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The Handover that Wasn't: Burma's Military Regime Transfers Power Back to Itself

On 30 March, Senior-General Than Shwe officially dissolved the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to make way for the new Union Government, but the formal handover of power from the SPDC to the current military-dominated government appears to be no more than an effort to maintain the status quo. The Forum for Democracy in Burma (FDB) strongly denounces the new government in Burma and cautions that the military dictatorship remains in full force despite its thinly veiled civilian façade.

President Thein Sein's inaugural address painted a picture of an idealistic and hopeful future and contained heavy-handed references to "good governance," "rule of law," and "democracy," which not only read like a checklist of principles to appeal to the sensibilities of the international community, but also stand in stark contrast to his past actions. Thein Sein's speech casually ignored the fact that the elections were carried out without regard for the principles of democracy or the rule of law. The scores of election related human rights violations committed by Thein Sein's own party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), fails to inspire confidence in the new President's rhetoric.

"This is not change," stated Naing Aung, FDB's Secretary General. "The now disbanded SPDC and the current government is one and the same. The military regime is transferring power to none other than themselves – how is that democratic progress?"

Elected during Burma's November 2010 elections – widely slated as undemocratic, unfree, and unfair – the current parliament is composed primarily of current and former military generals, retired SPDC officials and their associates. The elections were rife with human rights violations and electoral fraud, with millions of ethnic voters disenfranchised and opposition parties suppressed.

Since the convening of parliament on 31 January 2011, the few opposition Members of Parliament that exist have found themselves gagged through restrictions on freedom of speech and severely limited space for discussion. Over 2,000 political prisoners remain behind bars and ongoing human rights violations continue to affect the daily lives of citizens. The Burma Army's recent offensives in Eastern Burma following the elections have caused the displacement of tens of thousands of ethnic villagers.

With former Prime Minister and Ex-General Thein Sein as President, the appointment of 26 current and former military officials to the 30 ministerial positions, and the virtual lack of opposition in the parliament's leadership ensure that even progressive members in the new government would be hard pressed to find any space for change. General Min Aung Hlaing, known for leading offensives against ethnic armed groups along the Sino-Burma border, is the new Commander-in-Chief, while Senior-General Than Shwe will reportedly remain the de facto head of state.

"Those responsible for ongoing widespread and systematic human rights violations throughout Burma now remain in power. This handover is not a step towards democracy, but merely secures the regime's hold on power. To call this progress is to insult the millions who have faced human rights abuses at the hands of the regime," said Naing Aung.

"The international community must not reward the regime for what is ostensibly a well orchestrated scam at the expense of the people of Burma," continued Naing Aung, "In order to address the lack of accountability and improve Burma's human rights record, the international community must move to establish a Commission of Inquiry into crimes against humanity and war crimes."

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The Forum for Democracy in Burma is a democratic political coalition of organizations and individuals who have engaged in different types of struggle since 1988. It stands as a dynamic force for the achievement of democracy and national reconciliation in Burma through political campaigns; by empowering people of Burma; by promoting the role of women; and by promoting trust and solidarity among the democratic oppositions.