

**Update Note for the Secretary-General  
Tuesday, 1 April 2014**

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**1. Venezuela**

USG Feltman writes<sup>1</sup> about the outcome of a recent UNASUR-mandated visit by a delegation of FMs to Venezuela to “accompany, support and advise” the GoV’s initiative for a political dialogue, the so-called national conference of peace launched in February. The delegation held meetings with President Maduro, and a host of political and civil society actors, including from the opposition coalition Democratic Unity Roundtable (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* – MUD).

The UNASUR statement, released following the mission, acknowledged the willingness of all actors to engage in dialogue as well as their firm condemnation of violence. The two main action points were: i) the reference to a “group of FMs” that would follow up on the UNASUR mission, which according to remarks to the press by Bolivian FM David Choquehuanca and other diplomatic sources would include the FMs of Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador; and ii) the acknowledgement of “President Maduro’s openness and willingness to adopt the recommendations and engage in dialogue with the facilitation of a witness acting in good faith”.

President Maduro has since stated that he accepts the presence of a third party but that he would not accept “conditions or [agreed] agenda as he was not imposing any [conditions himself]”. (*Amongst the conditions sought by the opposition is the release of those detained during the protests.*) The importance of a neutral third party agreed by both sides has been pushed for by the MUD in their previous statements. At the same time, some sectors of the MUD reportedly remain hostile to the UNASUR involvement. As of 28 March, the participation of the opposition in such an initiative remains unclear. Of note is that there have been no public reactions from the opposition’s main leaders, including Henrique Capriles, Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado, to the UNASUR proposal.

Feltman observes that in spite of the remaining uncertainties, a key positive development was the contribution of the UNASUR delegation to set in motion the necessary conditions for a dialogue. While still incipient, this successful *démarche* by UNASUR demonstrated the ability of the sub-regional body to maintain coherence as a bloc and to play a constructive role, despite the existing diverging views among its Member States.

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<sup>1</sup> (14-02650)

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*Few seem to believe that the UNASUR proposal will convince the opposition to join the talks, even if President Maduro has indicated his willingness to accept a third party and there have even been statements by the Vatican indicating their willingness to play a mediator role. In the meantime, the protests and violence continues, with casualties numbering at least 39 people. Amnesty International in a report released today cautions that Venezuela is likely to slip into a spiral of violence unless serious dialogue commences soon and both parties respect human rights and the rule of law. DPA is drafting a proposal on how the UN should respond to the 1 March request from the MUD for a meeting. DPA's original proposal to have ASG Fernandez-Taranco meet with the MUD was put on hold following the demarche of the Venezuelan PR (accompanied by the PRs of Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua) on 13 March.<sup>2</sup> A meeting between the UN and the MUD is likely to be used for media purposes by the opposition, which would provoke a negative reaction from the Maduro Government. A failure to respond in a timely fashion or accept a meeting with the opposition could however result in criticism of the UN from other parties, including the US.*

## **2. Yemen**

SA Benomar writes about his 20-day mission to Yemen, the main focus of which was: 1) to get the constitution-making process off to a good start, which is the next phase of the transition before elections; and 2) to help diffuse new tensions with the Houthis, who have advanced on the capital.

A key development to report was the announcement of the 17 members (including 25% women) of the Constitution Drafting Commission (CDC) (Presidential Decree). Many Yemenis had been eagerly awaiting this announcement so the next phase of the transition could commence. At the request of President Hadi, UN experts had worked over eight months on crafting the decree on the constitution-making process. However, an inclusive, transparent and participatory constitution-making process will require significant resources. Benomar informs that donors have committed to nearly US\$ 9 million of a total target of US\$ 10 million. This has enabled the SA's office to provide timely support to the CDC as it commenced its work, including support to the 40-person CDC secretariat, provision of international experts and a whole range of public participation and outreach activities.

On the political front, a key development over the past few weeks has been the rise of the Houthis as an aggressive and belligerent political force. The Houthis – who are Shia and who used to be confined to the province of Sa'ada in the far North – have now gained control over large swaths of territory and had almost encircled the capital, Sana'a. This development started in early January 2014, when the Houthis

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<sup>2</sup> 14-02399 of 24 March 2014.



seized Khamir. The seizure of Khamir is symbolically significant, as it has been historically the tribal fortress for the Al Ahmar family in the face of political upheavals. But after years of bad leadership, accumulation of personal wealth and political influence, the latter paid a heavy price. The Al Ahmar business empire and political ambitions caused a disconnect between them and their constituents. After many clashes the Houthis defeated the Al Ahmar tribal militias. Their defeat indicates an unprecedented shift of power; Benomar believes that this defeat also could potentially redraw Yemen's power structure.

In addition, Saleh pumped in cash to encourage many tribal sheikhs to withhold support to the Al Ahmars. The Al Ahmars and Ali Mohsen (Saleh's half-brother and a serving general) tried to prevail upon President Hadi to send government forces to support them in their fight with the Houthis to stop their advance. However, the President chose to remain neutral on the matter. As the Houthis captured large areas around Sana'a, they clashed with other tribal groups allied with the the main opposition Islah party. Here again, many tribal sheikhs voluntarily welcomed the Houthis and signed deals with them. Benomar comments that once again "Saleh's fingerprints are all over this", by encouraging tribes to cede ground to the Houthis.

Benomar explains that the clever game played by Saleh is aimed at 1) dragging Islah into a long war with the Houthis, weakening them before the upcoming elections, on the one hand and 2) discrediting President Hadi (whom he sees as another enemy) by portraying him as a failed president unable to maintain order on the other hand. Benomar proposed to the Houthis and the President that they form a joint commission to force the Houthis into a DDR process. Houthis now have heavy weapons and tanks (estimated between 30 to 50; the Yemeni army has tanks in the 200s). Benomar was able to extract an agreement from the Houthis to commit to such a process. The Houthi strategy is to develop as a Hezbollah-type movement – both playing politics but continuing to control territory and build a well-disciplined military capacity. They are not there yet and this is why, writes Benomar, that there should be a coherent, international approach to prevent this from happening. The Houthis will never disappear from Yemen; they are inextricably part of the social, religious and political fabric of Yemen. But the question is: what strategies will lead to their containment? Benomar has also been discussing this with key GCC players, as well as the US and UK.

### **3. Burundi**

SRSO Onanga-Anyanga reports<sup>3</sup> that defence and security forces have been resorting increasingly to the use of teargas and live ammunition to prevent protests or gatherings organized by opposition parties. Civilians have been injured or killed in

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<sup>3</sup> (CDN-031 of 26/3/2014)

the process, and many have been imprisoned, including for life. Political and civil society actors denounce State violence while State officials including the President of the Republic, commend the forces.

The SRSB notes that the *Police Nationale du Burundi* (PNB) is a relatively new institution, having been established only in 2004. A mix of former combatants, former gendarmes, and other services, it is undergoing mental transformation and learning to adjust to its mandate of maintaining law and order in a professional manner, mindful that it has a duty to protect the population, rather than treating it as an enemy.

Onanga-Anyanga observes that the attitude of the Burundian authorities towards the excesses of the police and the national defence forces should be viewed in the wider context of human rights abuses and the absence of rule law. The forces of law and order, he notes, construe every protest or public gathering (unless it is carried out by the ruling party or its youth wing, the *Imbonerakure*) as an act of rebellion or an attempt to destabilize the country's governing institutions, which must be crushed. In response to criticism, the authorities point to the participation of Burundian forces in peacekeeping operations across the world as evidence of their professionalism.

Onanga Anyanga warns that there is no doubt that the defence and security forces will continue to be used to prevent opposition parties from carrying out their activities unfettered, leaving the field solely to the ruling CNDD-FDD and its allies. This will not only lead to a flawed electoral process but could also trigger a renewed spate of political violence with strong ethnic overtones.

#### **4. Myanmar**

In recent days, leading Myanmar experts, including Derek Tonkin, have penned grounded and thoughtful assessments of where Myanmar is headed. Tonkin focuses on specific issues which will shape the country's trajectory, while the latter argues for a different lens to be applied to the current developments. They both note that after three years of remarkable progress, many are questioning whether the reform process might be running out of steam or argue that it has "stalled and is now rolling back downhill."

The latter argues that what's happened in Myanmar so far is NOT a transition to democracy, but as a case of liberalization from above that may or may not produce a try at democratic government in the next few years. (*The distinction here is that liberalization involves the expansion of freedoms from arbitrary acts of the state and others, while democratization entails the expansion of popular consultation and accountability*). The two processes often coincide, but they are usefully construed as



distinct streams of political change. Understood on those terms, the liberalization process in Myanmar has progressed incrementally but significantly in the past two years and has not yet regressed in any substantial way (with the partial but significant exception of the plight of the Rohingya).

What Burma's liberalization has done is create space for new political and economic activity, and as is often the case, not all of what people are doing with that space is progressive or good e.g. some Burmese have responded to the opening by mobilizing around an aggressive chauvinism that has produced what amounts to a slow-rolling episode of ethnic cleansing and still threatens to slide into genocide. In connection, there has also been a concerted, possibly inspired campaign against the National Census which started on 30 March 2014.

All external eyes, however, are on current efforts to amend the country's Constitution. There is a tendency among some Western Governments, notably the US and the UK, to see this reform "as the essential precondition for further progress towards democracy," a view also held by Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK). This is an "ideological stance, but not practical politics" says Tonkin. In connection, some (i.e. mostly Western states) would seem to suggest that the only thing which now matters is the amendment of Article 59(f) of the Constitution which may debar ASSK, not from being nominated as a presidential candidate, but from being elected if so nominated.

As for the outsized (mostly Western) expectations that ASSK and the National League for Democracy (NLD) is poised to win, Tonkin counters that the latter two "seem to be losing ground." "The policies of the NLD remain something of a mystery. Their senior organization is opaque. The management of the party is autocratic. They do not even have a website, neither in Burmese nor in English." An "unwise discussion" between the [extremist] controversial monk U Wirathu and the NLD has led some to conclude that factions in the monkhood are not in favour of ASSK's presidential candidature.

The second general elections since the end of full military rule will be keenly contested in late 2015. Tonkin assures that the [military-backed] Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) party will not allow the NLD to "walk all over them as they did in April 2012." The USDP could resort to populist policies, which PM Thaksin found so electorally rewarding in Thailand. Clandestine vote-buying, which still plagues even Indonesia, could make its debut in Myanmar. Indeed, "the likelihood is that the NLD might not have an overall majority in either the Lower or Upper Houses and might not then be in a position to nominate ASSK as a presidential candidate. "Intriguing as it would be," Tonkin adds, "I somehow doubt that the military [who must agree to a presidential candidate] would choose her."

In sum, both analysts conclude that the political future of Myanmar is “enigmatic” and that the “transition’s trajectory is no longer clear.” It is “probably premature to speak of a transition to democracy in Myanmar... Democratization, yes, but not enough yet to say that the country is between political orders.” There are forces at work which could so easily upset the apple-cart, and especially ASSK’s ambition (“so strongly but unwisely supported in the West”) to be the next President of a country seated in the United Nations under a name “which she cannot yet bring herself to accept.”

What’s coming undone right now isn’t Myanmar’s reform process. What we’re really seeing is an overdue deflation of the hype balloon Myanmar’s reforms have pumped up. With some help from various outsiders - some eager to see deeper political transformations occur, others looking to capitalize on the money-making opportunities this new market presents - we let our hopes for Myanmar’s future drive our narrative about what is happening in the present. (“The Arab Spring spurred a similar dynamic in American analysis of that part of the world.”). Some countries in the West could be heading for a big disappointment.” Washington could resort to intransigence again, while London could lose interest, or worse. This would be regrettable, and assuredly counterproductive, “though China would be delighted.”

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Political, Peacekeeping, Humanitarian  
and Human Rights Unit  
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cc: DSG, CDC