

NLD starts election campaign but faces restrictions

Throughout February, the National League for Democracy (NLD) campaigned for the 48 parliamentary seats they are contesting in the by-election on 1 April. Aung San Suu Kyi toured in Irrawaddy and Rangoon Divisions and in Kachin State with huge crowds turning out to hear her speak in many towns.

However, despite government promises that the process would be free and fair, the NLD faced numerous obstructions to their campaign activities in February, including repeated refusals to allow the NLD to use local stadiums for campaign rallies. Campaign events planned for Kachin State were also blocked, with the government citing security concerns.

On 20 February, the NLD held a press conference to highlight these restrictions and in response, the Election Commission announced that it would lift all restrictions on the party's campaign activities.



Military action threatens peace agreements

Despite recent peace agreements, there has been renewed tension between the regime and some of the armed ethnic groups as a result of recent aggression and troop deployment by the Burmese Army.

Speaking to DVB, Major Sai Lao Hseng, from the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S), said there had been at least 10 attacks this month. The SSA have lodged a formal complaint with the government about Burmese Army aggression.

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) threatened to end its 'peace agreement' after the Burmese Army raided a DKBA weapons cache on 19 February and refused to return the stolen arms. Fighting broke out in Hlaingbwe and Hpa-an Townships, Karen State but the peace agreement was renewed after further negotiation.

The Karen National Union has accused the Burmese army of setting up hundreds of military outposts in KNU territory after they allowed the Burmese Army to deliver supplies to Burmese Army units.

On 25 February, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) signed an 'initial peace agreement' with government representatives led by the Minister of Rail Transportation Aung Min after talks in Moulmein, Mon State.

Aung San Suu Kyi says reforms not "irreversible"

Speaking to an audience in Canada via a video link, Aung San Suu Kyi has said that the current reform process in Burma is not yet irreversible.

"Some are a little bit too optimistic about the situation. We are cautiously optimistic. We are at the beginning of a road.

"Ultimate power still rests with the army so until we have the army solidly behind the process of democratisation we cannot say that we have got to a point where there will be no danger of a U-turn. Many people are beginning to say that the democratisation process here is irreversible. It's not so," she said.

The event was organised by Canadian Friends and Carleton University in Ottawa.

Burma's Human Rights Commission rejects human rights abuse investigation

The chairman of Burma's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Win Mra, has said that it would be inappropriate for the Commission to investigate allegations of human rights abuses in ethnic minority areas.

Speaking at a press conference at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thailand on 14 February, Win Mra said, "The national reconciliation process is political, to investigate into conflict areas would not be appropriate at this time."

The NHRC was set up in September 2011, replacing the 'Myanmar Human Rights Committee', which was established by Burma's dictatorship in 2000.

Following his fifth visit to Burma in February, Tomas Ojea Quintana, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, said that "... there are no indications as yet that the (National Human Rights) Commission is fully independent and effective in compliance with the Paris Principles."

He highlighted ongoing human rights abuses committed in ethnic areas, "including attacks against civilian populations, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, internal displacement, land confiscations, the use of human shields, the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as forced labour and portering."

He said it was essential that a durable political solution is found to "address the root causes of the conflict, including systematic discrimination, displacement and economic deprivation affecting ethnic minorities."

Quintana also stressed that justice and accountability measures were essential and that Burma cannot ignore or whitewash what has happened in the past, "facing Myanmar's own recent history and acknowledging the violations that people have suffered, will be necessary to ensure national reconciliation and to prevent future violations from occurring," he said.

U Gambira to face 'squatting' charges

On 17 February Buddhist monk U Gambira was detained for questioning following a midnight raid on a monastery in Rangoon. He was released several hours later but the state-run newspaper New Light of Myanmar has said that U Gambira will face charges of "squatting" in Maggin monastery and breaking into the Sasana Theikpan and Sasana Gonyi monasteries.

U Gambira, one of the leaders of the 2007 uprising,

was sentenced to 68 years for his role in the protests. He was released in January 2012.



Despite some easing of restrictions in recent months in Burma, activists are still facing harassment. In Arakan State, activists campaigning for better economic conditions were warned by police to stop their activities. Police later stripped the campaign t-shirts off a group of '24-hour electricity campaign' activists who participated in a local festival. In Rangoon, eleven activists calling for cheaper mobile phone SIM cards were briefly detained.

UN Human Rights Rapporteur Quintana also raised concerns this month that recently-released political prisoners are being monitored by government authorities.

Karen leader on trial

Mahn Nyein Maung, a Karen National Union leader, appeared in court this month facing charges of unlawful association and high treason, punishable by the death penalty or life sentence.



Mahn Nyein Maung, who is currently in Insein Prison, had already been sentenced to one year imprisonment for breaking immigration laws. He was arrested in July 2011 by Chinese immigration officials and deported to Burma, where he was taken into custody.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, the authorities had promised to free Mahn Nyein Maung if he helped with the ceasefire

negotiations with the Karen National Union.

Although Mahn Nyein Maung agreed, the authorities refused to release him and instead have put him on trial for the new charges of unlawful association and high treason.

Mahn Nyein Maung is a member of the central executive committee of the KNU and a committee member of the ethnic alliance, the United Nationalities Federal Council.

Strike at Rangoon factory

On 6 February, around 1,800 workers went on strike at the Chinese-owned Tai Yi footwear factory in Rangoon. The strike began after workers discovered that they would not be paid for working during the Chinese New Year holiday.

The workers demanded higher wages and other rights. At the end of February, the workers filed a suit with the arbitration court. The court's ruling did award a salary increase, raising the hourly pay from 100 kyat to 120 kyat (\$0.12 to \$ 0.14), but did not address other demands for improving conditions in the factory.

Workers at the factory have announced plans to form a union. A new labour law was passed in October giving workers in Burma the right to form unions and to strike. However, President Thein Sein had not yet signed a public notification that is required to put the new law into force and so no new unions have been allowed to register yet.

EU announces aid package

During a visit to Burma in February, EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs confirmed €150 million EU aid package to Burma for health, education, and job creation. Piebalgs said that if the by-elections on 1 April were free and fair, he "would expect the easing of sanctions to continue." However, despite stating that free and fair elections were a benchmark for easing sanctions, he told a press conference that independent election observers are "not needed".

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