

SPECIAL TO ANN

The many challenges before Myanmar

From leadership to China, the economy, Covid-19 and press freedom, Myanmar is in a tight spot on many fronts. We examine some of these.

NLD's relations with the Military: Most of Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian ministerial appointees were political prisoners during the long decades of military rule. But they remained "activist" by nature and proved to be "ineffective" administrators - fuelling rumours throughout the past few years of an eventual coup. The NLD team's performance was always compared that of its predecessor Gen Thein Sein who began the democratization and liberalization process which led to the 2015 national elections won by the National League for Democracy.

Following the 2 November 2020 election, the military-backed USDP party and the military started to criticise the election process and claimed that massive fraud had taken place in NLD's second landslide win. The call for investigation was rejected by both the Election Commission and the government.

On January 31, the military press team issued a release citing over 10 million instances of vote fraud and requested the Election Commission to release a comprehensive election roll call, a request that was quickly again rejected by the government and the commission. There is no love lost between the military and NLD politicians most of whom are now under house arrest.

Peace Talks: Uniting different ethnic factions - especially armed groups - was Aung San Suu Kyi's flagship policy. But it progressed at a snail's pace and had stalled over the past few years. All was not going well and the increase in activities by insurgency groups such as the Arakan Army fueled further conflicts from eastern to western borders. But Suu Kyi appeared to have thrown all her energy into making it work. She was truly her "father's daughter". But many critics said the effort was a strategic mistake, suggesting that the economy should have been the priority as a prelude to bringing about peace among the different factions.

It's difficult to say anything about the future of peace talks. The ethnic groups probably preferred to negotiate with the civilian government rather than the military hardliners but the latter was always going to have the final say. As of now, the coup has been condemned by large ethnic groups with armed factions such as the Karen National Union.

Rohingya: This is one of the few issues on which Aung San Suu Kyi saw completely eye-to-eye with the military. But her personal defense of Myanmar's back-to-the-wall Rohingya policy isolated the State Counsellor from the world completely. She might have gone to the World Criminal Court in the Hague but never once did she visit Rakhine State. The repatriation of millions of displaced person - not

only those in Bangladesh but within Rakhine State itself - will keep pressure on Myanmar politically, economically and socially. The military is unlikely to give way as it has always used this as a populist tool for domestic support.

Covid-19: Myanmar's poor public health system meant that infections were going to run away. The number of cases now stand at 140,354 with 3,318 deaths. Of these 125,324 had recovered. Dr Thet Khine Win, a Secretary of the Ministry of Health, has been appointed as Minister of Health and Sports, signaling a continuation of the Covid containment strategy under the new military government. Vaccines just began to arrive in Myanmar last week through the Covishield programme from India. A concerted vaccination effort has not yet taken off. Overall, Myanmar is dealing with a reduction in the second wave of Covid infections. The economy has been badly hit by Covid-19. GDP growth has been stagnant over the past year, but poverty has increased in the country.

Economy: This was the NLD led government's Achilles Heel in the past four years as the economy played second fiddle to ethnic peace efforts. Sentiment was further dampened by the Rohingya exodus crisis and a sharp drop in tourism in 2019 while in 2020, the business was further hit by Covid-19. But the welfare of those at the grassroots has not seen much improvement and Covid-19 pushed many into poverty.

Some political pundits have suggested that NLD would have lost more seats in the November 2020 elections if it hadn't played the "return to military rule" card in an effort to woo voters. The economy grew at about 6 per cent in 2019, somewhat below expectations of an investment hungry nation. China continues to be Myanmar's biggest foreign investor. Some progress was seen under the NLD-led economic team in investment in electricity supply and transportation.

Nonetheless in the past few years businesses have been complaining about indecisiveness and incompetence of cabinet ministers, whose background is mostly of political activism.

Press Freedom: Surprisingly more intolerant and draconian than her predecessor former president Thein Sein, Aung San Suu Kyi proved to have a "thin skin" and failed to defend the "rule of law" (among the harshest in the world) over freedom of speech. A number of journalists were put in jail and many media houses faced intimidation. The most high-profile case was of the two local



Reuters journalists who were jailed for their investigation into an army atrocity on the Rohingya community. The government was also an active user of the infamous telecom law under which the accused can go to jail when charged and before trial.

Press freedom, despite all hope, fell substantially since NLD came to power in 2015. Self-censorship prevailed throughout. No improvement in press freedom is expected under the military junta.

Leadership: Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership reference was always made against that of her predecessor and former president Thein Sein who was credited with Myanmar's opening up on political and economic fronts. She was not seen as a competent leader but more as a popular icon. Myanmar's long years of education collapse meant that the inexperienced civilian ministers and inefficient bureaucrats could not advance Thein Sein's achievements. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing now controls the executive, military, and judiciary. His ambition to become the president is well noted and he could run in the next election which the military appears to

aim for in a year.

Min Aung Hlaing's style of governance is still not quite clear, but it looks as though he aims to improve the economy and get Covid under control, according to his initial statements. His quickly-announced cabinet include 11 new members. Many of them are former ministers of the USDP government under Thein Sein or former military officials.

China: Relations with China during the past four years heightened with Myanmar's isolation because of the Rohingya crisis. Aung San Suu Kyi was drawn into China's orbit alongside the military. China continues to tread with the policy of non-interference. Along with Russia, China looks to continue to defend Myanmar at the UN Security Council.

China does not want to see Myanmar plunged into political instability and chaos especially at its borders as many projects are now being negotiated under the Belt and Road Initiative. Myanmar is important to China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and to future development of the Yunnan Province as well as energy supply from the Bay of Bengal.

The US has indicated the looming threat of sanctions. On paper, Singapore accounts for highest percentage of FDI to Myanmar, but a lot of the investors are American companies investing through Singapore. With sanctions, Myanmar could become more dependent on China. American sanctions are thus seen as bad for Myanmar and could prove to be counterproductive.

World: The arrests of Aung San Suu Kyi and senior NLD members is a watershed moment in Myanmar's relations with the world. She herself is unpopular with other world leaders because of her stance on the Rohingya and was seen as an ineffective, stubborn and self-serving leader. But many will also feel disappointment as Myanmar steps back from democracy - having come so far - to another possible long military-rule era. The military will propel economic management to the forefront as they have more capable people than Suu Kyi in this area. The military may reach out to the US to try and avoid sanctions. Even if they show progress, it will be not easy. The Rohingya crisis will be pivotal.

A confused EV policy

GOVIND SINGH AND ARMIN ROSENCRANZ

The Electric Vehicles (EV) segment is trying to make a dent in the automobile industry. The EV market in India has grown steadily in the last three years. In 2018, a key notification issued by the Ministry of Power clarified that electric charging of EVs does not fall under the provision of the Electricity Act 2003. What this meant was that setting up charging infrastructure for EVs was kept free from licensing. The notification clarified that charging of EV batteries is not the same as "transmission, distribution and trading of electricity which require license under the provisions of the (Electricity) Act."

However a year later, in February 2019, a Gazette notification issued under the Central Electricity Authority clarified the difference between a "charging point" and a "charging sta-

tion". The former was for charging private EVs and the latter for commercial use or public use. In the same month, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs released its Model Building Bye-Laws Amendments for accommodating EV charging infrastructure. In October 2019, the Ministry of Power - through another notification - continued to maintain that "setting up of Public Charging Stations (PCS) shall be a de-licensed activity." While the notification began with the objective of "enabling faster adoption of EVs," it initiated the shift towards tariffs.

In June 2020, the Ministry of Power introduced amendments in its revised guidelines. With these amendments, the tariff for supplying electricity to EV PCSs became applicable under Section 3 (Tariff Policy) of the Electricity Act, 2003. The revised guidelines further warranted that the tariff would not be more than the

average cost of supply plus 15 per cent, unless otherwise specified by the Tariff Policy.

With these tariff-filled regulatory notifications, electric vehicles in India have now entered the transport market. The EV segment will, in fact, remain alive in the twists and turns of these government-issued guidelines, amendments and notifications. The automobile sector has been watching closely. All leading automobile manufacturers are trying to put at least one electric-powered car in the market.

But there is something missing in this recent growth story of the EV segment. The initial push for EV a decade ago was backed by the idea of decentralized solar charging stations. The words EV and solar charging were often used together. The recent push for EV seems entirely focused on conventional fossil-fuel electricity. This is concerning since three-fourth of India's energy continues to be gener-

ated by burning fossil fuels, big dams and nuclear fission. Less than 25 per cent of the power in India is generated using renewable energy sources. And there are no mechanisms to ensure that it is this renewable energy that will power EVs.

This puts a big question mark on the perceived environmental benefits of EVs. EVs will lead to an increase in the use of fossil fuels in coming years. Less polluted cities may come at the cost of additional mining, spoiled forests and degraded countryside. One can argue that we can let the existing system continue and then work to shift away from conventional electricity to renewable energy sources to power the EVs. It has not been easy to shift away from the oil economy. It will similarly not be easy to shift from using conventional electricity-powered EVs to solar charging ones after the former dominates the market.

Government notifications have been silent on including solar charging in EVs. There are private players

and start-ups who are doing what they can to amalgamate solar charging with EV technology. Such efforts are appreciated and need recognition. But what they also need are support from government policies and regulations that incentivize EV manufacturing, keeping solar charging in full view.

The manual charging of an EV is a key roadblock to its adoption. With suitable solar charging integration, which can be possible only with suitable EV manufacturing policy, we can have a much more user-friendly and eco-friendly vehicle. The government can begin this transition by ensuring that the Ministry of New & Renewable Energy plays a much bigger role in EV implementation in India. The Ministry's focus should shift from merely energy efficiency to a complete transition to sustainable transportation.

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100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

A curious fact has emerged from the police reports regarding drunkenness during the Christmas and New Year holidays in Scotland. The number of arrests for breaches of the peace has been relatively small compared with the arrests of persons charged with being drunk and incapable. The result is not due to any change in the situation regarding the sale of liquor. The net result of the recent vote under the Temperance Act in Scotland is that altogether 329 public houses will be closed, but this will not come into operation for several months. The explanation which has been given for the absence of disorderliness along with drunkenness is that the people have been taking to the drinking of American spirits. Alcohol of a kind which is being imported from America has a very sudden and drastic effect. The characteristic feature of its effects on the drinker is his sudden and complete collapse into a condition of helplessness. There is practically no transition stage of excitement or violence. One result is that persons who have not been regarded hitherto as habitual inebriates have suddenly become "drunk and incapable" without any warning, and have required the services of the police. There may be no improvement from the moral point of view, but the effect has been to make the streets quieter, or at least less noisy.

NEWS ITEMS

THE TYPHUS EPIDEMIC IN POLAND

The Government of India have received through the Secretary of State an urgent appeal from the committee appointed by the Assembly of the League of Nations, asking for a contribution from India in the most generous manner possible, towards the estimated cost (pound 2,000,000) of the scheme for assisting Poland to deal with the typhus epidemic. The Council of the League of Nations consider that every country in the world is concerned in the scheme, either for reasons of geographical proximity or trade interests, or on broad humanitarian grounds. The distress in Poland is, however, very severe and there are no doubt many charitably disposed persons in India, European and Indian, who would be glad to assist the people of Poland in their suffering.

INDIAN SCIENCE CONGRESS

A discussion on the subject of earth movements as recorded by seismographs was opened with an interesting address by Dr. S.K. Banerji, Professor of Applied Mathematics in the Calcutta University. After mentioning the various types of seismographs and the difficulties in interpreting their records introduced by instrumental complications Professor Banerji gave an account of the physical theory of the propagation of earthquake waves. Three types of wave propagation are recognised, namely, the compressional waves and the distortional waves which pass through the body of the earth, and the surface waves which travel over the superficial crust, in each case with a different velocity. The reflections which occur when these waves meet at the curved surface of the earth also introduce complications.

CHIEF SCOUT AT A DELHI RALLY

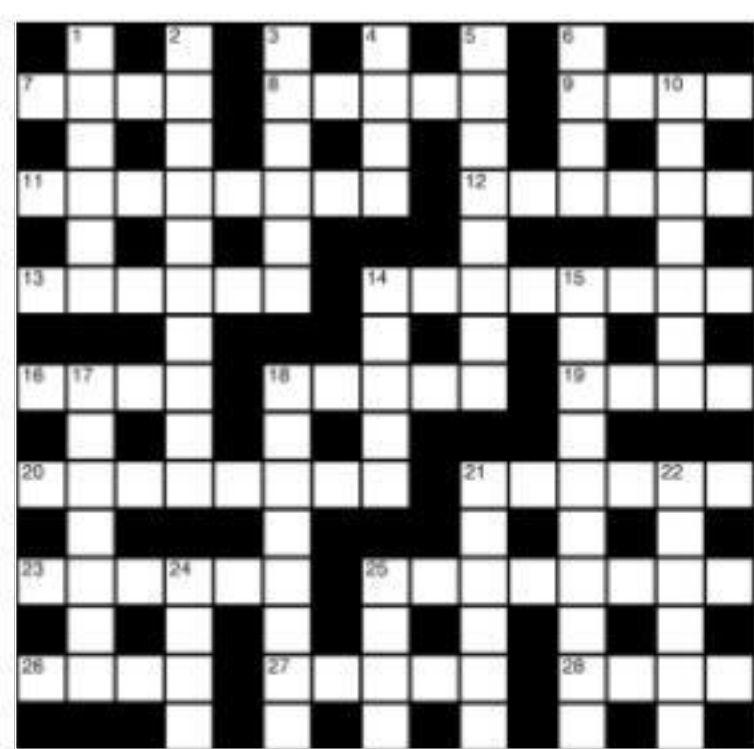
There was a large gathering in the grounds of the Government High School at Delhi this afternoon on the occasion of a boy scouts' rally and display. The grounds were nicely arranged and excellent arrangements were made for the spectators who came to witness the various items on a capital programme. The object of the rally was to introduce to the scouts their Chief Scout, General Sir Robert Baden Powell and the Chief Guide, Lady Baden Powell, who arrived shortly after half-past four. After the Chief Scout had inspected the lads a well executed march past took place, followed by the salute for the flag the band playing the National Anthem. The trail past followed, and then a squad of scouts came forward and sang Indian songs.

DECONTROL OF COAL

In view of the increased output and slackened home demand, and the fact that the export prices are now approximately the same as home prices the Government have decided to decontrol coal as from March 1 all restrictions with regard to pit-head prices and distribution in the United Kingdom will be abolished. The position is unchanged with regard to foreign bunker exports, which are freely allowed, subject to one slight restriction. This decontrolling is obviously a step giving effect to the Government's declared policy of releasing the industry from bureaucratic control as soon as possible. The control was originally imposed to guard against shortage of inland supplies in consequence of the very high export prices. Experts are uncertain as to the effects of this decontrolling.

CROSSWORD

NO 28815



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



ACROSS

- 7 Kim leaves Himalayan state hospital a religious adherent (4)
- 8 Trunk road primarily going on to Somalia (5)
- 9 Batik: the first cut, woven fabric of Asia (4)
- 11 Oriental setting for 'edgy work' from Beatles wife and naked mystic? (8)
- 12 India's boxing champ? Just the opposite in Olympic venue (6)
- 13 One day California will supply an entire continent (6)
- 14 Acclaimed singer provided by Spain for their holiday spot (8)
- 16 Capital city determining itself leaves Indonesia for

starters (4)

- 18 Revolutionary communist near to getting authority in the Midlands (5)
- 19 Expression of relief as man found in outskirts of Warsaw (4)
- 20 Three times oyster content gets sent back in US national park (8)
- 21 Seaport of Bali unfortunately overwhelmed by bad smell (6)
- 23 Informed Ohio about drug manufacturing centre there (6)
- 25 Brazil almost beaten by largely unconventional island group of 13 (8)
- 26 Spend some time relaxing in Shanghai (4)
- 27 Thailand women leaving

money for Pacific kingdom (5)

- 28 Expecting Lima to fight (4)
- 1 American setter's parting words: 'Shoot slightly upwind' (3,3)
- 2 A variety of claret that's very hard to confuse with Pottiers' (2-8)
- 3 Semi-aquatic mammal picked up north of Washington capital (6)
- 4 Compound rate's void in Ukraine (4)
- 5 November or May touring North Dakota's French region (8)
- 6 Put on clothing for international singer from Canada (4)
- 10 Nemesis roller coaster

ride for Faroes shortly to welcome children (4-3)

- 14 Hebridean island in which I will occupy log home? (5)
- 15 April wind swirling round a city in Pakistan (10)
- 17 Italy's sparkling water maintaining its river crustaceans' order (7)
- 18 Sail away after Germany, one nation in 13 (8)
- 21 Superhero gets New York to replace trademark tree (6)
- 22 Complex system in Saudi regularly defied understanding (6)
- 24 Hebridean island in which I will occupy starter home? (4)
- 25 Area of Zambia concerned with energy (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

