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BURMA:

Upset Win by Opposition

The apparent landslide victory of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) in Burma's National Assembly election on Sunday has humiliated the repressive military regime and will force it to revise its strategy for retaining power.

A government spokesman admitted yesterday that the NLD has won 100 of the 485 assembly seats. NLD officials claim they captured 241 of the seats, including all or nearly all in Rangoon and other cities. Unofficial returns from rural areas and heavily military districts also show large margins for the NLD; the regime-favored National Unity Party reportedly has won only two seats. The regime fulfilled its pledge not to interfere with the balloting; voting was peaceful and without significant irregularities. Army troops, who stayed off Rangoon streets during the election, are again on patrol in the capital, according to press reports.

Comment: The election outcome is a decisive endorsement of the NLD's outspoken leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since July. The NLD's unexpected success gives new momentum to the poorly organized opposition and upsets the military's plans to dominate a fragmented elected assembly. Protests may occur as popular pressure builds for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the formation of an NLD government.

The military regime's next steps are uncertain. The publicity surrounding the preliminary results makes it difficult to tamper with the official tally, even though final results will not be announced for a week or more. The military probably would put down any major demonstration by force, even at the risk of international condemnation. Regime officials have repeatedly pledged to step down after a new constitution is approved, but there is no established procedure and the military almost certainly fears reprisals from an NLD government. The regime, however, may calculate that it can still outmaneuver its opponents by exploiting NLD factionalism once the assembly convenes, dragging out the drafting and approval of a new constitution.

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