

## Concept-Note

### **Myanmar: Moving Towards Elections 2015**

*Date: February 19-20, 2015*

*Venue: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata*

*IB Block, Plot No. 166 Sector III*

*Salt Lake. Kolkata - 700106*

The Myanmar general election of 2015 is scheduled for the last week of October or first week of November. President Thein Sein has initiated a series of reforms that have opened up space for political participation and economic development. The government has released hundreds of political prisoners, relaxed restrictions on the Press and passed laws allowing for peaceful demonstrations and formation of unions. The bye-elections of 2012 were conducted in a free and transparent manner which resulted in landslide victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD) and incorporation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi within the Parliament. In the critical domain of ethnic relations, the President promised that his government would seek to solve the root causes of ethnic problems through political means and even organize a nation-wide ceasefire agreement to enable lasting peace among its ethnic communities.

In other economic and social sectors, there has been considerable progress in development since 2011, supported by improvement in business community's confidence, export of commodities, Foreign Direct Investment, development in tourism sector and comprehensive economic reforms. The government is working to develop Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to attract FDI into the region--- one near Yangon and the other in Kyaukphyu. Other big economic investments involves operationalizing the oil pipeline that will connect China to the Bay of Bengal and reduce its over dependence on the Malacca Straits for transit.; the multimodal Kaladan project sponsored by India and the Dawei project sponsored by Thailand. President Thein Sein had also pledged to eliminate forced labor by 2015 and laws were passed to boost child and women's right. Myanmar was presented the award of World's Best Tourist destination by the European Union Council on Tourism and Trade and its attraction as a tourist destination is multiplying each year.

As internally, externally too Myanmar's policy witnessed a steady reorientation from 'disengagement' to 'pragmatic engagement' with the USA, European Union, Japan, Australia, ASEAN and India. Myanmar played host to the 22<sup>nd</sup> World Economic Forum on East Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has allotted its Chairmanship to Myanmar in 2014. Myanmar at the helm of ASEAN, will chair the ASEAN Summits, the East Asian Summit, the ASEAN Regional

Forum, the Post-Ministerial conferences and individual summits with dialogue partners including India, China, the United States. During Myanmar's one-year term of ASEAN chairmanship, more than 240 regional meetings are scheduled to be held in the country's capital, Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan. It hosted the 3<sup>rd</sup> BIMSTEC Summit in March 2014.

But despite all positive developments within the country and 'goodwill gestures' from regional and major powers, the underlying grievances of its people 'inside home', the outcry of its ethnic and religious communities, absence of civil liberties and legislative reforms within the administration, the role of the military, has kept the nation 'at its cross-roads' and its proclamation of democratic transition 'questionable'. "What Myanmar needs," said one expert on Burma Studies "is a top-down transition with traits of a "reformed, modern and moral democracy." A reformed democracy projecting stability, transparency and mass participation; a modern democracy projecting 'proper institutionalization' of its administration and legal frameworks; and a moral democracy projecting 'right leadership quality'—a person with true motivation, mindset, experience and endurance.

The two-day international conference on '*Myanmar: Moving Towards Elections 2015*' organized by the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata aims to examine the conditions prevalent for a free and fair election; the impact of elections on India and its other immediate neighbours.

### **Objective of the Conference**

The Conference will foremost attempt to examine Myanmar's 'genuine efforts at democratic transition and political reform', its preparedness for the 2015 elections and compatibility as the ASEAN chair to deliver impartially on maritime disputes in the Bay of Bengal, South and East China Seas. It will facilitate discussion on 'other' important issues—the emerging 'class' structure; privatization and Army land holdings; pace of urbanization and censorship within the country that's holding back Myanmar's smooth transition to democracy .

The Conference will present an opportunity to look into India's role in strengthening 'bilateral relations' with its nearest Southeast Asian neighbour in 'all sectors'—infrastructure, energy, trade, maritime, security and soft-power projection after coming of NDA government in power;

### **Tentative Sessions**

- 1) *Myanmar's domestic issues;*
- 2) *Myanmar's Foreign Policy;*
- 3) *Indo-Myanmar Bilateral relations;*
- 4) *Myanmar Democratization: The Way Ahead.*

An Edited Volume would be prepared on the basis of the papers received and presentations made at the Conference. For this purpose, a brief paper ranging from 3000-4000 (including 250 words abstract) words with references is to be submitted to MAKAIAS before the Conference. Young researchers are encouraged to apply.