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Burma

Series of by-elections held

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On April 1 by-elections were held in Burma to fill 48 vacant seats in Parliament. The National League for Democracy (LND) led by the Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi won 43 out of the 44 seats that it contested. The result was greeted unanimously by the international press as a victory for democracy.

Some steps forward

The fact that it was possible for the LND and other opposition parties to take part in the elections should not make us forget the context in which they took place. For the majority of Burmese people, life has changed little since the transition to a semi-civilian government headed by the former general of the junta Thein Sein, in March 2011. A (small) number of political prisoners have been released and there has been some relative progress with regard to democratic freedoms.

These gestures cost the reconverted Burmese junta little, while they served as guarantees to the international community to obtain the lifting of economic sanctions. But in this country impoverished by 60 years of military dictatorships, the real reforms which would change the life of the 54 million Burmese people are still awaited.

In spite of assurances that the elections would be independent and democratic, they were marked by massive irregularities: censorship, pressure on candidates, violence against activists, intimidation of voters, vote-buying, irregular registration on electoral rolls. The authorities and the Electoral Commission created many obstacles in order to obstruct the electoral campaign of the LND.

Violation of human rights

At the same time, in spite of the signature of peace agreements with several ethnic minorities, military conflicts have continued, as have serious violations of human rights. According to the commission on human rights of the United Nations (UNHRC), the methods of the Burmese Army, the Tatmadaw, have not changed: attacks against civilians, extra-judicial murders, rape, forced displacement of populations, use of civilians as human shields and recourse to forced labour.

On March 23, the Electoral Commission postponed the elections in three districts in the Kachin territory, where the army is conducting a military offensive, depriving more than 200,000 people of the vote.

For the ethnic minorities, which account for 40 per cent of the Burmese population, no improvement has been seen with the new government. On the contrary, the situation has worsened, with a renewal of military conflicts.

The April 1 elections have symbolic significance, but they will not change the relations of power. The National League for Democracy will have approximately 5 per cent of the seats in Parliament, whereas the army and its principal party, the USDP, have about 80 per cent. Moreover, the Parliament has very limited powers and the army has a right to veto its decisions.

Democracy?

Burma is still far from being a democracy. Is it really on the road to it?

The answer will depend on the ability to exert pressure, both in Burma and outside the country, on this government whose objective is to remain in charge of the economy and of business in order to enrich itself.

The real success of these elections lies without question in the massive mobilization of tens of thousands of Burmese citizens, who broke the fear of getting involved in politics. Suu Kyi herself considers that "it is the emergence of the political consciousness of our population that we regard as our greatest success".