

# Sweeping political shake-up in the pipeline

LARRY JAGAN

MYANMAR'S President Thein Sein is in the final throes of overhauling his government which may even see the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi become a parliamentary speaker. The immediate catalyst for the changes is the resignation of Vice-President Tin Aung Myint Oo last week for health reasons.

Although the plans for a cabinet reshuffle have been in the pipeline for weeks, the vice president's resignation signaled that a significant cabinet reshuffle is imminent. Tin Aung Aung Myint Oo sent his resignation letter to Thein Sein last Thursday week, but the president has yet to accept it, according to government sources.

So far there has been no official announcement, which has to be first made to parliament, according to one of the president's advisors. In the meantime, there is a flurry of activity in the capital Naypyidaw as the president's plans to revamp the government administration and replace the vice-president are being sorted out. This should be completed by the end of the month.

Rumours of a major cabinet reshuffle, fuelled by hints from senior government advisors, have been circulating for months; amid reports of a battle between the liberals and hardliners in the government - strenuously denied by the president himself. Nevertheless major changes to the cabinet and government policies are in the pipeline, according to government advisers.

The massive victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the recent by-elections has made government changes inevitable -- and made the position of the hardliners in government even more untenable. But first Thein Sein has to announce the replacement for Tin Aung Myint Oo -- who is seen by many as a hardliner, though in recent months he had begun to swing in behind the president, according to sources close to him.

The Myanmar government remains highly secretive, similar to the Chinese authorities, who resisted having internal disputes and divisions made public. The local press has even been warned by government censors not to publish reports on the vice-president's resignation. But there is no doubt that a lot of horse-trading and private discussions are going on behind the scenes. The current speaker of the lower house U Shwe Mann seems to be the hot favourite to take on the vice-president's role.

Shwe Mann has become a thorn in Thein Sein's side as the parliament battles with the president over legislation and the constitution. So moving the speaker to vice-president would help calm the personal feud between the two of them. This would also give the ambitious politician a better springboard for the 2015 elections, and the presidency, as Thein Sein has repeatedly told government insiders he will not be seeking a second term of office.

"Shwe Mann should be interested in the post as it would give him greater influence in running for the presidency in 2015," said an Asian diplomat on condition of anonymity. "But apart from making him the presidential heir-apparent, he would then be next in line to take over if anything happened to Thein Sein in the meantime." There has been some speculation that the president is not in good health.

Then the question is, who will be selected to fill the vacant role of speaker of the lower house -- who in turn becomes the main speaker in the middle of next year? This has become a very powerful position now, as parliament has become a significant political institution

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and has not been shy of flexing its muscles under Shwe Mann's leadership.

For months government insiders have hinted that the president favours giving that post to Aung San Suu Kyi -- now that she is a parliamentarian. Diplomats in Yangon are sceptical, saying she has repeatedly told them that she would not take an administrative post in the government. She is particularly keen to pursue the political role of an MP and be a watchdog on government action -- or inaction -- and policies.

In reality though, the job of the speaker would be ideal for her to prove her political weight and help deliver a democracy dividend to the people. That has been one of her and the NLD's constant concerns. It would be an excellent opportunity for her to demand accountability and transparency from the ministers and the government bureaucracy.

She could also provide a role model and authority for the military MPs in parliament and it would also put her in a pivotal position to push for constitutional reform. "It is clear that many soldiers and their wives support the NLD," U Tin Oo deputy leader and co-founder of the party told *The Daily Star*. "In the by-elections, we won the vote in military cantons and most of the capital (which its mostly civil servants and military), as we did in the 1990 election."

There is no doubt that the military respect her greatly, because of their high regard for her father -- General Aung San. But she needs to be careful not to be confrontational, according to many observers I spoke to in Yangon.

"Aung San Suu Kyi's influence with the military will depend on how much they trust her to protect the mili-

tary's core interests," said Professor David Steinberg, an Asian specialist at Georgetown University in Washington. "She will have to change from the old 1989 NLD platform that called for civilian control over the military, as this is likely to be anathema to the military, and she needs military support if the constitution is to be amended to enable her to be president in 2015," he told *The Daily Star*.

As yet it is unclear if the president will follow the counsel of his senior advisers, or if the lady would even accept the offer. If not, then it may be a significant independent in parliament -- like Dr. Aye Maung -- that Thein Sein calls upon. Of course, whoever is nominated needs to be endorsed or elected by the parliament -- there would be a vote in the House.

But underlying all the political maneuvering is the more vexing question of the forthcoming cabinet reshuffle, which has been on the cards for weeks. Thein Sein, according to sources close to him, is wrestling with various options. The most critical is whether members of the NLD -- apart from Aung San Suu Kyi -- might be offered ministerial posts. More civilians or civil servants are also being considered for less politically sensitive posts -- like the planned new minister for aid coordination in the president's office.

In light of the election results -- though it was on Thein Sein's mind even before that -- it seems likely that the liberals in the cabinet will be strengthened at the expense of hardliners. The rumour mills have been working overtime in recent months with several names consistently being mooted for the chop, including the agriculture minister, electricity minister, fisheries minister, foreign minister, information minister and sports minister.

There has been mounting speculation that a cabinet shuffle was now imminent after several trips abroad -- including the minister for electric power 2 who was scheduled to visit the UK and Switzerland -- were cancelled more than a week ago on the president's orders.

But one change that seems certain is Aung Min -- the railways minister and lead negotiator with many of the ceasefire groups -- will give up his current post and become a minister in the president's office and put in charge of a revamped peace negotiating team.

This is all in the pipeline and will be announced within the next few weeks, according to government advisers. Under the constitution, the president has to announce to a joint sitting of parliament -- the Pyihtaunshu Hluttaw or Union Parliament -- and the vice-president's resignation, within seven days of accepting it. But if the parliament is in recess, as it currently is, he has to ask for an emergency session within 21 days, according to a government adviser.

Then the process of replacing the vice-president begins. And at that time it is expected the long-awaited cabinet shake-up will also be announced.

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## High chance of Bangladesh sinking under rising sea levels

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SCIENCE as a contact sport; inside the battle to save Earth's climate by Stephen Schneider is an illuminating book by a world renowned climate scientist and professor at the Woods Institute for the Environment at Stanford University. In 2007, Schneider received the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC), along with Al Gore. His book is a recounting of his efforts over three decades to get the US government and the rest of the world to pay attention to climate change science.

The basic question which climate science has tried to answer is: how serious is climate change? But communicating a scientific answer to this question has been impossible, Schneider says, as politicians, journalists and the average person on the street does not understand that scientific predictions and models of climate change can only predict probabilities of particular outcomes. Unfortunately, the public and the politicians have shown little desire to understand the significance of these scientific probabilities. Instead, they are generally interested in climate science only the extent that it supports their own pre-conceived political belief that climate change is insignificant.

If the above sounds familiar, a particular example for which Schneider presents some numbers should frighten all of us. For low-lying countries like

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Bangladesh, one of the critical questions of climate change is how high sea level rise will be. The answer to this actually depends on whether or not the Greenland ice cap melts; this event would release enough water to raise global sea levels about 25 metres (about 80 feet). This would be the end for Bangladesh, sinking perhaps 75% of the country. It would also be the end of most of the world's coastal cities like New York, Los Angeles, Washington DC and London. Here are Schneider's estimates of how likely this is:

"For Greenland to irreversibly melt, my own [estimate] would be roughly a 2 to 5% chance that it is already too late and it will happen over the long run. At 1 degree Celsius more warming, I'd raise the odds to 25% ..." (page 274).

So this is the problem of climate science in a nutshell; the likelihood of a major catastrophe like 25 meter sea level rise could be theoretically be as low as 2 to 5%. So in the US, Republican politicians like George W. Bush as well as numerous Democrats whose political campaigns rely on donations from oil and coal companies will always focus on the 2% probability and dismiss climate change as a waste of time. However, for those of us who have not been paid off and can think for ourselves, the rest of the sentence should be shocking:

"... and at 2 degrees Celsius to 60%, at 3 degrees Celsius to 90%, and so on" (page 274 continued).

Critically, the basis for all international climate negotiations is to limit global warming to 2% Celsius (as most governments in the world have already decided that it would be too expensive to do anything more than that). This international consensus means that 2 degrees of warming is inevitable, as everyone has accepted that it will happen and will not even try to prevent it. Given that fact, Schneider's odds for a 25 metre sea level rise and the destruction of Bangladesh becomes 60% to 90% (the 90% figure is still relevant, as it is always possible for countries to fail to cut carbon dioxide emissions enough to limit global warming to 2 degrees).

What to do now? The only people who care about Bangladesh and have the capacity to change anything are Bangladeshis living in Western countries. If they really care about Bangladesh, they should all become climate activists and pressure their governments to do something to prevent this. People in Bangladesh have only two options; firstly, invest vastly more in education and hope people can emigrate before the country sinks. Secondly, invest vastly more in birth control, targeting a 22<sup>nd</sup> century population of only the 25 million people, which would be the maximum number that the country could support if it was reduced to pockets of high land in Rajshahi division and Chittagong Hill Tracts. Unfortunately, Professor Schneider died from cancer in 2010, and now there is one fewer climate scientist to tell us how we can save ourselves from catastrophic global warming.

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## Nuclear accident risks

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POST Fukushima, every one is concerned about nuclear accidents. It added a new dimension. Rightly or wrongly more people characterise nuclear power plants as terribly unsafe. Similar perceptions prevailed over fifty years ago when governments attempted to commercialise nuclear power.

The myth of reactors exploding like nuclear bombs clouds the reality. Often, the public tend to be either pronuclear or antinuclear. Most of the operating nuclear power reactors depend on unforgiving technology. It is a complex technology. The complexity is to ensure safety. Nuclear operators must be eternally vigilant

Suppose a chemical plant handling large quantities of a highly toxic gas or a modern nuclear power plant is about to be involved in a serious accident. If you offer this writer a choice, he will remain near the nuclear power plant. It will not be foolhardy. He is confident that the containment will survive. Even if there is a radioactive release, he knows that he will have enough time to get away! The toxic gas release will kill its victims in seconds!

Can we estimate risks from nuclear reactor accidents? Nuclear industry has clocked over 14,000 reactor years of safe operation.

Fifty years ago, our knowledge about nuclear reactor risks was very scanty. Reactor designs were less robust. Can we ignore the gigantic strides in safety improvements taken by the nuclear industry which provides 13.5% of world's electricity continuously, reliably and exceedingly efficiently?

The US nuclear power industry learnt many lessons from the Three Mile Island accident. These led to making of US nuclear power plants efficient and safe. In 1980, the average capacity factor (the ratio of electricity produced compared with the maximum electric power a plant can produce, operating at full power all the year around) for US nuclear power reactors was 56.3%; it increased steadily and remained consistently above 90% for the past several years

The owners of TMI-1 modified the plant and revamped the training and operating procedures in light of the lessons of TMI-2.

Since then, TMI-1 clocked many creditable records. In October 1998, TMI employees completed three million hours of work without a lost-work day accident. In 2008, it clocked a capacity factor of 106.7%. In 2009,

TMI-1 completed the longest operating run of any light-water reactor in the history of nuclear power worldwide -- 705 days of uninterrupted operation. NRC renewed the licence to operate TMI-1 till 2034.

In USA, with an average annual capacity factor of 91.5%, nuclear power plants are well ahead of coal (7%), natural gas (42%), wind (31%), hydro (27%) and solar (21%).

It was believed that the record performance of all US nuclear power plants post TMI may gradually remove the stigma attached to them because of the TMI accident. But the Fukushima accident is casting its shadow

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worldwide

No one appreciates nuclear accident risks quantitatively. Recently, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Nuclear Energy Agency (OECD NEA) published a report titled "Comparing Nuclear Accident Risks with Those from Other Energy Sources." The analysis is meant to help policy makers understand how accident risks are managed at nuclear power plants and illustrate that with a comparison of risks from other energy sources (*World Nuclear Association Release September 3, 2010*).

The agency collected data on every accident causing five or more immediate deaths in the energy industry between 1969 and 2000. During that period, there were 1,870 such severe accidents worldwide resulting in 81,258 deaths. In the nuclear industry, there was only one accident, the one at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Thirty one plant and emergency workers died in the accident. At Fukushima, nobody died due to the nuclear accident. Two workers died due to the tsunami and one worker died in a crane accident during the earthquake.

Possible long-term fatalities due to the accident at Chernobyl continue to be controversial. Based on

reports by the World Health Organization, European Commission, International Atomic Energy Agency and Russian authorities, OECD estimated that the Chernobyl accident may eventually cause about 9,000-33,000 deaths over the next 70 years. Possible long-term deaths due to Fukushima accident will be much lower.

Specialists arrived at these numbers based on the controversial Linear No Threshold (LNT) concept which states that any radiation dose however small has a finite effect and it varies linearly with dose. The concept has not been proved irrefutably. It was a practical concept accepted to enforce radiation protection.

The report cautioned that if the same logic is applied, the background radiation to which every one is normally exposed will cause 50 million deaths in the same population in 70 years. "There is no way to definitely confirm these figures for Chernobyl," the report added.

According to OECD, the estimated latent potential death rate for the Chernobyl accident is the same as the immediate deaths resulting from the largest dam failure (the Banqiao/Simantan failure in China in 1975 claimed 29,924 lives). Many assume potential deaths as real deaths

Premature deaths caused by particulates from fossil fuel generation are thought to be around 288,000 annually worldwide (OECD *Environmental outlook*).

"Overall, the likelihood of an accident and radiological release is 1,600 times lower than it was when the first reactors were built," the report concluded. This is primarily because of engineering safety improvements among other factors

The report added that more than 2,500 people are killed annually in energy-related severe accidents. Though nuclear power was perceived to be high risk, it caused far fewer deaths than any other energy source.

Public confidence in nuclear operations will increase if trust in the regulators increases. There is also a direct correlation between public trust and awareness of the technology. "Openness and transparency in government decisions about the use of nuclear power and in the licensing process are vital elements in improving public confidence," the OECD report concluded. Unfortunately, in public debates including those by lawmakers, no one highlighted the enhanced safety levels achieved in the operation of nuclear power plants after the Chernobyl and TMI accidents.

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