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Burma's 2015 national elections

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The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, hereafter 'Burma', announced in July this year that it would hold elections for national, state, and regional parliaments on 8 November 2015.¹ As this has the potential to be Burma's first credible national poll in 25 years, the expectations surrounding the elections are high. The results of the national parliamentary election will feed into the selection of the next president in early 2016. This Quick Guide outlines Burma's political and electoral system, major parties and candidates, key issues and challenges, and briefly discusses the elections' potential domestic and international implications.

Burma's political and electoral system

2008 Constitution

Burma's 2015 national elections will take place under the political and legal framework established by the country's 2008 Constitution. This controversial document, part of the former military government's 'road map to democracy', was approved via a referendum in May 2008. The credibility of this referendum, as well as the subsequent 2010 elections, was vigorously contested by Burma's main opposition groups, as well as most Western governments.²

The 2008 Constitution establishes Burma's presidential system of government through chapters that provide for the 'basic principles of the Union' and the 'structure of the state', the selection of the president and two vice presidents, and a bicameral national parliament. The charter provides for national elections to constitute this parliament as part of a 'genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system'.³ The 2008 Constitution also stipulates that one of its objectives is 'enabling the Defence Services to be able to participate in the national political leadership role of the State'.⁴

Since 2011, the scope of political debate and civic participation in Burma has widened following the introduction of political and economic reforms by a quasi-civilian government led by the current president, Thein Sein. In the lead up to the 2015 elections, there was a renewed campaign by some members of parliament, as well as civil society and ethnic minority groups, to reform key elements of the 2008 Constitution. This campaign was not successful and any future constitutional changes will not occur until after the elections.⁵

1. 'Burma' is used in accordance with the terminology employed currently by the Australian Government.

2. See: International Crisis Group, *Myanmar's post-election landscape*, Asia briefing no. 118, 7 March 2011, accessed 29 October 2015.

3. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*, 2008, accessed 28 October 2015, p. 3.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

5. *'Parliament votes to postpone planned charter referendum'*, *The Irrawaddy*, 22 July 2015, accessed 29 October 2015.

Burma's national parliament

The national Parliament of Myanmar includes the lower House of Representatives (*Pyithu Hluttaw*) and the upper House of Nationalities (*Amyotha Hluttaw*). When convened together, the two houses form the Union Parliament (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*), Myanmar's highest legislative body.

In both houses of the national parliament, 75 per cent of representatives are directly elected, while 25 per cent are appointed by the military (*Tatmadaw*). This gives the military an effective veto power over constitutional amendments, which require the support of over 75 per cent of members in each house.⁶

Electoral system

The 2015 elections will involve around 32 million registered voters—in Burma and overseas—selecting from 93 parties and 6,189 candidates contesting seats at the national, regional, and state levels.⁷

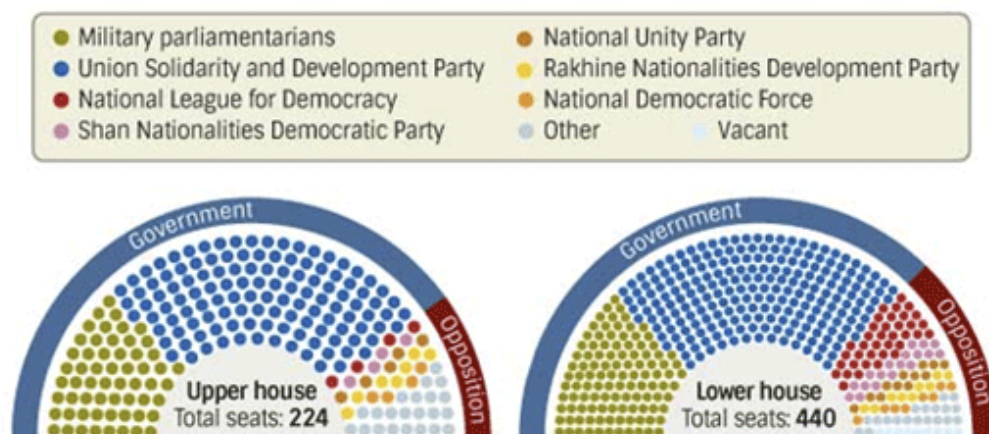
The national House of Representatives has 330 directly elected members. Elections for the lower house are conducted using a 'first-past-the-post' system in which candidates for single member districts who earn the most votes, win the seat. The 168 elected members of the upper house compete in 12 districts contiguous with the 14 regions and states of Myanmar.⁸ The legislative term is five years and the first session of the new legislature must be held within 90 days of the election.⁹

Composition

A total of 110 members of the 440-member House of Representatives and 56 of the 224-member House of Nationalities are military appointees. The current composition of the remainder of the national parliament reflects the outcome of the 2010 election, as well as subsequent by-elections. This includes the April 2012 by-elections which saw Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), win 43 out of the 44 seats it contested. In contrast to the 2010 national election, these by-elections were deemed credible.¹⁰

Despite these changes, the parliament remains dominated by members of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development (USDP) party, which is made up largely of retired military officers and officials from the former military regime, as well as the *Tatmadaw* appointees. There are also a number of smaller ethnic minority parties represented in the current parliament (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of seats in Myanmar's upper, lower houses after 2012 by-elections



Source: V Nehru, [Myanmar: the mechanics of the elections](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 September 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

6. S DuPont et al., [Elections and political transition in Myanmar](#), Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, accessed 29 October 2015, p. 5.
7. C Win, ['Will growing pains mar the Myanmar election?'](#), *East Asia Forum*, blog, Australian National University, 30 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.
8. DuPont, [Elections and political transition in Myanmar](#), op. cit., pp. 5–6; International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), [Myanmar 2015 general elections](#), fact sheet, 15 September 2015, accessed 2 November 2015, p. 1.
9. International Crisis Group (ICG), [Myanmar's electoral landscape](#), Asia report no.266, 28 April 2015, accessed 28 October 2015., p. 11.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Myanmar ranks low internationally on the proportion of women in its national legislature (130 out of 190 countries), with 6.2 per cent in the lower house and 1.9 per cent in the upper house.¹¹

Choosing the president

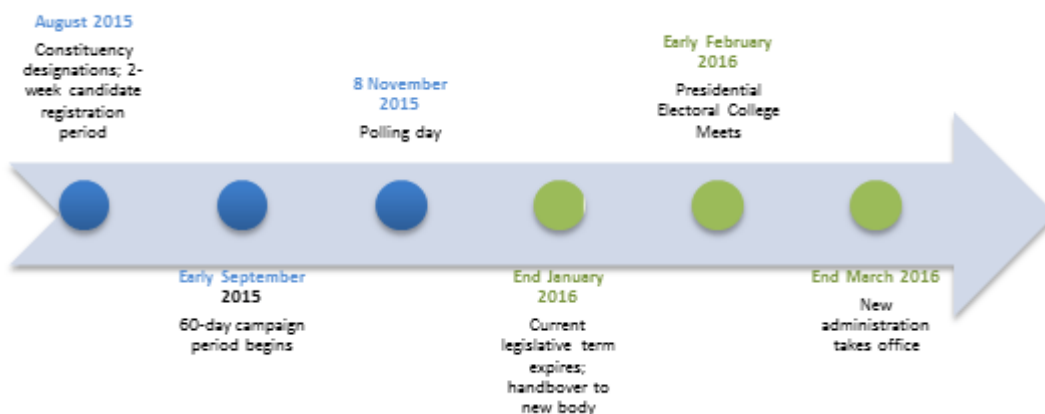
Under Burma's presidential system, the president and the vice-presidents are nominated and selected by a body called the Presidential Electoral College (PEC). The PEC comprises three groups—the elected members of the *Pyithu Hluttaw*, the elected members of the *Amyotha Hluttaw*, and all the appointed *Tatmadaw* members of both houses. Importantly, 'while the Tatmadaw has a quarter of the seats in the parliament, it has a third of the positions (and thus a greater influence) in the PEC'.¹²

After the public vote for the elected members of parliament:

the PEC is formed to nominate three presidential candidates who are then vetted for eligibility. Once approved, PEC members vote for the candidates and the one with the majority of votes becomes president, while the others become vice-presidents.¹³

The PEC must choose a president prior to the end of March 2016, the expiration of the current government's five-year term (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Election timeline



Source: International Crisis Group, [Myanmar's electoral landscape](#), Asia report no.266, 28 April 2015, accessed 28 October 2015, p. 11.

Election authorities

Union Election Commission

The Union Election Commission (UEC), Burma's principal election management body, operates under the relevant provisions of the Constitution and the 2012 Union Election Commission Law. The UEC is currently comprised of fifteen members, including the current chair, Tin Aye, a former USDP legislator and retired senior member of the *Tatmadaw*.¹⁴

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), whilst serious concerns about both the independence and capacity of the UEC persist, a number of decisions suggest that the Commission is making a concerted effort to ensure a credible poll. These include efforts to build greater trust with political parties and civil society

11. Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Women in national parliaments](#), updated 1 September 2015, accessed 29 October 2015.

12. R Thompson, 'How Myanmar's presidency will be won (part I)', *The Interpreter*, blog, Lowy Institute for International Affairs, 5 December 2014, accessed 29 October 2015.

13. Ibid.

14. IFES, [Myanmar 2015 elections](#), op. cit., p. 7; 'The Leaderboard: Tin Aye', *cogitAsia*, blog, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 21 April 2015, accessed 29 October 2015.

organisations (CSOs); collaboration with international electoral support organisations; changes to electoral rules on issues that were problematic in 2010, such as advanced voting; and a willingness to allow international observers for the first time.¹⁵

Judicial bodies

In addition to the UEC, the country's judicial system, composed of the police and the courts, is responsible for the adjudication of specific offences under the 2012 Electoral Law, including bribery, threats, intimidation, or instigation of violence. Other complaints are adjudicated by specialised UEC tribunals.¹⁶

Security forces

The *Tatmadaw*, which controls all of Burma's security forces, remains the 'ultimate arbiter' of power in Burma's ongoing political transition.¹⁷ For this reason, its continued support for a credible and peaceful election will be crucial, both to the conduct of the poll itself and to the prospects for post-election stability (see below).

Given concerns about election-related violence, particularly in conflict-affected ethnic minority regions, Burma's security forces will play a prominent role in the management of the elections. In October, the UEC announced that elections would not be held in several hundred villages in conflict-affected areas of Kachin, Karen, Shan, and Mon states due to security concerns.¹⁸ In addition to the presence of the army, it has been reported that 40,000 specialised police officers will be recruited, trained, and deployed to manage election security across the country.¹⁹ Incidents of intimidation and sporadic violence, including the stabbing of an NLD parliamentarian, have occurred in the lead-up to the election.²⁰

Civil society and international electoral support organisations

The preparations for the 2015 elections have been notable for the prominent involvement of CSOs, as well as international electoral support organisations such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).²¹ This represents a shift from previous elections and reflects Burma's new political climate in the wake of the post-2011 reforms. International donors funding this work include the United States (US), the European Union (EU), Norway, and Australia.²²

Significantly, in March 2015, the Government announced that the US-based Carter Center and the EU would be invited to provide long-term international election observers.²³ According to local media, around 470 diplomats from 32 embassies, 465 staff members from six international election observation groups, 183 staff members from nine international NGOs, 9,406 people from local election observation groups, and 290 foreign journalists will observe Burma's elections.²⁴

Parties and candidates

Ninety-three parties have registered to contest the elections. Many of these are small ethnically and geographically-based parties that will contest elections at the regional level. The USDP, the NLD, and a combination of the larger ethnic minority parties are likely to dominate at the national level.

15. ICG, [Myanmar's electoral landscape](#), op. cit., p. 12.

16. DuPont, [Elections and transitions](#), op. cit., p. 13.

17. A Selth, ['Will Aung San Suu Kyi be president? Odds are lengthening'](#), *The Interpreter*, blog, 30 June 2014, accessed 30 October 2015.

18. ['Myanmar election body cancels vote in two more Shan State townships'](#), *Radio Free Asia*, 27 October 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

19. ['Special police get ready for Burma elections'](#), *The Irrawaddy*, 26 October 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

20. ['Myanmar election: opposition rally attacked with swords'](#), BBC, 29 October 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

21. International Foundation for Electoral Systems, [Myanmar](#), accessed 2 November 2015; Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [Myanmar](#), accessed 2 November 2015.

22. UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [Joint statement on election support from the Embassies of Australia, Denmark, EU, Norway, Switzerland, UK and the US](#), media release, 3 March 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

23. ['Myanmar to invite Western observers for general election'](#), *Reuters*, 24 March 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

24. ['Thein Sein highlights achievements in pre-poll radio address'](#), *The Irrawaddy*, 3 November 2015, accessed 4 November 2015.

Union Solidarity and Development Party



Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Parliamentary elections

Given the popularity of the NLD in central and southern Burma, many analysts expect that it will be a substantial challenge for the ruling USDP to retain its current dominance in the parliament if the November elections are free and fair.²⁵ The USDP does have some advantages stemming from incumbency, in particular its large national network of offices, as well as its links to civil servants and legislators and the funds they control.²⁶ Some are predicting that the USDP may perform better in rural electorates, where it is seen to be more responsive to the economic concerns of the populace.²⁷ Nevertheless, the ICG concludes that 'it is hard to see the USDP beating the NLD in the centre or the ethnic parties in the periphery'.²⁸

Possible presidential candidates

The current president, Thein Sein, has not ruled out seeking a second-term and could be a potential compromise candidate if neither the USDP nor the NLD command a clear majority in the PEC. Reports suggest, however, that following the failure of constitutional reform efforts in early 2015, Suu Kyi has become disillusioned with Thein Sein, lessening his prospects as a viable compromise candidate.²⁹

The commander-in-chief of the *Tatmadaw*, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has also been discussed as a possible next president if the USDP win a clear majority and vote in a bloc with military members of the PEC.³⁰

A third potential USDP candidate, lower house speaker and prominent reformer, Shwe Mann, remains a possible contender. The probability of this has diminished considerably, however, following his sudden removal as chair of the party in September 2015, reportedly at the behest of party conservatives.³¹

National League for Democracy



Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Parliamentary elections

Although it lacks recent experience in nation-wide campaigns, the NLD is expected to do well in the elections, given the widespread support for its charismatic leader, particularly in the Burman heartland. An NLD landslide similar to that of the 1990 election—after which the military annulled the results of the poll—would be a major test for Burma's political transition.

25. See: Economist Intelligence Unit, [Country report: Myanmar](#), updated 23 October 2015, accessed 30 October 2015 (subscription only); ICG, [Myanmar's electoral landscape](#), op. cit., p. 15; ['Change in the air'](#), *The Economist*, 31 October 2015, accessed 1 November 2015.

26. ICG, [Myanmar's electoral landscape](#), op. cit., p. 16.

27. ['USDP eyes big wins in Burma's rice bowl'](#), *The Irrawaddy*, 30 September 2015, accessed 29 October 2015.

28. ICG, [Myanmar's electoral landscape](#), op. cit., p. 16.

29. Selth, ['Will Aung San Suu Kyi be president?'](#), op. cit.

30. S Aung, ['The man to watch'](#), *Foreign policy*, 15 January 2014, accessed 30 October 2015.

31. N Farrelly, ['The USDP faces the people'](#), *New Mandala*, blog, Australian National University, 26 October 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

With 25 per cent of seats already allocated to the military, the NLD would need to win more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament to command a majority—‘in this scenario, Suu Kyi could alone decide who the next president will be’.³²

Possible presidential candidates

In the 2008 Constitution, Clause 59F bars anyone whose spouse or offspring owe allegiance to a foreign power from becoming president or vice-president. As a result, Suu Kyi, whose late husband and two sons are British citizens, is barred from running for the presidency.³³

To date, Suu Kyi has not specified who the NLD might choose as an alternative presidential candidate, saying only that it would nominate ‘a civilian member of our party’.³⁴ Speaking in early October 2015, Suu Kyi stated, ‘I’ve made it quite clear that if the NLD wins the elections and we form a government, I’m going to be the leader of that government whether or not I’m the president’.³⁵

Ethnic minority parties

Parliamentary elections

Ethnic parties could play a big role in determining the balance of power in the new parliament and, as a result, in selecting the next president. These parties achieved some success in the 2010 elections, ethnic minority politicians have been prominent in the current parliament, and many new ethnic parties have registered since the 2012 by-elections.³⁶ While the NLD has actively campaigned in ethnic minority areas, Suu Kyi is often negatively identified by minority populations as being aligned with the interests of the majority Burman populace.³⁷

One constraint facing ethnic minority parties is the fact that multiple ethnic parties are running in many constituencies, potentially splitting votes and thereby advantaging NLD and/or USDP candidates.³⁸ A second constraint, despite an October 2015 partial nation-wide ceasefire agreement, is the potential that ongoing conflicts and security concerns in Burma’s border regions could disenfranchise many ethnic minority voters (see below).³⁹

Possible presidential candidates

If ethnic minority parties emerge as a unified force—alongside the NLD and a combination of the USDP and the military—they could hold significant bargaining power. In this event, they would likely support a presidential candidate ‘that can promise to improve their status by addressing issues that matter most to ethnic groups, including greater distribution of powers to state governments and parliaments, revenue sharing of natural resources, and direct election of state chief ministers by state parliamentary ministers.’⁴⁰

Issues and challenges

While the poll will likely have more credibility than the one held in 2010, ‘there are growing concerns over the elections’ conduct and the implications for post-poll politics’.⁴¹

Expectations and legitimacy

As noted, popular expectations surrounding the 2015 elections remain very high. Not surprisingly, however, given decades of harsh repression and censorship, voters’ awareness of Burma’s political institutions remains

32. V Nehru, [Myanmar: the mechanics of the elections](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 September 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

33. E Brennan, [‘The Lady, the constitution and Myanmar’s political manoeuvring’](#), *The Interpreter*, blog, 24 June 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

34. [‘Change in the air’](#), op. cit.

35. [‘Myanmar election: Suu Kyi vows to lead government’](#), BBC, 7 October 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

36. Transnational Institute (TNI), [Ethnic politics and the 2015 elections in Myanmar](#), Myanmar policy briefing, 16 September 2015, accessed 30 October 2015, pp. 6–11.

37. A Din, [‘Burma: the rise of ethnic parties in the political system \(part III\)’](#), *cogitAsia*, 17 April 2014, accessed 2 November 2015.

38. TNI, [Ethnic politics](#), op. cit., p. 17.

39. [‘Ceasefire pact is ‘historic gift’: president’](#), *Myanmar Times*, 21 October 2015, accessed 30 October 2015.

40. Din, [‘The rise of ethnic minority political parties’](#), op. cit.

41. [‘Myanmar election fears could mar post-poll politics’](#), *Oxford Analytica*, 18 September 2015, accessed 29 October 2015 (subscription only).

limited. A 2014 survey by The Asia Foundation found, for example, that 82 respondents could not name one branch of government, and that only 12 per cent knew that the president was elected by the parliament.⁴²

These results point to the paucity of voter education efforts, particularly in rural and minority areas, and a disjuncture between expectations and knowledge. This disjuncture could undermine the perceived legitimacy of the election outcome, or lead to disillusionment with the political process. The potential for disillusionment could be particularly high in the lead-up to the presidential selection process, a process from which, arguably, the most popular candidate remains barred and that will likely involve fairly opaque political bargaining.⁴³

Election management and security

While there have been significant improvements in capacity, there remain concerns about the UEC's structural weaknesses. These weaknesses are exacerbated in conflict-affected areas, where rival paramilitaries and local army commanders exert control and where 'incidences of fraud and other electoral abuse are likely to be much higher'.⁴⁴

Apprehensions about the integrity of the electoral roll remain, with concerns about serious errors and ongoing allegations of abuse.⁴⁵ Non-government parties and CSOs have also raised the issue of advance voting, particularly by military personnel, as an area vulnerable to manipulation. In response, the UEC has recently announced that international observers will observe voting at military bases.⁴⁶

Election security has also been an area of significant concern. According to the Carter Center:

The lack of transparent security planning about potential violence is disturbing, particularly in areas with a history of communal and ethnic tensions.... As the campaign period approaches, it is possible that nationalist groups and political parties will seek to build support by appealing to voters on religious grounds, heightening tensions in an already tense political atmosphere.⁴⁷

Disenfranchisement of minorities

Perhaps the most serious concerns expressed to date have been those surrounding the disenfranchisement of minority and displaced populations.

This includes the decision to exclude communities of Muslim Rohingyas, around 850,000 of whom live in the south-west state of Rakhine, from voter lists, and to disqualify Muslim candidates. The previous government had issued so-called 'white cards' giving temporary citizenship to many Rohingya and allowing them to vote in the 2008 referendum and the 2010 elections.⁴⁸ In the face of fervent protests from local Rakhine and Buddhist-nationalist groups, around 500,000 of these cards were revoked by the Government in February 2015, a move that effectively 'severs the last link that Muslims in Rakhine state feel they have with political life'.⁴⁹

The Carter Center has observed:

The decision to disenfranchise former TRC [temporary rights card] holders immediately prior to the election, without having a timely, transparent, and fair process for verifying citizenship firmly in place, or a process for challenging the cancellation of rights, runs counter to a number of provisions of international human rights documents and good practice. The effects of the decision also appear to be discriminatory, as they disproportionately impact members of religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Rohingya, most of whom are already marginalized from the political process and living in conditions that prevent them from exercising their full civil and political rights, including basic freedom of movement.⁵⁰

42. E Brennan, '[Why institutions, not elections, should be Myanmar's yardstick in 2015](#)', *The Interpreter*, blog, 16 January 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

43. K Thant, '[Myanmar's fragmented ethnic politics mean post-election horse trading will likely be messy](#)', *cogitAsia*, blog, 2 November 2015, accessed 3 November 2015.

44. '[Myanmar election fears could mar post-poll politics](#)', op. cit.

45. '[Scramble to fix Myanmar's error-riddled voters roll](#)', *Channel NewsAsia*, 16 July 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

46. '[Myanmar gives EU observers access to voting on military bases](#)', *Radio Free Asia*, 20 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

47. Carter Center, '[Preliminary Findings of The Carter Center Expert Mission to Myanmar](#)', 19 August 2015, accessed 2 November 2015, p. 9.

48. '[Myanmar nationalists threaten protests over Rohingya vote change](#)', *Reuters*, 6 February 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

49. ICG, Myanmar's electoral landscape, op. cit., p. 14.

50. Carter Center, '[Preliminary Findings of the Carter Center Expert Mission](#)', op. cit., p. 8.

This was followed, in August 2015, by a UEC ruling that more than a dozen parliamentary candidates from the Democracy and Human Rights Party, which is predominantly Muslim, were ineligible to run because their parents were not Burmese citizens when they were born.⁵¹ Moves to disenfranchise Rohingya communities and disqualify Muslim candidates have not faced any real resistance from the major parties and have occurred in parallel with the rise of the Committee for the Protection of National Race and Religion (or 'Ma Ba Tha'), an influential nationalist organisation that 'accuses Muslims of threatening Buddhism's privileged position and affiliation with the state'.⁵²

There is also apprehension that around 100,000 internally displaced people living in camps in Kachin and Shan states will not be able to vote because of the humanitarian situation and a lack of access to polling stations. A further concern is that the lack of transparency surrounding election security in these and other conflict-affected regions, particularly the moves by the authorities to cancel voting in some areas, could undermine the credibility of the elections in the eyes of minority populations.⁵³

Freedom of association and expression

While political space in Burma has continued to expand since 2011, local CSOs, international observers, and human rights groups have voiced concerns about the use of potentially arbitrary restrictions on freedom of association and expression in the lead-up to the elections.

According to the Carter Center:

Party representatives and civil society organizations reported that their activities are rarely restricted, despite being subject to burdensome administrative procedures (especially at the township level).

There is nonetheless concern that local authorities will unfairly enforce campaign restrictions in favor of a particular party. Parties and civil society sometimes reported intrusive surveillance by the Special Branch police, although the surveillance did not appear to be specifically election-related. In Kachin State, concerns were raised about the possibility that provisions of the Unlawful Associations Act could be used to target members and supporters of Kachin parties.⁵⁴

The pre-election media environment has been more concerning:

Restrictive and vaguely worded laws at the national level (including the Official Secrets Act, Media Law, Printing and Publishing Law, and sections of the Penal Code) make it difficult for journalists to know what falls within the permissible range of publishable speech. Recent arrests of journalists, defamation cases brought by the Ministry of Information, and a tightening of media access to the parliament have raised concerns that the government may further restrict media coverage in the pre-election period.

Self-censorship is widespread, and more common than overt threats. However, instances of intimidation were reported to The Carter Center in Bago, Rakhine, and Magway. Fear of social sanction, or criminal liability, were commonly cited as reasons for avoiding politically charged topics. Journalists also reported limited access to government officials and parliamentarians.⁵⁵

The October 2015 arrest of two activists for allegedly 'defaming' the military on social media has been widely cited as an example of an increasingly restrictive media environment and 'the military's readiness to strike when its interests are at stake'.⁵⁶

51. ['Myanmar election body rejects Muslim parliamentary candidates'](#), *Radio Free Asia*, 1 September 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

52. A MacDonald, ['Competition the litmus test for Myanmar's upcoming election'](#), *East Asia Forum*, blog, 31 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

53. Carter Center, [Preliminary Findings of the Carter Center Expert Mission](#), op cit., p. 8.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

56. P Nguyen, ['Myanmar military's role in the elections: straddling old and new'](#), *cogitAsia*, blog, 21 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

Implications

Domestic

The perceived credibility of the November elections will play a key role in shaping the extent to which Myanmar's ongoing political transition will be one characterised by political compromise and accommodation or a reversion to 'zero-sum' conflict and contention.⁵⁷ It is in this sense that the elections, along with recent peace efforts and economic reforms, need to be seen as just one part of a longer-term attempt to craft a more responsive, transparent, and trusted set of institutions through which Burma's multiple and longstanding political fractures can be successfully healed.⁵⁸ The disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya prior to the elections is unlikely to assist this process.

Given their prominence in shaping Burma's politics, the elections and their aftermath will also be important in illuminating the *Tatmadaw's* political disposition. In the event of a large NLD victory, the period following the elections will be a key test of where the military elites see their core interests, and how far they are willing to go to protect these. Widespread political, ethnic, or sectarian violence would likely undermine any *Tatmadaw* propensity to support further political reform.

Whatever the result, accommodation between the country's traditional centres of political power will remain crucial given that Burma's leadership will, in all likelihood, 'continue to be drawn from the top rungs of the armed forces, from distinguished political lineages, and from other elite strata'.⁵⁹

International

While the United States and EU countries have largely decoupled their Burma policies from the individual fortunes of Aung San Suu Kyi, the elections will be an important input into decisions about how to calibrate their future engagement. It is likely that the West 'will be strongly influenced by opposition parties' assessment of the polls, and will react negatively if the polls are perceived unjust, particularly hindering aid flows'.⁶⁰ The possibility of constructively addressing the place of Rohingya, and Muslim minorities more generally, in Burma's polity and society through an inclusive 2015 poll has now been foreclosed. As a result, the plight of these communities will remain a serious constraint to closer engagement with the West.⁶¹

China—Burma's largest source of trade and investment in recent years—has remained largely silent on the elections. The potential for election-related violence targeting Burma's large ethnic Chinese populations, or further unrest in the border regions, will likely be among Beijing's immediate concerns.⁶² According to one analyst, over the longer term, China is likely to continue to adopt a pragmatic approach to Burma's transition:

...Beijing knows that Naypitaw needs it. China is still Myanmar's biggest trading partner, and its simplest source of capital. Many of Myanmar's major projects are beyond local engineering capacity and savvy. While Chinese firms' micro-management of major projects—extending from resources to labour—may grate, the ability of these firms to deliver huge infrastructure to tight schedules is a major contribution to the Myanmar economy. It is hard to imagine that the know-how necessary for the pipelines from Kyaukpyu in Rakhine State to Ruili over the border will be readily available in Myanmar.

So, in the excitement and awe, expect China to sit back and wait—it will be hoping that cheque signing will win out over flag waving, no matter who wins on 8 November.⁶³

Burma's Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) neighbours will also be approaching the elections pragmatically. Some will be mindful that fragile democratic norms and institutions have been under renewed pressure in their own countries. Following a May 2014 coup, Thailand once again has a military government and 'competitive authoritarianism' remains dominant in Malaysia, Singapore, and Cambodia, despite recent

57. ICG, *Myanmar's electoral landscape*, op. cit., p. ii.

58. Brennan, 'Why institutions, not elections, should be the yardstick', op. cit.

59. Farrelly, 'The USDP faces the people', op. cit.

60. 'Myanmar election fears could mar post-poll politics', op. cit.

61. US State Department, *Burma's challenge: democracy, human rights, peace, and the plight of the Rohingya*, Daniel R. Russel, Assistant Secretary, statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, transcript, 21 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

62. R Manuel, *China and the vote*, *New Mandala*, blog, 26 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

63. Ibid.

elections in all three countries.⁶⁴ Single party rule endures in Vietnam and Laos. Even in democratic Indonesia, there are concerns that the military is gaining increased political influence.⁶⁵ Seen in this context, recent calls for the West to re-impose punitive sanctions should the military not fully withdraw from politics might be seen as unfairly singling out Burma from its peers, thereby strengthening the position of Naypitaw's hardliners.⁶⁶

The potential for post-election unrest in Rakhine to spark renewed outflows of Rohingya migrants and asylum seekers will also be a concern for Burma's ASEAN neighbours, as well as Bangladesh.⁶⁷ In what would be a regarded as a controversial move, there are reports that Thailand is looking to repatriate large numbers of (mainly ethnic Karen) migrants and asylum seekers living on the Thai-Burma border after the November vote.⁶⁸

Australia has been actively supporting Burma's reform efforts over the last several years, including the preparations for the 2015 elections.⁶⁹ While the November poll will be important in shaping this engagement, the 2015 elections represent just one milestone in Burma's ongoing transition. Questions surrounding Australia's long-term interests and strategies—encompassing support for Burma's post-election political, economic and development agenda, as well as debates surrounding increased engagement with Burma's defence, security and police forces—will endure and will need to be constantly re-assessed in light of Burma's complex and shifting political landscape.

64. L Way and S Levitsky, *Competitive authoritarianism: hybrid regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

65. Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), [The expanding role of the Indonesian military](#), report no. 19, 25 May 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

66. ['Still the generals' election'](#), *The Economist*, 29 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

67. ['Thousands of Rohingya refugees to flee by boat in "looming disaster", Amnesty warns'](#), *The Guardian*, 21 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

68. K McConnachie, ['Myanmar's refugee problem: it's not just the Rohingya'](#), *The Diplomat*, blog, 14 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

69. ['Australia urged to use clout to ensure free and fair Myanmar poll'](#), SBS News, 25 October 2015, accessed 2 November 2015.

Annex A: Regions, districts, townships, and lower house constituencies (2012)



Source: Australian National University, [Myanmar 2012 boundaries](#), accessed 2 November 2015.



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