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In a fast moving situation, the highlights noted below are of significance to Myanmar and the region.

- Myanmar took over the ASEAN Chairmanship for 2014 on October 10, 2013 at the 23rd ASEAN Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei).
- Myanmar Government signed a landmark agreement with the KIO during the last round of talks held at Myitkyina from 8 to 10 October 2013 though it is not being termed as a ceasefire.
- Consequent to a notification of 3 October, 2013 of the Joint Committee to Review the 2008 Constitution, calling for advice and suggestions for submission by 15 November 2013, a virtual debate is in progress (through the media) on how to go about amending or revising the constitution. This is an unprecedented development.
- The main opposition party – National League for Democracy (NLD) celebrated its Silver Jubilee on 27 September 2013.
- The World Bank has revised its economic forecast for Myanmar up to 6.8% from 6.5% following better than expected results in gas production, services and construction.
- There was yet another incident of inter-communal violence in Thandwe (Sandoway) Township in Arakan Province. In this incident which lasted for four days from September 29, 2013, 5 people were killed, over 100 homes destroyed and 500 people rendered homeless.
- At a ceremony marking Mahatma Gandhi's birthday (02 October, 2013), the Indian Ambassador to Myanmar Gautam Mukhopadhaya addressed a gathering at the Myanmar Peace Centre in looking into ways India can help Myanmar in facilitating the peace negotiations with ethnic armed groups.

ASEAN Chairmanship

In a symbolic gesture President Thein Sein took over the ASEAN gavel from Sultan Hassanlal Bolkia of Brunei during the closing ceremony of 23rd ASEAN Summit held in Brunei on October 10, 2013.

The official media reported that it would create a great environment to develop closer connectivity (within the region), especially, economic and trade opportunities. The country will also see larger foreign investment.

Many analysts are critical as to whether Myanmar can shoulder such a big responsibility to host over 1100 meetings during the year with inadequate infrastructure and lack of skilled personnel. When its own house is in disorder how can Myanmar take up the regional leadership role? This is a cynical view. Myanmar is coming of age and should be allowed to shoulder its regional responsibility no matter what the internal situation could be.

The Government officials who had accompanied the President to Brunei were confident and had conveyed that preparations have been underway for sometime and they can manage it.

A Burmese scholar remarked “It won’t be perfect, but it won’t be a disaster” (The Irrawaddy – 11 October 2013).

This is good news from Myanmar.

There has been a sea change in Myanmar between 2006 when it was forced to surrender its turn for the ASEAN chairmanship and October 2013 when it has taken over the chairmanship for 2014. Myanmar has the will (if not the wherewithal) to do it. Perhaps India can also offer to assist Myanmar in the IT aspects for hosting such a major event as it has the expertise after the conduct of the ASEAN commemorative summit in New Delhi last year. This is a great opportunity and Myanmar seems to be keen to make the best of it.

It is our view that India should go in a big way to help Myanmar in this respect.

Agreement with the KIO and the Nationwide Ceasefire

In the last round of peace talks held at Myitkyina from 08-10 October 2013 the Government has entered into a seven point agreement with the Kachin Independent Organisation (KIO) paving the way for a nationwide cease fire. However, the KIO was categorical in stating that it cannot be termed a full cease fire agreement as “the conditions are not yet in place for that”.

“The Myanmar government and the Kachin Independence Organization agreed to work together toward a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

(NCA) and lay a foundation for political dialogue.” “The NCA will include the government and all non-state armed groups and would represent an end to fighting in Myanmar for the first time since independence in 1948.” (The Irrawaddy 10 October, 2013).

It is also interesting to note that the ethnic groups are holding a conference at Laiza (the KIO Head Quarters) from 25 to 31 October 2013 with the blessings of the Government. A media report says that at this conference, the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) along with other ethnic groups will discuss and coordinate their demands for signing a nationwide ceasefire.

Calling it a Nationwide Cease fire without the participation of KIO, (the second largest armed ethnic group in the country) would have been a misnomer. The Government's perseverance to wait till the KIO agreed to take part in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement is an indication of the government's anxiety towards achieving sustainable peace.

Some analysts have even questioned the necessity of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement when nothing has really changed on the ground. Perhaps the government has considered it as a necessary prelude to political dialogue and also showcase this agreement as an achievement of the present Government.

2008 Constitution

All stakeholders agree that the 2008 Constitution in its present form is an impediment to the country's transition to democracy. However, opinion is divided as to whether to amend, revise or rewrite the constitution.

The Government formed a 109 member committee to review the Constitution in July 2013. The committee has 52 members of the USDP, 25 military representatives, 25 members from ethnic parties and 7 members of the main opposition party - National League for Democracy (NLD). The Committee has asked for views from members of the legislative, administrative and judiciary bodies and from political parties for submission by 15 November 2013. The committee's composition is lopsided and heavily in favour of Tatmadaw, its proxies and those army men in civvies. One can visualise what it could achieve!

The ruling party (USDP) has warned of grave danger and bad consequences if the 2008 Constitution is abolished and redrawn. The opposition party is having public consultations and meetings with ethnic parties to obtain the common view. It has also formed a committee to examine the matter in detail. The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), an umbrella body of the ethnic groups has rejected the 2008 constitution and has decided to draft a new federal constitution.

That the constitution is being debated publicly by all the stake holders is itself a great development.

The debate on amendment or revision of the constitution is gaining heat by the day keeping in mind the 2015 elections. Assuming the enormity of the task, it is very unlikely to achieve a consensus on the matter and to complete the process before the 2015 elections. The

articles, pertaining to reservations in the legislature and other concessions or protections to the military are the ones that are the bone of contention. The present procedure for amendment of the constitution is also heavily loaded in favour of the military. Thus such provisions are unlikely to be amended in the near future though some cosmetic changes may be allowed for the opposition and ethnic parties to have more say in certain areas.

It looks that changes in the constitution could only be incremental and any expectation of a major overhaul is unrealistic.

National League for Democracy (NLD)

The NLD celebrated the Silver Jubilee of the party on 27th September 2013.

While speaking at a press conference on this occasion Aung San Suu Kyi said that greater collaboration between civil society groups and the military is necessary to promote national reconciliation. She also stressed on the requirement of amendments to the 2008 constitution before the 2015 elections.

With the 2015 elections in view, the party is being revamped with a membership drive, formation of youth groups, committees (for various tasks such as education, constitution review etc.), holding of elections for its regional bodies, enrolling more women leaders and drive for collection of funds.

The party's performance in the by elections in April 2012 by winning 43 of 45 seats it contested indicates that it continues to be the most popular party despite this long hiatus of over two decades. Critics have questioned the relevance of the party in view of its aged leadership, calling it a one-woman show and that it is weak in its policy making and its popularity is declining especially with the ethnic groups.

However, there are also views to say that she has been pragmatic in making the right moves by compromising with the military and establishing good relations with the Government leaders. The weakness in the second rung of leadership can be overcome and the party will be a strong contender for governing the nation if she can convince the 88 generation to join hands and also woo the ethnic groups by espousing their cause.

It is too early to say how the ethnic groups look at Suu Kyi and her policies of active engagement and reconciliation with the military. It does not look that NLD's past performance in the earlier election held before the military take over can be repeated.

Economy

The World Bank has revised its economic forecast for Myanmar up to 6.8 per cent from 6.5 per cent (Mizzima News 07 October 2013).

For the fiscal year 2012/13 the Gas exports reached a record of US \$ 4 billion according to World Bank's East Asia and Pacific Economic update. The report adds that exports would further improve with Myanmar's reinstatement into the EU's Generalised system of preferences for Least Developed Countries.

Foreign investment in Myanmar's oil and gas sector had reached 14.372 billion US dollars in 115 projects as of the end of July 2013, accounting for 33.46 percent and ranking the second in the country's foreign investment sectorally after electric power. (Xinhua, 12 October 2013)

While the economy is on the fast track, some negatives like growing inflation, political instability and lack of an educated work force may hinder the growth. The general criticism is that the impact of the economic reforms unlike the political reforms is not felt by the common man.

Inter-communal Violence

The latest incident of inter-communal violence took place in Thandwe Township in the Arakan State.

The unrest began on September 29, 2013 and continued for four days. The target was the Kaman Muslims (and not the Rohingyas). It may be added that ethnic Kaman villagers are recognized citizens of Burma.

In this incident (though there is variance in the media reports), 7 people were killed, over 100 homes were destroyed and over 500 people rendered homeless. The mosques bore the brunt of destruction.

The security forces have again been blamed for not taking timely and appropriate action to restore order. 35 Buddhists and 13 Muslims have been arrested for the violence that occurred in Thandwe Township.

Internationally, the continuing communal violence in Arakan province is likely to bring down the image of Myanmar.

Mahatma Gandhi's Birthday

It was befitting for the Indian Ambassador in Yangon Gautam Mukhopadhaya to address a gathering at the Myanmar Peace Centre on 02 October 2013 (Gandhi's Birthday). He said that the Indian Embassy would work closely with the government and civil society groups as Burma undergoes further democratic reforms and works toward national reconciliation.

Thant Myint-U, a US-born Burma historian of Burmese descent, who also participated in this meeting, said India would be an ideal nation to help Burma's transition to democracy, given the two countries' similarly diverse ethnic populations—and the inter-communal and political

discord that this has sometimes sown. (The Irrawaddy October 3, 2013).

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