comes hate speech said Nay Phone Latt. "Some of the hate speech ... becomes dangerous for society and the country. One word can destroy the whole country," he wrote. "I believe that not only the tight restrictions and unfair laws but also hate speech, dangerous speech and irresponsible speech challenge and threaten freedom of expression," he added. After half a century of brutal military rule, a quasi-civilian government took office in Myanmar in March 2011 and introduced democratic reforms that have won near-universal praise. Yet the country has been grappling with hate speech since religious conflict erupted in June 2012, killing at least 240 people and displacing more than 140,000, mostly Muslims. Vitriolic and inflammatory comments about Muslims, who make up a small fraction of the population, have become common on blogs, web forums and Facebook pages. Buddhist nationalists and some monks, driven by fear that Muslims will take over Myanmar, have urged people to boycott Muslim-owned businesses and successfully lobbied the government to draft controversial laws, including one that would force Buddhist women wanting to marry non-Buddhist men to get permission from their parents and local government officials. No such restrictions are planned for

⁵ Shan MPs switch political parties –

http://www.english.panglong.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5780:shan-mps-switch-political-parties&catid=85:politics&Itemid=266 (S.H.A.N.) 29 March 2014

⁶ UN's Nambiar urges greater KIO commitment to peace as battles rage in Kachin –

<http://www.dvb.no/news/uns-nambiar-urges-greater-kio-commitment-to-peace-as-battles-rage-in-kachin-burma-myanmar-2/39314> (DVB) 4 April 2014

Buddhist men. Famous comedian Zarganar, who was sentenced to 59 years in prison in 2008 after criticising the junta, is a supporter of the Panzagar movement, whose slogan is “Let’s watch what we say so that hate between mankind does not proliferate”.⁷

NLD RESHUFFLE PARTY FOR ELECTIONS

The National League for Democracy (NLD) has reorganised its party to develop closer links between MPs and central executive committee members. The move is also to ensure the smooth running of the party ahead of a by-election this year and general elections in 2015, according to a statement by the NLD. “We have made some amendments to the NLD’s organisational set-up in the recent meeting. The number of committee members will be decided in the coming meeting... Now I am responsible for organising tasks in the upcoming by-elections. We will form the additional teams when the by-elections draws near,” said May Win Myint, who is in charge of organisation. The new set-up is made up of 4 committees, 8 departments, the party’s disciplinary committee, the administrative body and an independent auditing party. The arrangement will see Dr Aung Moe Nyo heading the parliamentary affairs committee, Nan Khin Htwe Myint the ethnic affairs committee and Dr Myo Aung in charge of foreign affairs. Nyan Win will serve as chairperson of the rules enforcement committee while NLD patron, Tin Oo will head social and legal affairs committee and Tun Tun Hein the admin and office department. New blood will also be added to the opposition party after a youth forum, he added.

The party’s reshuffle comes shortly after the NLD announced they would stand for all vacant seats in the upcoming by-elections. This comes at a time of widespread criticism over the party’s perceived weakness to comply on its promises for constitutional reform.⁸

NATIONAL UNITY PARTY TO COMPETE IN BY-ELECTIONS

The National Unity Party will compete in the upcoming by-elections, according to central executive member Han Shwe. The Chairperson of the Union Election Commission Tin Aye said that there are 31 vacant places for candidates in both houses of parliament. “We can’t take part in regions where there is no base for our party. We must consider participation of by-election in some places like Kayin and Kachin States where there are armed group organisations. We will hold a meeting after Thingyan [Burmese New Year]. But we will participate in most of the vacant seats,” said Han Shwe.

In the 2010 general election, the National Unity Party won 64 seats including 12 for the lower house, five for upper house and 45 for states and regional MPs - as well as two for national races representatives among 995 vacant constituencies. The National Unity Party is the second largest party to participate in the last elections after the now ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Both are offshoots from the military.⁹

ANALYSIS

Burma’s democratisation process to date has witnessed both positive and negative changes unfolding while an array of complex issues remains unresolved. And the latest census process aimed

⁷ Myanmar activists launch anti ‘hate-speech’ campaign – <http://www.trust.org/item/20140403131148-4mqvg/?source=hpeditorial&siteVersion=mobile> (Thomson Reuters Foundation) 3 April 2014

⁸ NLD reshuffle gears opposition party for elections – http://elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5653:nld-reshuffle-gears-opposition-party-for-elections&catid=32:politics&Itemid=354 (Eleven News Media) 3 April 2014

⁹ National Unity Party to compete in by-elections – http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5652:national-unity-party-to-compete-in-by-elections&catid=44:national&Itemid=384 (Eleven News Media) 3 April 2014

at the collection of accurate demographic data crucial for national planning and development seems to have taken a negative turn with many including ethnic groups airing concerns as to how census could fuel conflict in Burma. These groups have also expressed concerns that the authorities and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) have failed to adequately consult a broad range of ethnic groups and stakeholders in preparing the census in a non-transparent and satisfactory manner. Many ethnic minorities and other disenfranchised have also stated the census is a tool that could potentially weaken their status or claims to ethnicity and as such further classifications could lead to further escalation in conflicts within diverse communities in such areas as Shan, Kachin, Karen and Rakhine States. How the government handles the data collected from the census will define the government's commitment to reforms.