

Myanmar: Civil-Military Relations: Suu Kyi standing up to the Army

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Wed, 06/03/2020 - 11:42

Paper No. 6590

Dated 3-June-2020

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For some time, it was thought that the supposed democratic Constitution of Myanmar of 2008 that gave the Army a significant role in governance and a Parliament with 25 percent of the seats reserved for serving officers, the civilian government had hardly any leg room to freely function as a genuine democratic state. One well known Analyst called it a “Hybrid Democracy”. Built into the Constitution was that important portfolios like Defence, Home and border management were also to be headed by serving Army Officers.

The Army had also a proxy USDP as a political party that contested elections in November 2015 and had a few seats.

With the exception of Suu Kyi out maneuvering the Army by creating the post of a State Councillor who acted as the Chief Executive, the Ruling party NLD could do nothing in the last four years to assert itself. Suu Kyi, still appeared to believe in gradual transformation and her efforts to amend the Constitution to reduce the control of the Army in the Constitution also failed when none of the amendments could be gone through. The Army’s Representatives en bloc voted against any constitutional amendment.

It is in this situation we find a refreshing change in Suu Kyi’s Government asserting itself now. May be, that these decisions were taken in view of the impending General elections towards the end of the year, but it required quite a bit of courage for the civilian government to finally assert itself vis a vis the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw).

On 28th May, for the first time, the Union Parliament declined to approve in full the additional Army budget requested by cutting US \$ 7.57 million. The Defence Minister Lt. Gen. Sein Win pleaded with the Parliament not to cut the budget. He gave four reasons for granting the full amount asked for. These were

1. To cover daily allowance for the Soldiers who are undertaking operations.
2. Funds required for transportation, rental fees for transport of rations.
3. Costs of aviation fuel and operational support material.
4. Cost towards using Choppers for transporting not only soldiers and other military uses but also transport of Civil servants, Currency, High school examination papers as well as other uses.

Despite the plea, the Parliament stood firm in cutting the budget of the Army.

The fact of the matter is that the Army is incurring enormous costs in continuing the war against the Arakan Army in Northern Rakhine and now spread to Chin area around Paletwa.

Despite the declaration of a cease-fire by the Arakan Army as part of the “Three Brother hood Alliance,” the Army did not agree to the cease-fire in the Rakhine Area. As one Observer said in describing the conflict in Rakhine that never before in the seven-decade old conflict has there been what is seen in the present conflict with the Arakan Army as the longest, heaviest and worst seen so far.

There has been complete lock down and Internet Blackout for a very long time. Over 150000 villagers have been displaced so far. There are reports of heavy shelling of the Army against the villages like the one on May 1 at Roka Wa Village of Paletwa and again one incident of very heavy fighting at Thazin Myang.

Earlier Suu Kyi’s Government together with the Army leadership had decided to go all out to eliminate the Arakan Army but the fighting has not gone the way the Army wanted. Both sides have taken prisoners and there are a few desertions of Non Bamar individuals from the Army.

It is yet not clear whether by not accepting an increased budget to carry out the operations now only in Rakhine and Chin State, the civilian government is giving a signal to the Army to go slow in the operations. But it is necessary to review the operations as the Arakan Army has the full support of its people.

In declaring the cease-fire till May 31st (could have been extended by now) the Arakan Army has indicated that the cease fire is required to

1. Start a political dialogue
2. Development of People
3. Protect the life and property of general Public and maintain stability
4. More importantly to support the preventive and combative measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 Virus.

The appeal apparently had fallen on deaf ears. There were reports that Government did send out medical equipment and other support materials to all ethnic insurgent units including the Wa group, but there is no mention of sending such supplies to the Arakan Army!

It is time for Suu Kyi to rethink for a bilateral cease-fire and go for talks instead of the Army threatening to attack other ethnic insurgent entities like the Kachn for letting the the Arakan Army stay and train in their areas!

June 1st was another historic day for Myanmar Civilian Government when the Army-sponsored resolution to impeach the Speaker of the Parliament Khun Myat was rejected outright.

A resolution moved by the Army Representatives and the members of the Army Proxy- the USDP to remove Speaker as he was supposed to have violated the Constitution and Parliamentary laws was overwhelmingly voted down by 243 members of the Parliament.

The Charge led by the Army Representative, Lt. Col Myo htet Win said 1. that the Speaker broke the law by allowing the NLD the Ruling Party to submit an urgent proposal to form a Constitutional Amendment Committee in January 2019 2. By blocking a full parliamentary debate on a charter amendment proposal submitted by the Military 3. Of Misusing his power in preventing a debate on impeachment 4. Committed an act of negligence and dishonestly blocking motions that were important for the nation and the citizens.

There is no doubt that the Army representatives in the Parliament moved the resolution on the instructions of their Army Chief who chose to show his indignation by letting the Army go for removal of the Speaker and perhaps testing the civilian government in the process!

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