

THE LADY VS THE LION  
Mystics predict  
Suu Kyi's win

From Tarot cards to black magic, Myanmar's most competitive elections in decades are suffused with a superstition inherited from years under secretive generals whose reliance on the whispered predictions of astrologers was legendary. Reliance on astrologers dates back hundreds of years -- Myanmar's former kings regularly consulted their fortune tellers and even now most ordinary people have an astrological chart drawn up at birth. Ne Win, the strongman who ruled Myanmar for around three decades, was notorious for his use of mystics. In the late 1980s the military leader caused economic chaos when he introduced notes in the local kyat currency of 45 and 90, because the numbers added up to his lucky number nine. Even current President Thein Sein has indicated his openness to consulting soothsayers. "Sometimes they give me advice on how the situation of the country could be affected from the astrological point of view. I willingly take this advice into account," he told French documentary "Un oeil sur la planète" (An Eye on the World) in 2013. Thein Sein's ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party, with its emblem of a stately lion, is the main obstacle to Suu Kyi's hopes of electoral victory. But leading astrologer San Zar Ni Bo told AFP that the November 8 timing of the election, far from giving astrological support to the ruling party, would actually favour a woman. "The tarot card number eight shows a beautiful woman shutting the lion's mouth," said Bo, whose predictions have often favoured "The Lady" as Suu Kyi is known in Myanmar.

MYANMAR POLITICS KEY PLAYERS

GENERAL ELECTION- NOVEMBER 8

THEIN SEIN Age: 70 Gave up post as army senior general to take position in 2011 as civilian president. Helped found the United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), junta's mass social group turned political party. Has not ruled out standing for president early next year, making him a likely military-backed candidate.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI Age: 70 Democracy icon who served a total of 15 years house arrest under the military junta. Member of the parliament and leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). Running for parliament seat, barred from becoming president by junta-era constitution.

GENERAL MIN AUNG HLAING Age: 59 Military chief, considered enormously influential, often described as the most powerful man in the country. Cut his military teeth fighting rebels. Said in September interview the military would abide by outcome of the vote.

ETHNIC MINORITIES AND REBEL GROUPS COUNTRY IS A PATCHWORK OF COMPETING ETHNICITIES \*Voting cancelled in some regions where fighting still rages; parties representing ethnic minorities likely to do well

BUDDHIST NATIONALIST MONKS Monks are forbidden from taking part in politics but have been at forefront of protest movements. Ma Ba Tha and firebrand monk Wirathu are the best known of the nationalist movement, espousing anti-Muslim sentiment. Supporters of the incumbent government.

SOURCE: MYANMAR INFORMATION MANAGEMENT UNIT/MYANMAR UNION REPORT/AFP PHOTO

Who would be the next president?

REUTERS, Yangon In a ramshackle hospital in Myanmar's largest city, at the end of a corridor milling with patients, sits the man some people believe will be the country's next president. Tin Myo Win is the long-time personal physician of Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party is expected to win today's landmark general election. That position has earned him a place on a list of presidential candidates, some of them improbable. Even if her National League for Democracy (NLD) wins big, Suu Kyi is barred from the presidency by a constitution written by Myanmar's powerful military. Suu Kyi vowed on Thursday to run the country from "above the president", filling the position with a proxy she has chosen but not disclosed, a move that could antagonise the military. It has also left Myanmar's voters with a presidential puzzle: If not "Mother Suu", as she is affectionately known, then who? A likely choice could be former general Shwe Mann, now the speaker of the lower house, or the party's ageing patron, Tin Oo. Suu Kyi could be "something like Sonia Gandhi," said Win Htein, a top NLD leader and Suu Kyi confidant.

Gandhi is the Italian-born widow of the late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. As leader of the Congress party, she dominated the government of former Prime Minister Mahmoan Singh before it fell from power last year. "We'll appoint someone (as president) but he will be controlled by Aung San Suu Kyi," said Win Htein. That proxy president would step down as soon as the constitution was amended to allow Suu Kyi to rule, he added, refusing to say who the NLD had chosen for a job he described as "benchwarmer." The arrangement was necessary due to "the ridiculousness of this constitution," he said. When asked if it would provoke the military, he replied: "It's not a provocation. It's a challenge." Another senior NLD leader struck a more cautious note. Han Tha Myint said any presidential candidate would have to be acceptable to the military, which had the power to make any government unworkable.



A fruit vendor holds a newspaper featuring a special election front page featuring pictures of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's army chief General Min Aung Hlaing, as she offers clementines as alms to two monks (L) in Yangon, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

MYANMAR ELECTION: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

More than 30 million people are eligible to vote in Myanmar's election today, a poll that could redraw the political landscape of a nation smothered by decades of junta rule.

HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THE POLLS? November 8 offers Myanmar voters their first -- and potentially freest -- chance to have a say in their nation's future. The military's so-called "Burmese Way to Socialism" turned a once a booming economy into a basket case as an elite got rich while pushing disastrous economic policies onto the nation. Whatever the outcome, there is still a long way to go until the country becomes fully democratic -- the army is granted 25 percent of parliamentary seats under the constitution.

HOW TO GET TO POWER? Some 30 million people are expected to vote for more than 6,000 candidates standing for 91 different political parties. There are 323 seats up for grabs in the lower house and 168 in the upper house. A further 110 seats in the lower house and 56 in the upper are reserved for military appointees. For an outright majority over the combined parliament, the NLD need to win at least 330 -- or 67 percent -- of the contested seats. The USDP has an automatic head start because of its links with the army. It needs just 33 percent of the seats to combine with the military bloc. NLD supporters may not stomach anything less than clear victory after years of struggle for democracy. But a strong result from ethnic parties could dilute the party's majority. Observers expect months of political horse-trading after the poll in the run up to a parliamentary vote to select a president early next year.

HOW DID IT COME ABOUT? In 2011 the junta ceded power to a reformist Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) administration led by ex-general Thein Sein. Observers say Myanmar's generals were motivated to open the country to halt economic disintegration. But they planned the route to "disciplined democracy" carefully, passing a 2008 constitution that ring-fenced the role of the military in parliament and barring Suu Kyi from the presidency. In 2010 the generals released Nobel Peace Prize winner Suu Kyi from years of house arrest after flawed elections. The USDP government, which released hundreds of political prisoners and restored many freedoms, was rewarded with the lifting of most Western sanctions. International investors flooded into the virtually untapped market.

WILL IT BE FREE AND FAIR? That very much remains to be seen. President Thein Sein insists he supports Myanmar's democratic development and has vowed the election will be free and fair. But Suu Kyi has accused the government of backsliding on reforms, a fear echoed by many international observers. Major election fraud would cast a shadow over reforms and raise questions over whether the military are serious about democracy. Tens of thousands of ethnic Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State have been disenfranchised, while election authorities have cancelled voting in dozens of townships in war-hit borderlands. Both issues are potential flashpoints in the election aftermath.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? Whoever reaches a majority can expect to form a government. The next step will be to choose a president, but it is a deliberately messy process established under an army-scripted constitution. The lower house, the upper house and the military offer up preferred candidates, with the winner elected by lawmakers. At the moment President Thein Sein is likely to be the military-backed candidate. The NLD has yet to give any hint who its preferred candidate will be, as Suu Kyi is barred. Although she has promised it will be a civilian NLD member. Nonetheless, Suu Kyi has made no secret of her determination to "lead" the government if the NLD wins. It is unclear how the military will react to this.

SOURCE: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Children massacred in South Sudan: UN  
AFP, Juba Dozens of children have been killed in fighting in South Sudan, where battles rage despite political deals to end almost two years of civil war, the United Nations has said. The UN said that fighting in the northern battleground state of Unity has "intensified with grave consequences for civilians" in recent weeks, adding that 40,000 people are also starving to death.



Aerial view of damages after a dam burst in the village of Bento Rodrigues, in Mariana, Minas Gerais state, Brazil on Friday. The dam burst at the mining waste site unleashing a deluge of thick, red toxic mud that smothered a village killing at least 17 people and injuring some 75. Officials said that more than 40 people could be missing. PHOTO: AFP

China and Taiwan hold historic talks

AFP, Singapore The presidents of China and Taiwan reached across decades of Cold War-era estrangement and rivalry to exchange a historic handshake and warm words in the first summit since the two sides' traumatic 1949 split. China's Xi Jinping and Taiwan's Ma Ying-jeou shook hands for more than a minute and smiled for a mass of reporters before their talks in Singapore in scenes considered unthinkable until recently. They later sat down across a table from each other, with Xi praising the event as opening a "historic chapter in our relations" and repeating China's oft-expressed desire for eventual reunification. "We are brothers connected by flesh even if our bones are broken. We are a family whose blood is thicker than water," Xi said. Despite the apparent warmth, the hour-long meeting's lasting significance remains to be seen. No agreements were announced between two sides that still refuse to formally recognise each other's legitimacy and Ma's moves face significant opposition at home. But the encounter is undeniably historic: the previous occasion was in 1945, when Communist revolutionary leader Mao Zedong met with China's nationalist President Chiang Kai-shek in a failed reconciliation attempt. The eventual Communist takeover forced Chiang's armies and about two million followers to flee to Taiwan, then a backwater island province, leaving a national rupture that has preoccupied both sides ever since. "Behind us there is more than six decades of cross-strait separation. Now before our eyes are the common fruits of the policy of replacing opposition with dialogue," Ma told Xi, in the unexpectedly cordial encounter. Ma later told reporters he proposed the establishment of a hotline between the two sides and that Xi responded positively. He also raised issues sensitive to Taiwan's people, including the arsenal of Chinese missiles aimed at Taiwan, and China's policy of marginalising the island diplomatically. Analysts said there is no guarantee any glow will last, especially with Ma out of office soon, and his ruling party expected to lose in January polls to an opposition that distrusts China. Opponents at home accuse Ma, who leaves office soon, of using the summit to boost his ruling Kuomintang's (KMT) flagging chances at the polls.



Modi pledges \$12b to Indian Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday announced \$12 billion in financial assistance to Indian-administered Kashmir, more than a year after deadly floods devastated parts of the disputed Himalayan region. Speaking in the main city of Srinagar amid intense security, the Hindu nationalist leader said he wished to take India's only Muslim-majority state back to its "former glory". Modi stressed the need to create jobs for young people, boost tourism and infrastructure, and close a gaping digital divide in the conflict-ravaged region, where many do not have access to the Internet.

Obama rejects Canada's Keystone XL pipeline

AFP, Washington US President Barack Obama on Friday blocked the Keystone XL oil pipeline that Canada sought to build into the United States, ruling it would harm the fight against climate change. The long-awaited decision was a blow to Canada's new leader, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and pipeline operator TransCanada warned that it may file an application to renew the project.

Castro, Pena Nieto seal warmer ties

AFP, Mérida Cuban leader Raul Castro received a warm welcome in Mexico on Friday as President Enrique Pena Nieto sought to end a diplomatic chill and boost business opportunities on the island. The two governments signed five cooperation agreements in migration, education, diplomacy, fishing and tourism.

WHO declares end of Ebola in Sierra Leone

AFP, Freetown The UN health agency yesterday said Ebola-ravaged Sierra Leone had beaten an 18-month outbreak that killed almost 4,000 of its people and plunged the economy into severe recession. "Today, November 7, 2015, the World Health Organization declares the end of the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone," Anders Nordstrom, the UN agency's country representative told a ceremony in the capital Freetown, provoking prolonged cheering from the gathered dignitaries. The former British colony recorded around half of the cases in an epidemic that has infected 28,600 people across the three hardest-hit west African nations and claimed 11,300 lives since December 2013. The announcement represents a hugely significant milestone in UN-backed efforts to wipe out Ebola, leaving neighbouring Guinea as the only country still registering cases.

Egypt plays down bomb theory amid speculations

Says investigation is still open to any possibilities  
AFP, Cairo But Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry yesterday said the Egyptian-led inquiry into disaster had yet to establish any firm theory about the cause. "We have not dismissed any possibility but there is no hypothesis yet, before the investigations are over and a full report is ready," Shoukry said. He said that foreign intelligence that had triggered the international travel restrictions had not been shared with Egypt. "We expected that any technical information should have been shared with us, at a technical level, before publicising it in the media," he said. Already battered by years of unrest, Egypt is heavily reliant on tourism revenues and fears the impact any firm determination that a bomb caused the crash would have on the key industry. The Islamic State group said it downed the plane in retaliation for Russian air strikes in Syria, but has provided no details as to how. If it was behind the attack, it would be the first time the jihadists had hit a passenger plane.



SINAI PLANE CRASH

No plans to limit Syrians' asylum rights

Says Germany  
AFP, Berlin The German government assured Friday there had been no changes to its refugee policy for Syrians, after the interior minister said they would be given a lesser status that excluded family reunifications. Germany has to date maintained an open-door policy for Syrians escaping their country's bloodshed, giving them "primary protection" -- the highest status for refugees. Among other benefits, it includes a three-year residence permit and family reunification. Germany "is sticking to the practice currently in place", Government spokesman Steffen Seibert said on Twitter. Seibert's statement came after Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere told German radio that Syrians would be given shorter residence permits and denied the right to be reunited with their families.

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Chinese President Xi Jinping shakes hands with Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou during a summit in Singapore yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS