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## MYANMAR: National league for Democracy Party Congress

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*“Even party members say their National League for Democracy is in disarray — suffering from an array of problems including what one called a “leadership vacuum” in the middle ranks.”* - Thomas Fuller (The New York Times)

### Introduction

National League for Democracy (NLD) was in the news recently both in the local and international media as it conducted its first ever national party congress at Yangon from 08 to 10 March 2013. About 900 party members from 260 townships attended the three day congress. The NLD claims to have more than 1.2 million members nationwide.

### The Past

The NLD was founded on 27 September 1988 in the wake of a nationwide uprising popularly known as the 8-8-88.

*“The NLD was an amalgam of disparate individuals coalescing under the banner of democracy and under the leadership of former military officers under the flag of antipathy to continuing military control”* wrote David I Steinberg in his book “Burma/Myanmar – What Everyone needs to Know”.

Even at the outset the party was accused of having some communist leanings which resulted in Brig. Aung Gyi walking out with his group to form his own party. Despite being a loose federation of all disgruntled army officers and champions of democracy, NLD had a landslide

victory in its first shot in the 1990 elections. The party won 392 of the 485 seats with a 58.7% of the popular vote.

However the military junta did not honour the results on the pretext that the parliament cannot be convened before a new constitution is drafted and that a national convention will be held for this purpose.

During the period 1990 to 2010 there was a deliberate campaign by the military junta to marginalise the NLD, by closing down its branch offices on some pretext or the other, intimidating and arresting most of its senior leaders besides keeping Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for about 15 years. Most of the leaders who were not arrested had left the country on their own to prevent being arrested. The NLD which had initially joined the National Convention for drafting the 2008 constitution, walked out of it as the convention was orchestrated by the military for its own ends.

Elections were held in the country in November 2010 after two decades (the last was in 1990). However, NLD boycotted the 2010 general elections on the grounds that the 2008 Constitution and the election laws are so restrictive and against the norms of democracy. NLD was officially declared as dissolved in September 2010 for failing to register as a political party in accordance with the election laws for the 2010 elections.

The decision to boycott weakened the party on two grounds – firstly the general public was disillusioned and disappointed as they had no options left and secondly a breakaway faction of the party under Khin Maung Shwe decided to contest the elections.

After another period of hibernation the NLD was re-registered as a political party in Jan 2012 consequent to the formation of a quazi-civilian government in March 2011 and a rapprochement between President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi.

## **The Present**

The resurgence of the party began in January 2012. The party decided to contest the by-elections in April 2012. There was a big membership drive. The party's Central Committee and the Executive Committee were revamped and canvassing for the by-elections was conducted vigorously despite the odds posed by the government.

In a repeat performance of the 1990 elections the NLD swept the polls in the April 2012 by-election by winning a total of 43 out of 44 seats it contested. Despite apprehensions as to whether the regime will honour the results, the results were honoured as the NLD will still not have much say in the parliament with a meagre 6.4% of the seats and because the lifting of the economic sanctions by the Western nations was dependent on the outcome of this by-election.

The NLD held its first ever party congress at Yangon from 8 to 10 March 2013 keeping in view the 2015 general elections. Aung San Suu Kyi had already conveyed in a press meet that she is willing to become the President of the nation if her party is successful with the majority

votes and if the people want her to become the president.

The salient features of this congress were:

- As expected Aung San Suu Kyi was re-elected as the chairperson of the party unanimously.
- A Central Committee of 120 members was elected.
- It has been decided to have 30 reserve central committee members.
- The Party's Central Executive Committee has been expanded from 7 members to 15 but the existing CEC members continue to be in the new line-up. There will be 5 reserve members in the CEC also.
- There will also be a seven-member board of patrons with U Tin Oo, a co-founder of the NLD, as Chairman.
- There are more women members.
- Aung San Suu Kyi had promised to initiate specific changes in the Party's strategy in view of the change in the political set-up of the nation.
- The first meeting of the new CEC will be held on April 8 2013, where in the responsibilities of the CEC members for the 2015 elections are likely to be discussed.

The policy programme of the NLD released at the end of the Congress reveals the following:

- It stressed building peace and enforcement of rule of law in striving for becoming a modern developed and democratic state.
- It will practice an active and independent policy in relations with global countries and work for close cooperation with them politically.
- It will also cooperate in exploring business undertakings which bring mutual benefit to countries, especially that benefit local people.
- It will deal closely and firmly with the United Nations, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund giving priorities to people-centred sector.
- It will work for absolute peace in the country, saying that it will not ignore the ethnic nationalities' dissatisfactions but to coordinate politically to address the issue.
- It will work for revoking laws that go against the era and for emergence of a genuine democratic state.
- It will adopt a market-oriented economic policy, fight poverty by laying down strategic plan, increase budget for use in health and education sectors and encourage agricultural development among others.

(This policy program has been extracted from English News (Xinhua)—March 10, 2013)

## Problems and Challenges

Many of the leaders are in the 70s and 80s and the various Committees have been expanded without a push to infuse young blood and new faces. There is no prominent second line of leadership with most decisions coming from the top. Win Tin (83), a senior leader of the NLD remarked "*the party's reliance on Suu Kyi and the disarray caused by the detention of senior leaders in the decades since 1988 have left the NLD without a clear successor*" (Bloomberg, February 11, 2013).

The fact that Aung San Suu Kyi herself urged the members in the congress to unite and move away from infighting and factionalism proves that both these ills are there in the party.

As of now NLD continues to be a symbolic than significant and a populist than effective opposition party.

Media reports indicate that democratic norms have not been followed in selecting regional representatives for the party congress resulting in expulsions on disciplinary grounds.

NLD being a predominantly Buddhist party have made no major efforts to include ethnic members and ethnic people are also sceptic about Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD to look after their interests.

The party is short of funds and had to compromise to accept funds from the so called "cronies" of the erstwhile military junta.

The biggest challenge to the party is to get the 2008 constitution amended. Under this constitution Suu Kyi is disqualified as she was married to a foreign citizen and has two sons of foreign nationality.

To amend the constitution a 75% majority vote is required which is almost impossible with 25% of the seats reserved for the military in the parliaments. Hence the acquiescence of the army has to be manoeuvred for any meaningful amendment of the 2008 constitution. Aung San Suu Kyi had once remarked "*I do not rule out the possibility of amendment through negotiated compromise. In fact, that is the way I want to go*" (Bloomberg, February 11, 2013).

The military will continue to have a leading role in Myanmar politics till it is reduced gradually as it happened in Indonesia. Hence, the party's strategy towards the army has to be carefully planned without any indications for retribution even if the NLD becomes the majority party in 2015.

Aung San Suu Kyi's ambivalent attitude towards, the human rights abuses, the Rohingya issue and the Kachin conflict as well as her repeated pronouncements of her fondness for the army have put her in bad light and is also affecting the image of her party the NLD, which

has no principled stand on these issues.

## **News Analysis**

It was no surprise for Suu Kyi to be re-elected as chairperson in the party congress.

Despite pronouncements of infusing young blood and fresh faces into the party, there is no significant change in the set up to this effect.

The party is beset with problems on many counts particularly for funds and on the second line of leadership.

Aung San Suu Kyi's changed attitude as a politician may be in view of the 2015 elections but the ethnics particularly the Kachins are not on her side.

President Thein Sein may be thinking on a second term and in that case the military will fully back him and make things difficult for the NLD.

The 2008 Constitution and the military's role continue to be the deciding factors in any future dispensation.

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