Myanmar’s Post-Election Future:
Challenges and Opportunities for Aung San Suu Kyi

An Interview with Christina Fink

In November 2015, Myanmar held a landmark, nationwide election in which Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won a landslide victory against Thein Sein and the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Though constitutionally barred from becoming president, Aung San Suu Kyi now wields an unprecedented popular mandate. This past December, the Journal sat down with Christina Fink, Professor of Practice of International Affairs at George Washington University, to discuss the 2015 elections, the current political situation in Myanmar, and what the NLD’s victory might mean for Myanmar going forward.

Journal: In your assessment, what accounted for the National League for Democracy’s (NLD) remarkable electoral success?

Fink: There are two main reasons. The first is that people were tired of military rule, and they saw Thein Sein’s government as a continuation of military rule. The second reason is the tremendous respect that most people in Myanmar have for Aung San Suu Kyi. They believe that she can really bring change and improvement to their lives.

Journal: In September 2014, you wrote an article asking, “How real are Myanmar’s reforms?” In your opinion, does this election indicate that Myanmar is sincerely democratizing, or are these reforms merely tactics to legitimize authoritarian rule?

Fink: The 2008 constitution was written by the former military regime, and it established a lot of rights for the military to continue to be involved in politics. What they were trying to do was to create the veneer of democracy while ensuring they would still have a significant degree of power in the political process. This election has allowed the
opposition party, the NLD, to take most of the elected positions. But, there are still a number of appointed positions in various parts of the government, which will ensure that the military still has a say in all aspect of politics.

Journal: Perhaps you could briefly discuss the extent to which the military maintains control over government processes, including key ministries. Given the military’s considerable influence, what stakeholders will Suu Kyi need to cooperate with in order to achieve her objectives?

Fink: The military has control of three ministries in the government: the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Border Affairs, and also, perhaps most importantly, the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Ministry of Home Affairs has a much bigger mandate than the Department of the Interior in the United States. The police, the prison system, and basically the country’s whole administration at the subnational level are all under the Ministry of Home Affairs. So, if Aung San Suu Kyi does not have a good relationship with the commander-in-chief or with the home minister, then they could subvert government administration at all levels below the central level. That’s one really important power for the military. The military also has control over its own military activities; so, for the peace process, Aung San Suu Kyi can’t really achieve a settlement unless she’s got the military on board.

Another important power the military has is in the National Defense and Security Council. It is similar to our National Security Council, but it has more powers than our National Security Council. It is really above the president in that there are eleven members in the Council, and six of them are from the military or represent military interests. That body is able to declare a state of emergency and, theoretically, could do so against the president’s will.

The final important power that the military has in the government is that the military holds 25 percent of the seats in the parliament. Amending the constitution requires more than 75 percent of the parliamentarians to vote in favor. So, if Aung San Suu Kyi cannot develop a cooperative relationship with the military, she will not be able to change the constitution.

Journal: After the election, Aung San Suu Kyi declared that although she could not be president by constitutional mandate, she would rule by proxy. Does this decision put her “above the law” or more fully in line with the demands of her popular mandate? Why is this outcome acceptable to the NLD and the public?

Fink: Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD tried to change the 2008 constitution during President Thein Sein’s administration, because there is a provision in the constitution which specifically prevents her from being able to become the president. What she’s really doing is making a mockery of that provision and a mockery of the constitution as a whole, because the constitution was written in a way to ensure military influence in politics and to prevent her from being able to head the government. Most people who voted for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD did so because they wanted her to lead
the country. So, for those who voted for Aung San Suu Kyi, it is not necessarily a prob-
lem if she’s not the “official” president, but it is likely that she will try to change the
constitution so that she could be both the *de jure* and *de facto* president.

**Journal:** Now that the NLD holds about 60 percent of the seats in both houses, do you
think this will be a rubber stamp parliament for Suu Kyi’s initiatives or will we see the
activist parliament continue to flourish?

**Fink:** I think what is so interesting is that under the Thein Sein government, you did
have the development of an activist parliament when it was expected that the parlia-
ment would function as a rubber stamp. There were some ambitious leaders from the
ruling party in the parliament, and they wanted to demonstrate their own power and
capabilities by making the parliament an important body in government. That legacy
will be there for the next parliament. But, if you look at how the NLD members of par-
liament operated under the Thein Sein administration, they generally voted as a bloc
on any important issues. Under the next administration, I expect that NLD parliamen-
tarians will follow Aung San Suu Kyi’s lead on critical issues. She may also have the
parliament investigate “rule of law” concerns and how the government is performing
in various areas as a way to push civil servants to be less corrupt, more effective, and
more efficient.

**Journal:** In 2013 and 2014, civil society organizations were instrumental in influencing
the parliament to change some “peaceful assembly” laws and the Association Bill. Do
you expect these organizations to play a bigger role with an NLD-dominated parlia-
ment? Since not all organizations are committed to democracy or democratic ideals, is
a stronger civil society a positive development?

**Fink:** First of all, a lot of people in the NLD have close personal relationships with
people in civil society organizations, particularly rights-oriented civil society organi-
zations. It is likely that they will look to members of civil society who have expertise
on specific topics, whether it is the environment or education or the peace process, for
information and suggestions about legislation and policy in those areas. But, the NLD
will certainly have to think very carefully about how it manages organizations that
have agendas that are discriminatory towards certain groups in society. In particular,
that means *Ma Ba Tha*, the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion.
That group supported the passage of four laws under the Thein Sein government that
are really meant to discriminate against Muslims and also are discriminatory towards
women. *Ma Ba Tha* will want to see those laws enacted, and there may be other things
they would like to see happen. They do have a degree of support throughout the popu-
lation, so a challenge for the NLD will be to figure out how to be open to civil society,
but also how to engage with organizations that are working against an inclusive and
diverse Myanmar society.

**Journal:** In the lead-up to the elections, it was reported that Aung San Suu Kyi was
“very upset” by the entrenched Islamophobia in the majority Buddhist country. How-
ever, she did not make a statement on the stateless *Rohingya* Muslims. Why do you
think Aung San Suu Kyi did not make a statement?

**Fink:** Aung San Suu Kyi acted strategically in that her goal was to achieve a resounding victory in order to propel her party into power. Then they would be in a position to effect policy changes. That said, *Ma Ba Tha* has been a strong force in Myanmar, and it may be challenging for the NLD to really take on these issues, particularly early in the administration. So, my guess is that Aung San Suu Kyi will continue to take a “rule of law” approach to the issue and potentially, going forward, talk about the restoration of rights for *Rohingya* Muslims. The 1982 citizenship law needs to be changed. It does not recognize the *Rohingya* as an indigenous ethnic group. Individuals from non-recognized groups must prove that their ancestors resided in the country from before 1823.

**Journal:** Will the rank and file of her party rally behind this cause?

**Fink:** I think that within the NLD, as well as within the population as a whole, there is a feeling of insecurity and unease during this period of transition—a period in which some people’s fortunes are rising, while other people worry that they are going to lose out. So, this provides an environment in which it is very easy to stoke narrow nationalism. Aung San Suu Kyi alone cannot change that. There needs to be a broader movement that emphasizes tolerance and diversity.

**Journal:** Given the military’s remaining control over security and border issues, is there opportunity for compromise on ethnic issues?

**Fink:** This is going to be a very important issue once Aung San Suu Kyi’s party takes power, but even during the transition period, a lot is happening. Within sixty days after the national ceasefire agreement was signed in October, a political framework had to be established for the ensuing political dialogue. The framework explains what groups of people will be represented in the political dialogue, how decisions will be made, and what topics will be considered.

Political talks are supposed to begin within ninety days of the ceasefire accord being signed. The NLD wants to take a leading role, but the military also wants to have significant authority—and then there are also the ethnic minority political parties, ethnic armed groups, and other political parties including the current ruling party. All want to have influence over the process. Aung San Suu Kyi has said that she is committed to a federal union, but specifically what that would mean in terms of both political and economic rights is not clear. Whether the military would go along with that is also not clear. She will have to work with both the military and ethnic minority representatives to come to some type of agreement.

**Journal:** Many in the United States are calling for Aung San Suu Kyi to immediately tackle democratic and human rights related issues such as protecting the persecuted *Rohingya* or amending the constitution. Will Aung San Suu Kyi be free to focus on these widely publicized issues, or will her voters demand her attention elsewhere?
Fink: Aung San Suu Kyi may set free political prisoners, who have been jailed for unauthorized protests and offenses against the media laws.

But, I think that her main focus is going to be improving the standard of living for the population as a whole. That means focusing on economics and also good governance, increasing the services that are available to the population, improving service delivery, and reducing corruption. Corruption is something that really hinders people in their everyday lives in Myanmar. Bribes are demanded for virtually every interaction people have with local authorities—to get an ID card, to receive any kind of service, or even to pay taxes. So, reducing these transaction costs—making the government actually work for the people—will be a key priority for her.

Beyond that, the peace process is essential not only for bringing about political stability for the country but also for economic development. And then I would say that amending the constitution would be a longer-term goal.

Journal: Now that the military has allowed for elections, some are calling for the U.S. government to validate and further incentivize the military by, for example, lifting sanctions. In your opinion, how can the United States best assist Myanmar’s development and democratization moving forward?

Fink: That’s a conversation that the U.S. government will want to have with the new government, and the new government may include people beyond the NLD. For example, it may include ethnic minority representatives among others. The goal is to ensure that this government can succeed, that economic prosperity can be realized, that peace can be realized, and that there will be greater political openness in the country going forward. So, what needs to happen is a reevaluation of what would be the best means to support the achievement of those goals.

Christina Fink is a Professor of Practice of International Affairs at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs. She received her Ph.D. in Social/Cultural Anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley. She specializes in development, civil society and ethnically diverse states with a particular regional focus on Southeast Asia, especially Myanmar. In addition, she has worked as a coordinator for the Open Society Institute’s Burma Project and at the National Endowment for Democracy.

Christina Fink was interviewed by Wafi Abdul Manan and Taylor Wettach on December 7, 2015.