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Upcoming elections in Burma: No end to authoritarian rule in sight

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Upcoming elections in Burma: No end to authoritarian rule in sight

Bonn, 2 November 2010. Burma's first general election since 1990 will be held on 7 November 2010. The last time the country went to the polls the majority of the population voted in favour of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and the generals subsequently overheard or silenced the voice of its people. The NLD has pulled out of the forthcoming elections and is calling for a boycott. Party leader Aung San Suu Kyi was formally barred from taking part on the basis of administrative rules and continues to be under house arrest; her party has been banned.

Even though General Than Shwe has taken to appearing in public in civilian clothes, it is clear that the generals in Burma will under no circumstances allow themselves to be recast as democrats on account of the upcoming elections. The generals never meant for the elections to be a mechanism for transferring power. They are intended to create a "disciplined democracy", they will neither be free nor fair and their outcome is entirely predictable. Power will remain in the hands of the military. To be on the safe side, the junta has already bagged a quarter of the seats in parliament in accordance with provisions set out in the new constitution. They have threatened to arrest anyone who does not cast their vote and have hinted that there will be another military coup if the mass party the junta has established in recent years does not secure a majority of the votes.

Milestone en route to consolidating power

The elections reflect a process of change the military dictatorship is undergoing towards a more civilian form of government. It follows the logic of evolution that is often seen in authoritarian regimes. Compared to all other political systems, a military dictatorship like the one in Burma has the biggest potential for self-destruction on account of rivalling factions within the ruling elite. Moreover, it has only little legitimacy among the population. The generals' fear of both resistance from the population and attacks from among their own ranks has dominated the junta's

decisions over the past few decades. It led to a tripling of military expenditure between 1989 and 1995 and to the overthrow, in 2004, of General Khin Nyunt, whom the other generals had begun to mistrust. Ultimately, it was also reflected in the absurd decision to move the country's capital further inland. Now the ruling elite is trying to reduce its uncertainty concerning its own ability to maintain power. And so it is on the one hand attempting to create internal institutional structures to retain power and to transfer power internally and on the other hand to increase its legitimacy among the population.

The upcoming elections in Burma are a milestone on the road to consolidating the junta's autocratic power. The ruling elite is thereby taking a step to eliminate the mutual mistrust among its own ranks and could thus pave the way to more political stability, more economic development and less repression. In the past, paranoid measures to hold on to power have eaten up gigantic sums of money and resources. They also prevented investments in the country's economy. Rather than being interested in a continuous flow of tax revenues, the military has aimed to take over direct control of the economy to ensure its political survival by exploiting natural resources. When it gained independence, Burma was one of the richest countries in Asia. The second largest of the ASEAN countries, it has considerable economic potential, but the country has been bled dry by a power-hungry elite and degraded to the poor-house of South East Asia.

Things could get better in the short term

Against this background, the path the junta has embarked on to consolidate its power could give reason to hope – as paradoxical as that may sound. Political stability can provide those in power with a longer-term perspective and can create the enabling environment needed to unleash the country's economic potential.

A correlation exists, however, between a country's economic clout and political repression of the population: There is on average more censorship,

torture and oppression in poorer countries. If the ruling elite was more certain that it will retain power, then the Burmese dictators could copy the Chinese strategy and increase their legitimacy through economic progress, reducing the need to fall back on repressive measures. That could lead to a considerable improvement in the human rights situation in Burma, even if political freedoms and rights were still to be curtailed. Both the alleviation of the people's extreme poverty and a reduction in the level of violence used by the government against the population would be a positive thing.

Gradual change – but towards what?

It has rightly been criticised that the elections in Burma are intended to extend the regime's power indefinitely rather than to establish real democracy. However, the NLD's uncompromising calls for free and fair elections are controversial even among the opposition in Burma. Many have realised that the regime will not voluntarily do away with itself and that change will come only gradually. The fact that a military dictatorship has

only very rarely managed to transition directly to a democracy speaks for that. The military dictatorships in Thailand, Portugal and Uruguay only managed the transition to a democratic government after the regimes had first permitted limited competition from other political parties.

Burma's dilemma is that the process that could take the country forward – that is the consolidation of political structures – also carries the risk that the kleptocratic elite will "ensconce" itself in power, preventing real democratisation in the future too. The regime has already ensured control over officialdom and the administration. Through its mass party, it has also established a hold on society. And over the last few years it has transferred state-owned enterprises into private hands by means of an obscure programme of privatisation. That does not exactly testify to the fair use of economic resources needed to create sustainable growth, jobs and broad-based prosperity. And the more the elite has to lose, the more reluctant it will be to establish a democratic order. That, too, unfortunately, can be observed in many countries.



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