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## Myanmar:The Dragon on a 'Roll'

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Events in Myanmar are moving at a bewildering pace both in the ethnic front and in moving towards Constitutional amendments. There is an indirect benefit for India too with the Myanmar Army acting against the Indian Insurgents operating from Myanmar for the first time in a serious manner. Above all, what is seen is the shadow of China taking the initiatives which were absent all these years- but not to be ignored is that China is not doing for any selfless service for the sake of Myanmar but to further its interests on its border. The war in Rakhine State is getting intensified with heavy casualties on both sides.

### **First, on the Myitsone Dam.**

As I had said earlier it looks that China will some-how manage to re start the Myitsone Project despite protests from the people in the region. In this both Suu Kyi and even the Army Chief appear to be interested to accommodate China.

The Minister of Investment and Foreign Relations U Thang Tun was honest enough to admit that the Government is working hard to find a solution with all options from down-sizing to re-locating or even develop other projects instead.

He indicated that the main problems are that the project is located on a fault line and a large number of villages will be displaced. He admitted that the public is opposed to the project for a variety of religious, cultural and social reasons. 90 percent of the power produced will also go to China bringing no benefits to the region. He indicated that his Government would like to avoid making the same mistakes as other countries have done and have found themselves deeply in debt! A frank admission indeed!

The NLD in the past had set up a 20-member Commission with the Chief Minister of Kachin to reassess the project including its environmental and Social impacts. Two reports produced by the Commission which perhaps were not favourable in re opening the project have not yet been released.

Suu Kyi had in the past until 2017 vigorously opposed the construction of the dam, but now has changed her mind and wants to accommodate China.

On 5<sup>th</sup> February, Min Aung Hliang, the military Chief who has political ambitions of his own, met the Kachin religious leaders and discussed about the Myitsone dam. He said that the final decision would depend on public's wishes and that of the Parliament!

Cardinal Bo an influential religious head of Kachin people said that it will be a political suicide if the project is continued. He added that Myanmar is facing the sad prospect of losing the Irrawady to the greed of a Super Power.

One idea that is gaining ground is to hold a referendum on this issue. China will have no alternative but to accept it, if the overwhelming view of the public is against the construction of the dam.

### **Amendments to the Charter:**

With the elections to go in 2020, the Government finally gathered courage to file a proposal for the amendments. The proposal is to form a committee represented by all parties to carry out the process of amending the Constitution. It was later approved to be debated in the Parliament and Army Representatives abstained from voting. Differences have already surfaced over forming the committee with the NLD going for proportional representation while the USDP wants "equal" numbers.

The proposal was vigorously opposed by the Army Representatives led by Brigadier Maung Maung. The Army contingent in the Parliament rose up in unison to oppose the charter amendment not on the substantive amendments, but on the procedure employed by the Ruling Party to push through the proposals. They also said that they would await instructions from the Army Chief.

The Army Chief on the other hand said on 31<sup>st</sup> Jan that he is not opposed in principle to amend the Constitution. Nonetheless his military MPs sent a strong letter of protest to the Speaker. On another occasion he said that the Tatmadaw (Army) does not engage in politics but focus on national security. He added however that the military will not agree to any attempt to damage the Union or allow secession in the country. To me it looks like a threat not to cross the Red Lines. There was a big street demonstration in Yangon in support of the Army's position and the infamous Buddhist Priest Wiratho was also present.

It is not that the NLD had not tried for Constitutional amendments earlier. It tried in 2013 and again in 2015. In the second instance, they

wanted to amend the constitution to permit Suu Kyi to take over the Presidentship and another to bring down the percentage of approval from 75 to percent to 70.for amending the Constitution. Both were turned down by the Army.

It looks that the Army may agree to some cosmetic and perhaps some incremental changes like the division of powers between the Centre and the States and nothing beyond. In the near term one does not see the Army relenting on its current central and decisive role in the political life of the country. The Army is also seen to be cultivating the majority Bamar community. Its ruthless action against the Rohingyas has won their hearts while on the other hand Suu Kui has come in for flak both domestically and internationally.

Why is Suu Kyi pushing for Constituional amendments now towards the end of her term? One noted Kachin Analyst has given two reasons- One. It is the right time to 'push' when China can influence the Military. Two. Suu apparently has allowed the revival of Myitsone dam and perhaps expects China to support her in amending the Constitution in return.

China does not care about democracy in other countries when it does not allow it in its own country. Second, China loves dictators and autocrats and most of the controversial deals under the BRI or otherwise were with such leaders. Maldives and Sri Lanka come to my mind.

### **Ethnic Insurgency:**

On the ethnic insurgent side there have been some positive developments. Under China's persuasion, a structured formal dialogue is soon going to take place between the Government and the Northern Alliance and even a cease fire cannot be ruled out.

However, the fighting against the Arakan Army has intensified. We see the beginnings of a civil war with large number of civilian populations vacating their areas. It is said that there are over 5000 IDPS and may go further as fighting intensifies. Midnight raids on peaceful homes have become common and people are living under fear.

One good fallout from operations against Arakan Army has been that the Indian Insurgents living safely across the border from India are being dispersed. The Army is said to have taken control of the headquarters of NSCN Khaplang group. It is also said to have cleared the area of five Indian insurgent groups who have now moved to the Kachin area. If there is more pressure the groups they may move further north towards China. There are reports that on 4<sup>th</sup> Feb., an abandoned ULFA camp was also attacked by the Myanmar Army.

In return Myanmar would expect India not to provide shelter or allow camps on the Indian side to the Arakan Army!

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