

Network Myanmar and the Future

8 September 2015

Network Myanmar was set up in June 2007 as a political lobbying group which sought to convince UK Governments, whether Conservative, Labour or Coalition, of the futility and counterproductive nature of their policy of isolating and sanctioning the military regime which had ruled Burma (later Myanmar) since 1962, in a situation where it was the people who suffered directly as a result of Western actions and the regime scarcely, if at all.

Our association's *raison d'être* came to an end when Western Governments concluded that the advent of a parliamentary system of government following the 2010 elections provided sufficient cause for them to change their policy and to seek to recover lost influence through engagement across the board. Network Myanmar's flagship website has however continued, seeking to provide independent and impartial coverage of events in Myanmar under my editorship. My contacts are sometimes surprised to discover that I am the sole editor, graphic artist and webmaster. Many assume that I must depend on editorial, graphic and technical teams to service the website. It is surprising what even an octogenarian can do unaided, when challenged.

My plan is to keep the website going until the results of the elections, due on 8 November, are known and the new President is chosen. This should be achieved by the end of March 2016. This is conveniently close to the end of the UK Financial Year and of the funding which I have received as an advisor to Bagan Capital Limited. The website will however continue online until at least 1 July 2016, as some technical housekeeping may be required for the digital record to be finalised. The coding ravages of several scarcely compatible Joomla operating systems take time to repair.

The website will then be frozen in time as a record of the events which led to the reintroduction of a parliamentary system of government in Myanmar and of the five year term of the first Parliament from 2011 to 2016. Those who wish to use the materials on the website as an archived resource on their computer or external storage device can at any time download a mirror image using free programmes like HTTrack.com. The latest download of the full website is only 581 MB. All internal URLs work automatically, whether you are online or not, and all external URLs work as well when you are online. Inevitably, some external URLs will, with the passage of time, no longer be valid whenever records at source are archived or deleted, but I have found that in almost all cases news reports and feature articles can be recovered by pasting the headline into a search engine like Google and tracking down an archived or alternative source.

I expect that the next six months will be full of surprises. I have myself been reluctant to speculate on the likely outcome, either of the elections themselves or of the contest for the presidency. Though the National League for Democracy (NLD) may well be able to count, as it did at the 1990 elections and at the 2012 by-elections, on the popularity of its charismatic leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the majority Union of Solidarity and Development Party in the legislature has a solid record and its close association with the Tatmadaw, or Armed Forces, is not the liability it once was. The Tatmadaw is these days rather less unpopular than it used to be in a society where Buddhist nationalism is a growing phenomenon and the Tatmadaw uses its political clout less obtrusively than in the past.

At the best of times, politics anywhere in South East Asia is a rough business, with populist policies firm vote-winners. I would not be surprised if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, already reportedly overworked and overwrought, were to wilt physically under the pressures of the election campaign. I think most of us would see her election to a quasi non-executive presidency, if only for a time, as the pinnacle of her career and a fitting tribute to her struggle for democracy over the years. This prospect would depend on a landslide victory for the NLD at the elections and the acquiescence of the Tatmadaw in the necessary changes to the Constitution in order to make her eligible for the presidency. Such a scenario though seems unlikely, if not improbable. I hope I am wrong.

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