

Myanmar's new cabinet: national reconciliation without equality

By Fiona Macgregor | Friday, 25 March 2016



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The announcement this week of the [names of the ministers](#) who will lead Myanmar through this key time of transition has been revealing and hugely disappointing. Women have been virtually excluded from the top posts.



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi speaks with U Win Myint during a parliament in Nay Pyi Taw on March 15. Photo: AFP

Out of 18 ministerial posts, just one woman has been nominated for a position: The Lady herself, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The move effectively slashed in half the number of female cabinet ministers.

Admittedly the number was already ridiculously low to start with. The outgoing military-backed administration had just two female ministers – for education and social welfare, relief and resettlement – plus one female deputy, in the Ministry of Culture. But it is a massive blow to gender equality in this country that the new National League for Democracy-led administration has worsened women's representation in government, not improved it.

In creating the new cabinet, Daw Suu was undoubtedly engaging in a [careful balancing act](#). Her promise of a “national reconciliation” government meant that at least some posts had to go to members of the former ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party and to representatives of ethnic groups.

Women, it seems, have been sacrificed to allow that to happen. And, in the event, only [one ethnic minority politician](#) was appointed, and just two from the USDP. That The Lady is [taking on four](#)

[portfolios](#) – foreign affairs, education, energy and electric power, and the President's Office – also highlights her lack of trust in others to take on senior responsibilities.

This is entirely unacceptable from a gender equality perspective. It is also a serious political mistake and will damage the future of the country. How can Myanmar hope to achieve a balanced and equal society if more than 50 percent of the population is not considered suitable to hold powerful positions on gender grounds?

This has not been an accidental decision. Daw Suu must be well aware that women activists in this country have called regularly for greater representation in politics and the peace process – a call that has been backed by senior international rights representatives and academics.

The message from Nay Pyi Taw, however, is clear: The voices of these women are to be ignored by the new government, and the massive contribution women can make to the future of Myanmar is neither valued nor respected as it should be.

It was obvious when the [NLD MP candidate lists](#) were put forward ahead of the election last year that improving the gender balance in parliament was not a priority for Daw Suu. But this week's cabinet announcement let down women in this country very badly.

Certainly there are now more women in parliament than before, but with military representation included, Myanmar's parliament is [still 90pc male](#). That imbalance could have been notably less skewed had the NLD put forward a candidate list for the 2015 election that was 30pc female – as happened in 2012 – instead of just 15pc.

Explaining that decision, senior NLD representative U Win Htein told *The Myanmar Times* last November that the reason the party had not put forward more female candidates was that many of the women were “green” and “inexperienced”. He said a mixture of nature as well as [cultural and religious traditions](#) in Myanmar meant women were not confident in political situations. Daw Suu, he said, was an exception.

Lack of experience is not of course just a problem among the new intake of female MPs. Many of the male MPs are also new to the game, as the [political training classes](#) politicians have been undergoing in Nay Pyi Taw have demonstrated. It also now emerges that two of the nominated ministers – U Kyaw Win for finance and planning, and U Than Myint for commerce – [hold bogus](#) or, at very best, highly questionable university degrees.

When it came to picking cabinet ministers who did not have to come from the ranks of MPs, there were numerous powerful, confident and politically educated women Daw Suu could have chosen from. Such people could have brought to the cabinet table not just knowledge of gender issues, but experience in ethnic issues, education, health, conflict and other matters of vital importance to the future of this government and country.

Instead they have been marginalised and the view that Myanmar women – other than the clearly exceptional Daw Suu – are somehow naturally and culturally incapable of playing an equal role in politics has been perpetuated instead of extinguished.

It has been a wasted opportunity and one Daw Suu may well come to regret as she attempts to achieve national reconciliation without equality.