

ISSN 0219-3213

2019

no. 1

Trends in  
Southeast Asia

EMERGING POLITICAL  
CONFIGURATIONS IN THE RUN-UP  
TO THE 2020 MYANMAR ELECTIONS

AUNG AUNG

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# Trends in Southeast Asia

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614  
publish@iseas.edu.sg <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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### **ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

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Aung Aung.

Emerging Political Configurations in the Run-up to the 2020 Myanmar Elections.

(Trends in Southeast Asia Series, 0219-3213 ; TRS1/19)

1. Myanmar—Politics and government—21st century.
2. Civil-military relations—Myanmar.
3. Ethnic relations—Myanmar.
4. Muslims—Myanmar—Politics and government.
5. Rakhine State (Burma)—Politics and government.
6. Elections—Myanmar.
7. National League for Democracy (Burma).
8. Union Solidarity and Development Party (Burma)
9. Political parties—Myanmar.

I. Title.

II. Series: Trends in Southeast Asia ; TRS1/19.

DS501 I59T no. 1(2019)

January 2019

ISBN 978-981-4843-36-2 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4843-37-9 (ebook, PDF)

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Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# Emerging Political Configurations in the Run-up to the 2020 Myanmar Elections

By Aung Aung

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While facing international pressures relating to Rakhine State, and under tense civil–military relations, political parties are preparing for the 2020 Myanmar general elections.
- The National League for Democracy (NLD), the ruling party, is taking a more democratic platform focusing on the creation of a democratic federal union, while the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) adopts a more nationalist approach, emphasizing the prevention of foreign interference regarding Rakhine State.
- Taking lessons from the 2015 Myanmar general elections, and in order to effectively contend with the NLD and the USDP, the ethnic political parties are at the same time merging into single parties and new political parties are now also being registered at the Union Election Commission.
- The current situation indicates more uncertainty in politics and economic downturns, and many indicators suggest that the NLD is now in a defensive position.
- But be that as it may, because of Aung San Suu Kyi's personality cult following and the ingrained hatred for the military dictatorship, the NLD is still expected to receive the majority seats in Bamar-dominated regions. It may be at risk in ethnic-dominated states nevertheless.





# Emerging Political Configurations in the Run-up to the 2020 Myanmar Elections

By Aung Aung<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Ten years since the new Constitution was adopted in 2008,<sup>2</sup> Myanmar's political landscape has significantly changed. Elections and elected governments now define politics, although huge obstacles remain to be overcome where the Constitution is concerned. General elections take place every five years in accordance with the Constitution and a series of election laws;<sup>3</sup> the next general elections are to be held in 2020.<sup>4</sup> The National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi won a landslide victory in the 2015 elections,<sup>5</sup> both in Bamar-dominated areas and ethnic minority areas except Rakhine and Shan States. Voters

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<sup>1</sup> Aung Aung was Visiting Fellow in the Myanmar Studies Programme of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. Under the pen name Aung Aung IR, he is a regular contributor to the Myanmar-language press.

<sup>2</sup> BBC News, “Burma approves new constitution”, 15 May 2008 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7402105.stm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (provision 399 A), Union Election Commission Act (provision 10), Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) Election Act, the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) Election Act (provision 34C).

<sup>4</sup> *Global New Light of Myanmar*, “UEC seeks suggestions from political parties on 2019–2022 Strategic Plan for 2020 general election”, 4 July 2018 <<http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/uec-seeks-suggestions-from-political-parties-on-2019-2022-strategic-plan-for-2020-general-election/>>.

<sup>5</sup> BBC News, “Myanmar election: Suu Kyi's NLD wins landslide victory”, 13 November 2015 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34805806>>.

heavily voted for the NLD in the hope of prosperity and sustainable peace in accordance with the NLD's election campaign slogan, "It's time for change, Vote to NLD."<sup>6</sup>

Voters had unrealistically high hopes for the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government, thinking that they would solve or ease the protracted crisis in Rakhine State with the support of international community since Aung San Suu Kyi had close relationship with foreign countries especially with the West. These voters also thought that the NLD government could tackle ethnic armed conflicts since she was strongly supported by ethnic voters. Instead, the situation in Rakhine State and the ethnic conflicts worsened, and commodity prices gradually rose day by day because of the political uncertainty. Frustration has been growing in the two and a half years since the NLD came into power. In by-elections held in April 2017, the NLD only secured nine seats out of eighteen, a warning sign<sup>7</sup> for the NLD in the 2020 general elections.

The crisis in Rakhine State energized nationalism especially among the majority Buddhist population,<sup>8</sup> and the stalled peace process<sup>9</sup> and the erection of statues of General Aung San<sup>10</sup> in ethnic areas escalated existing anti-Bamar sentiment<sup>11</sup> among ethnic minority populations. In

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<sup>6</sup> Eleven Media Group, "NLD victory in 2015 election", 30 December 2015 <<http://elevenmyanmar.com/special-focus-politics/nld-victory-2015-election>>.

<sup>7</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "NLD Should Take By-election Results as a Wake-Up Call", 4 April 2017 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/nld-take-election-results-wake-call.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), "Myanmar Nationalists Protest 'Terrorist Attacks' in Beleaguered Rakhine State", 18 September 2017 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-nationalists-protest-terrorist-attacks-in-beleaguered-rakhine-state>>.

<sup>9</sup> Burman News International (BNI) — Myanmar Peace Monitor, "Peace Process Overview" <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/mpm/peace-process-overview>>.

<sup>10</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "Locals protest against General Aung San statue", 4 July 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/locals-protest-against-general-aung-san-statue.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> 7-Day Daily, "How the hatred can be cured", 9 June 2015 <<http://www.7daydaily.com/story/39134>>.

addition, observers view that sensitive civil–military relations between the NLD government and the military or Tatmadaw has become more tense since the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) call for Myanmar generals to be prosecuted for genocide<sup>12</sup> and for the setting up of an independent inquiry commission on Rakhine State.<sup>13</sup>

Amid current tensions between the military and the civilian government, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and ethnic political parties have been preparing heavily through internal reforms<sup>14</sup> and mergers<sup>15</sup> for the 2020 elections. Moreover, a new political party<sup>16</sup> led by former student leaders, which could well be a threat to the NLD emerged in August 2018. The NLD now seems to be in a defensive position. However, because of Aung San Suu Kyi’s personality cult following and the ingrained hatred for military dictatorship, the NLD is still expected to receive the majority of seats in Bamar-dominated regions but to be at risk in ethnic-dominated states.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF MYANMAR’S GENERAL ELECTIONS**

The country’s first general elections took place in April 1947, months

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<sup>12</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “UN Team Calls for Prosecution of Myanmar Military Leaders For Rakhine Atrocities”, 27 August 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/un-report-08272018164052.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “Myanmar to Set up Inquiry Commission to Examine Human Rights Violations in Rakhine”, 31 May 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-to-set-up-inquiry-commission-to-examine-human-rights-violations-in-rakhine-05312018123839.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “U Thein Sein steps down as USDP chair”, 24 August 2016 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/22121-u-thein-sein-steps-down-as-usdp-chair.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Four Kachin political parties merged as ‘Kachin State Party’”, 14 August 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/four-kachin-political-parties-merged-kachin-state-party.html>>.

<sup>16</sup> *Global New Light of Myanmar*, “Granting permission to ‘The People’s Party’ to register as a political party”, 24 August 2018, p. 3 <<http://www.moi.gov.mm/npe/nlm/>>.

before Burma gained its independence from the British in January 1948.<sup>17</sup> This paper will focus on elections after the 8888 Uprising<sup>18</sup> beginning with the 1990 general elections, as some key stakeholders of the elections such as the Tatmadaw, the NLD, ethnic political parties and 88-generation leaders are still active today. There have been three general elections and two by-elections since 1990. General elections were held in 1990 and 2010 by the military junta led first by late Senior General Saw Maung<sup>19</sup> as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), then by former Senior General Than Shwe as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).<sup>20</sup> The 2015 general elections and the 2012 by-elections were held by the so-called quasi-civilian USDP government led by former President U Thein Sein.<sup>21</sup> The 2017 by-elections were held by the NLD government led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>22</sup>

The sentiment of the general public before each of these elections and by-elections were relatively similar. Thus, the outcome of those elections, provided that they were fair, could easily be predicted from public opinion. In those days, voters wanted to punish the military and pro-military political parties which had ignored the 1990 general election results<sup>23</sup> and brutally crushed any anti-government protests including

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<sup>17</sup> Robert I. Rotberg, *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, 2nd ed. (Brookings Institution Press, 1998), p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> BBC News, “Burma’s 1988 protests”, 25 September 2018 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7012158.stm>>.

<sup>19</sup> *Washington Post*, “Gen. Saw Maung Dies”, 25 July 1997 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1997/07/25/gen-saw-maung-dies/>>.

<sup>20</sup> *The Telegraph*, “General Than Shwe profile”, 11 August 2009 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmamyanmar/General-Than-Shwe-profile.html>>.

<sup>21</sup> Reuters, “Ex-general who led Myanmar from dictatorship leaves mixed legacy”, 15 February 2016 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-president-idUSKCN0VN12G>>.

<sup>22</sup> BBC News, “Profile: Aung San Suu Kyi”, 5 December 2016 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11685977>>.

<sup>23</sup> Eleven Media Group, “When the promise of 1990 election was nullified”, 5 November 2015 <<http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/opinion/when-promise-1990-election-was-nullified>>.

the 2007 Saffron Revolution led by Buddhist monks, which gained worldwide attention.<sup>24</sup> As a result, people enthusiastically showed their resistance to military rule and their strong support for the NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi in every election. In the past until the 2015 elections, the majority of voters widely tended to express “We would vote for the NLD’s candidates no matter who they were”, with the belief that only the NLD could liberate them from military dictatorships. However, two and a half years after the NLD came into power, the trend is starting to change. At the very least, it is starting to lose momentum.

## **THE CURRENT POLITICAL PARTY LANDSCAPE**

### *The National League for Democracy (NLD)*

The NLD is the current ruling party, which won a resounding victory in the 2015 general elections.<sup>25</sup> In preparation for the 2020 general elections, the NLD has started internal reforms such as reorganizing its committees relating to information, women’s affairs, workers’ affairs, peasant affairs and economic affairs in 2017.<sup>26</sup> It held the Second National Congress on 23–24 June 2018<sup>27</sup> and in the speech of the Chairperson, the NLD called for great preparedness for the elections, and its political report included victory in the 2020 elections as one of five future work plans.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> *The Economist*, “The saffron revolution”, 27 September 2017 <<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2007/09/27/the-saffron-revolution>>.

<sup>25</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “NLD wins absolute majority in parliament”, 13 November 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/17623-nld-wins-absolute-majority-in-parliament.html>>.

<sup>26</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “The NLD begins internal reforms”, 8 January 2018 <<https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2018/01/08/149268.html>>.

<sup>27</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “NLD Begins Second Party Congress to Elect New Executive Committee”, 23 June 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/nld-begins-second-party-congress-elect-new-executive-committee.html>>.

<sup>28</sup> National League for Democracy (NLD), “Excerpt of five future processes from political report by CEC”, 23 June 2018 <<https://www.facebook.com/NLDParty/>>.

party also held its first Nationwide Women's Work Committee meeting in July 2018<sup>29</sup> and its second All-Myanmar Youth Conference (Central) in April 2018<sup>30</sup> in which some qualified youths were reportedly chosen as parliamentary candidates for the 2020 elections. Another significant change of the NLD was the appointment of incumbent President U Win Myint,<sup>31</sup> aged 66, as NLD deputy chairman-1 and Mandalay Region Chief Minister Dr Zaw Myint Maung,<sup>32</sup> also aged 66, as deputy chairman-2<sup>33</sup> in March 2018. This is the first time ever that the NLD has revealed a potential successor to Aung San Suu Kyi. However, because of the Rakhine State crisis and the slow pace of the economy, the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi have encountered more pressures within<sup>34</sup> and from outside<sup>35</sup> the party, as well as from the international community<sup>36</sup> in the run-up to the 2020 elections.

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<sup>29</sup> *Global New Light of Myanmar*, "NLD concludes first Nationwide Women's Work Committees Congress in Nay Pyi Taw", 3 July 2018 <<http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/nld-concludes-first-nationwide-womens-work-committees-congress-in-nay-pyi-taw/>>.

<sup>30</sup> Eleven Media Group, "Second national youth conference of NLD set on April 7", 4 April 2018 <<http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/13695>>.

<sup>31</sup> *Global New Light of Myanmar*, "Biography of President U Win Myint", 31 March 2018 <<http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/biography-president-u-win-myint/>>.

<sup>32</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "Could U Zaw Myint Maung be Mandalay's next chief minister?", 26 February 2016 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/mandalay-upper-myanmar/19189-could-u-zaw-myint-maung-be-mandalay-s-next-chief-minister.html>>.

<sup>33</sup> Frontier Myanmar, "Finally, the NLD embraces succession planning", 4 May 2018 <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/finally-the-nld-embraces-succession-planning>>.

<sup>34</sup> Eleven Media Group, "NLD dismisses two MPs from positions", 2 September 2018 <<http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/14858>>.

<sup>35</sup> The Coconuts Yangon, "Myanmar's currency crisis could 'bring down the government': Economist", 7 August 2018 <<https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/myanmars-currency-crisis-bring-government-economist/>>.

<sup>36</sup> *The Independent*, "Aung San Suu Kyi to keep Nobel Peace Prize despite UN saying Myanmar carried out act of genocide against Rohingya", 29 August 2018 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-nobel-peace-prize-myanmar-rohingya-genocide-a8513746.html>>.

The NLD's strategy in the 2015 general elections mainly focused on the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi and her message to the electorate to vote for the NLD regardless of who its candidates were.<sup>37</sup> During the election campaign period then, Aung San Suu Kyi travelled across the country especially to ethnic areas such as Kayah,<sup>38</sup> Rakhine,<sup>39</sup> Shan,<sup>40</sup> Kachin,<sup>41</sup> and Mon<sup>42</sup> States to canvas for ethnic votes. In addition, 2015 marked the 100th birthday of General Aung San, Myanmar's national hero and the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, so the celebrations of the birthday of General Aung San were held across the country throughout the year. Some observers viewed this as the NLD exploiting General Aung San for its election campaign.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, celebrities, comedians<sup>44</sup> and popular singers<sup>45</sup> played a vital role in soliciting votes for the NLD across

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<sup>37</sup> Channel News Asia, "Myanmar elections 'a big chance' for change: Aung San Suu Kyi", 3 November 2015 <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/myanmar-elections-a-big-chance-for-change-aung-san-suu-kyi>>.

<sup>38</sup> RFA, "Aung San Suu Kyi Begins Campaign Rally in Eastern Myanmar", 9 October 2015 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/aung-san-suu-kyi-begins-campaign-rally-in-eastern-myanmar-09102015164645.html>>.

<sup>39</sup> BBC, "Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi campaigns in Rakhine state", 16 October 2015 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34546811>>.

<sup>40</sup> RFA, "Aung San Suu Kyi Begins Campaign Rally in Eastern Myanmar", 10 September 2015 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/aung-san-suu-kyi-begins-campaign-rally-in-eastern-myanmar>>.

<sup>41</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "NLD leader talks peace as war continues in Kachin State", 6 October 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/16836-nld-leader-talks-peace-as-war-continues-in-kachin-state.html>>.

<sup>42</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "NLD chief woos voters in unofficial campaign", 18 May 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/14506-nld-chief-woos-voters-in-unofficial-campaign.html>>.

<sup>43</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "NLD to Lead 'Whole Year' Celebration of Aung San's 100th Birthday", 2 December 2014 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/nld-lead-whole-year-celebration-aung-sans-100th-birthday.html>>.

<sup>44</sup> "NLD အောင်နိုင်ရေး - ဇေလဝ တောပြောပွဲ", 9 October 2015 <<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/multimedia/comedian-bayluwa-nld-campaign-myeik>>.

<sup>45</sup> RFA, "Pan Ye Lan Music Group Campaign in Taungdwingyi", 27 October 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KLNswMDCaA>>.



the country. Most civil society organizations including Myanmar's two largest civil organizations, the Free Funeral Service Society (FFSS)<sup>46</sup> and the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society,<sup>47</sup> were also known as pro-NLD organizations. Private printed media ahead of the 2015 elections hugely covered most of the activities of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>48</sup> In short, Aung San Suu Kyi's personal influence, the legacy of General Aung San, support from civil organizations and artists and media were central to NLD's election campaigns in 2015.

### *The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)*

Taking bitter lessons from the loss of the 2015 general elections,<sup>49</sup> the military-backed USDP, the main opposition party, has rushed to prepare for the 2020 general elections.<sup>50</sup> In a surprise to many, former president U Thein Sein handed over his USDP leadership role to U Than Htay, a member of the USDP central executive committee, at the party's three-day conference in August 2016.<sup>51</sup> The USDP also held its Nationwide Youth Conference (Central) in May 2018<sup>52</sup> and its Nationwide Women Conference (Central) is to be held at the end of the year.

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<sup>46</sup> Free Funeral Service Society (FFSS) <<https://www.ffssyangon.org/>>.

<sup>47</sup> "The 88 Generation Peace and Open Society" <<https://www.facebook.com/The88Generation/>>.

<sup>48</sup> Reuters, "Myanmar media stack the deck for 'Mother' Suu Kyi ahead of polls", 29 October 2015 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-election-media/myanmar-media-stack-the-deck-for-mother-suu-kyi-ahead-of-polls>>.

<sup>49</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "All USDP Members Are Responsible for Our Loss in 2015", 25 April 2016 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/all-usdp-members-are-responsible-for-our-loss-in-2015.html>>.

<sup>50</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "USDP Sets Sights On 2020 Comeback", 25 May 2016 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/usdp-sets-sights-on-2020-comeback.html>>.

<sup>51</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "U Thein Sein steps down from USDP chairmanship", 24 August 2016 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/22104-u-thein-sein-steps-down-from-usdp-chairmanship.html>>.

<sup>52</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "USDP youth to gather for conference at end of May", 9 May 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/usdp-youth-gather-conference-end-may.html>>.

Compared to the NLD, the USDP's 2015 election campaigns were not highlighted by the mass media and its large campaign rallies were rarely obvious to the people in Yangon and other major cities. Similar to the NLD, the USDP also focused on the popularity of its leader, President U Thein Sein, throughout the campaigns by posting huge posters with his photos.<sup>53</sup> In addition, ahead of the 2015 elections, U Thein Sein travelled across the country as the President of Myanmar during which he was greeted by large crowds, especially members of the USDP. The NLD complained to Union Election Commission (UEC), saying that the President's domestic visits looked like election campaign activities. However, the UEC's response was that the President's visit did not look like campaign activities but were expressions of people who loved the President just greeting him.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the USDP campaign in 2015 focused on the achievements of the party<sup>55</sup> as a whole and of its candidates who had served in U Thein Sein's government. While private media paid less attention to the USDP, the state-owned television and newspapers highlighted the activities of the USDP President U Thein Sein.

### *USDP's Leaders*

Than Htay, born in 1954, is a former brigadier general and the current chair of the USDP. He left the military in 2010, joined the USDP, and won a seat in the 2010 general elections.<sup>56</sup> He served as minister of rail transport and energy in the previous USDP administration and then

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<sup>53</sup> Thit Htoo Lwin, "U Thein Sein to continue to lead USDP", 28 January 2016 <[http://www.thithtoolwin.com/2016/01/blog-post\\_301.html](http://www.thithtoolwin.com/2016/01/blog-post_301.html)>.

<sup>54</sup> Mizzima Burmese, "UEC responds NLD the President did not involve in election campaign", 6 November 2015 <<http://www.mizzimaburmese.com/article/7045>>.

<sup>55</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "USDP: We brought democracy to Myanmar", 29 September 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/16726-usdp-we-brought-democracy-to-myanmar.html>>.

<sup>56</sup> <<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages> = ၂၀၁၀ ခုနှစ် အထွေထွေ ရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>, Myan-aung constituency, Irrawaddy Region, Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House), U Than Htay (USDP): 81,996 votes received; U Hla Kyaing (NUP): 24,501 votes received.

resigned from the position to be a USDP candidate in 2015. He lost to his NLD counterpart.<sup>57</sup> According to an article in the *Irrawaddy*,<sup>58</sup> Than Htay is the same age as current commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and was senior to him at the Defence Services Academy, being from an earlier intake — Than Htay from the eighteenth and Min Aung Hlaing from the nineteenth. Observers therefore believe that the USDP takes its relationship with the military seriously. Than Htay is not well known but, according to USDP members, he has a good reputation both in the party and in the military service.<sup>59</sup> In a media interview, Than Htay said the USDP will put emphasis on the “Our Three Main National Causes”<sup>60</sup> to which the military attaches great value, and that the USDP would not be upset if it were labelled as nationalist.<sup>61</sup> In a meeting with USDP officials in Yangon and Mandalay in August 2018,<sup>62</sup> I asked whether Than Htay would be nominated to become President of Myanmar should the USDP won in the 2020 elections. The answer was that it was too early to say for sure but that the majority consent would be a deciding factor.

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<sup>57</sup> <<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages=၂၀၁၅ ခုနှစ် အထွေထွေ ရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>>, Myan-aung constituency, Irrawaddy Region, Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House), U Than Htay (USDP): 38,716 votes received; U Khine Maung Latt (NLD): 75,588 votes received.

<sup>58</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Meet the New Leaders of the Opposition”, 25 August 2016 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/meet-the-new-leaders-of-the-opposition.html>>.

<sup>59</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with the USDP and political parties in Yangon and Mandalay, 2–11 August 2018.

<sup>60</sup> *New Light of Myanmar*, “Our Three Main National Causes: 1) Non-disintegration of the Union, 2) Non-disintegration of National Solidarity & 3) Perpetuation of Sovereignty”, 24 April 2012, “Our Three Main National Causes — non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuity of sovereignty”.

<sup>61</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “‘You Can Label Us As Nationalist,’ USDP Chairman Says”, 21 March 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/can-label-us-nationalist-usdp-chairman-says.html>>.

<sup>62</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with USDP in Yangon and Mandalay, 2–11 August 2018.

In comparison, former USDP chair President Thein Sein is much better known to people than current USDP chair Than Htay. After relinquishing his chair position in 2016, Thein Sein became a party member and keeps a low profile; but observers were surprised that Chinese State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Thein Sein in Beijing in April 2018.<sup>63</sup> Unlike other generals, Thein Sein is widely respected and is regarded as the Aung San Suu Kyi of the USDP. Those who love Thein Sein actually set up a philanthropic association called “Point to Golden Land”<sup>64</sup> and have paid respect to Thein Sein every year since 2016.<sup>65</sup> I asked the USDP if Thein Sein might again be the President of Myanmar in 2020 if the USDP won in the elections. The USDP did not reject the possibility, but instead said Thein Sein is getting old and really wants to spend the rest of his life peacefully.<sup>66</sup>

### *Ethnic Parties*

Fifty-five out of the ninety-five parties<sup>67</sup> registered with the UEC in Myanmar as of 15 September 2018 are ethnic political parties. In the 2015 elections, the NLD won landslide victories in five states named for

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<sup>63</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Analysis: China’s Shadow Over Myanmar”, 25 April 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/analysis-chinas-shadow-myanmar.html>>.

<sup>64</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Point to Golden Land to cooperate with current government to fulfil the needs of people”, 13 November 2017 <<https://myanmar.mmtimes.com/news/103555.html>>.

<sup>65</sup> *The Voice*, “Around three thousands to pay respects to ex-President U Thein Sein”, 23 February 2017 <<http://thevoicemyanmar.com/about-us/6435-tmt>>.

<sup>66</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with the USDP in Mandalay and Yangon, 3 and 10 August 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Union Election Commission, “List of Political Party”, (1) Mro National Development Party, (2) La Hu National Development Party, (3) Kokang Democracy and Unity Party, (4) Pao National Organization, (5) Kayan National Party, (6) Rakhine State National United Party, (7) Kayin Peoples Party, (8) Wa National Unity Party, (9) Ta-Arng (Palaung) National Party, (10) All Mon Regions Democracy Party, (11) Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, (12) Chin National Democratic Party, (13) Chin Progressive Party, (14) Inn National Development Party, (15) Wa Democratic Party, (16) Phlone-

ethnic groups and it only failed to carry Rakhine and Shan States.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the 2015 results were not surprising. Most ethnic parties also lost heavily to the NLD in the 1990 general elections.<sup>69</sup> The 2015 general elections put the combined votes received by ethnic parties far behind those received by the NLD in places such as Mon and Karen States.<sup>70</sup>

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Sqaw Democratic Party, (17) Ethnic National Development Party, (18) Ka Man National Development Party, (19) Kha Me National Development Party, (20) Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State, (21) Mro Nationality Party, (22) Tai-Leng Nationalities Development Party, (23) Asho Chin National Party, (24) Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, (25) Danu National Democracy Party, (26) Mon National Party, (27) Zomi Congress for Democracy, (28) Shan State Kokang Democratic Party, (29) Kachin State Democracy Party, (30) The Kachin National Congress, (31) Lisu National Development Party, (32) Dawei Nationalities Party, (33) Federal Union Party, (34) Kachin Democratic Party, (35) Union Pa.O National Organization, (36) Arakan National Party, (37) Chin League for Democracy, (38) Khami National Party, (39) Karen National Party, (40) Mro National Democracy Party, (41) Danu National Organization Party, (42) Shan-ni & Northern Shan Ethnic Solidarity Party, (43) Inn National League, (44) Lhaovo National Unity and Development Party, (45) Eastern Shan State Development Democratic Party, (46) Akha National Development Party, (47) Zo National Region Development, (48) Women Party (Mon), (49) Arakan Patriot Party, (50) Daingnet National Development Party, (51) 'Wa' Liberal Democratic Development Party, (52) Arakan League for Democracy Party, (53) Kayah State Democratic Party, (54) United Nationalities Federal Democracy Party, (55) Karen National Democratic Party.

<sup>68</sup> BNI Multimedia Group, "ANP Win In Arakan State", 9 November 2015 <<https://www.bnionline.net/en/2015-election/arakan-state/item/1157-anp-wins-most-seats-in-the-arakan-state.html>>.

<sup>69</sup> 1990 Multi-Party Democracy General Elections, Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangyaung-2, "National Democracy Party for Human Rights (NDPHR)", 1 February 2003, p. 33 <[http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990\\_elections.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990_elections.htm)>. Shan State: 23 seats (SNLD), 22 (NLD); Rakhine State: 11 seats (ALD), 9 (NLD); Mon State: 5 seats (MNDF), 16 (NLD); Chin State: 3 seats (CNLD), 4 (NLD); Kachin State: 3 seats (KSNCD), 14 (NLD), Kayah State: 2 seats (KSNLD), 3 (NLD); Karen State: 1 seat (KSNO), 10 (NLD).

<sup>70</sup> Aung Aung, "Understanding Ethnic Political Parties in Myanmar: The Cases of Mon and Karen States", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 57/2018, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 20 September 2018 <<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/iseas-perspective-2018-2>>.

Learning the lesson from the 2015 general elections, many ethnic parties today are merging across the country, including those in Kayah,<sup>71</sup> Karen,<sup>72</sup> Mon<sup>73</sup> and Kachin States.<sup>74</sup> However, there is also a reverse trend in Rakhine State where the powerful nationalist Arakan National Party (ANP) is now split<sup>75</sup> and further internal break-ups in future are expected,<sup>76</sup> threatening to make Rakhine State's political landscape more complex. Relations between the NLD and the ANP will continue to worsen, meaning that international organizations working in Rakhine State may face an uncertain and complex political landscape that will impede humanitarian activities there in the run-up to the 2020 elections.

Compared to the NLD and the USDP, ethnic parties are very small and weak in the human and financial resources needed to campaign effectively. However, the ANP and the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) are exceptional. In the 2015 elections, ethnic parties

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<sup>71</sup> BNI Multi Media Group, "New Kayah State party officially registered", 15 August 2017 <<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/karenni-state/item/3373-new-kayah-state-party-officially-registered.html>>. The new party is the result of a merger between the Kayah Unity Democracy Party and the All Nationals' Democracy Party (Kayah State).

<sup>72</sup> BNI Multimedia Group, "Karen Political Parties to Unite", 4 February 2016 <<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/mon-state/item/1458-karen-political-parties-to-unite.html>>. The merger of six Karen parties headquartered in Hpa-An and Yangon in 2016 failed but in 2018, they are now striving again to merge.

<sup>73</sup> Eleven Media Group, "A New Mon Party to be named in August and be registered in September", 22 August 2018 <<http://news-eleven.com/politics/76364>>.

<sup>74</sup> BNI Multi Media Group, "Kachin parties come together by establishing Kachin State Party (KSP)", 13 August 2018 <<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/kachin-parties-come-together-establishing-kachin-state-party-ksp>>. The Kachin Democratic Party (KDP), the Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDP), the Kachin National Congress (KNC), and the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UDPKS) have agreed to abolish their parties and do politics under the new party "KSP".

<sup>75</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "ALD Members Re-Establish Party Under Same Name", 9 January 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ald-members-re-establish-party-under-same-name.html>>.

<sup>76</sup> BBC Burmese, "Arakan Fatherland Party –AFP not allowed", 2 September 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-45386228>>.

largely appealed for votes along ethnic lines with messages tailored to the interests and aspirations of their state.<sup>77</sup> Both major Rakhine and Shan parties highlighted working on constitutional change and setting up a democratic federal union as top priorities.<sup>78</sup> The mass media paid more attention to the ANP and the SNLD since Dr Aye Maung, Chairperson of the ANP, and U Khun Tun Oo, Chairperson of the SNLD, were national political figures. Like the NLD and the USDP, the ANP and the SNLD used their leaders' personal reputation as main election campaign tools.

In addition to mergers, there are currently three ethnic alliance groups, namely: the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF),<sup>79</sup> the Federal Democratic Alliance (FDA)<sup>80</sup> and the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA).<sup>81</sup> The UNA, founded in 2002, is an alliance of fifteen ethnic parties,<sup>82</sup> which mostly competed in the 1990 elections. The NBF, established in 2011, is comprised of twenty-four ethnic parties,<sup>83</sup> which

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<sup>77</sup> Personal experience with ethnic political parties across the country before 2015 general elections.

<sup>78</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "SNLD launches campaign in key election battleground", 9 September 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/16382-snld-launches-campaign-in-key-election-battleground.html>>.

<sup>79</sup> Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF) <<https://www.facebook.com/nbf.myanmar/>>.

<sup>80</sup> Radio Free Asia, "Nine Myanmar Political and Ethnic Parties to Form Alliance", 18 December 2013 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/coalition>>.

<sup>81</sup> United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), <<https://www.facebook.com/UnitedNationalitiesAlliance/>>.

<sup>82</sup> Personal interview with the UNA in Yangon on 19 March 2018 (Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, Shan State Kokang Democratic Party, Arakan League for Democracy, Karen National Party, Mon National Party, Zomi League for Democracy, Kachin State National Congress for Democracy, Kayan National Party, Shan-ni & Northern Shan ethnics Solidarity Party, Danu National Democracy Party, Chin League for Democracy Party, Chin Progressive Party, Arakan Patriot Party, Khumi (Khami) National Party, Mro National Democracy Party).

<sup>83</sup> Personal interview with the NBF in Yangon on 14 March 2018 (Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, Danu National Democracy Party, Inn National

mostly competed in the 2010 elections. The FDA, founded in 2013, is a partnership of eight ethnic parties<sup>84</sup> including Bamar ethnic parties.

### *The Third Force*

A choice for those who seek alternatives to the NLD and the USDP is the “third force”. Aiming at the 2020 general elections, former leaders, veteran politicians and former Tatmadaw generals are preparing to form political parties of their own.

Among them, the People’s Party led by Ko Ko Gyi, one of the senior leaders of the 88 Generation, is widely regarded by some local media as one that can challenge the NLD in the 2020 elections. Former student leaders from the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society<sup>85</sup> had set up the Central Forming Committee for a New Party in 2017 and officially applied to the UEC to register the “Four Eight People’s Party” on 19 December 2017. However, some people, including some ex-colleagues disputed the choice of party name. The committee then re-applied to register the “People’s Party” on 9 July 2018,<sup>86</sup> leaving the controversial “Four Eight”

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Development Party, Wa Democratic Party, Pa-O National Organization, Ta’aung (Palaung) National Party, Wa National Unity Party, ‘Wa’ Liberal Democratic Development Party, Kokant Democracy and Unity party, Kayan Unity and Democracy Party, Chin National Democratic Party, Asho Chin National Party, Kachin Democratic Party, Union Pa.O National Organization, Arakan National Party, All Mon Regions Democratic Party, Phlone-Sqaw Democratic Party, Dawei Nationalities Party, Ethnic National Development Party, Federal Union Party, Khumi National (Development) Party, Mro Nationality Party, Inn National Organization Party, Women Party (Mon)).

<sup>84</sup> Personal interview with the FDA in Yangon on 30 March 2018 (Karen People Party, Union Democratic Party, Modern People Party, Mro Nationality Party, Democratic Party (Myanmar), Democracy and Peace Party, Bamar People’s Party, Confederate Farmers Party)

<sup>85</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “The 88 Generation Peace and Open Society”, 16 May 2018 <<https://www.facebook.com/The88Generation/>>.

<sup>86</sup> “A New Political Party Forum”, နိုင်ငံရေးပါတီတစ်ရပ် ဖြစ်မြောက်ရေးကော်မတီ, 9 July 2018 <<https://www.facebook.com/ANewPoliticalPartyForum/>>.



wording out. On 23 August 2018, the UEC approved the new name.<sup>87</sup> Led by Ko Ko Gyi,<sup>88</sup> the party is regarded as a potential threat to the NLD. Viewing the People's Party as the rival to the NLD, there has been much criticism of the party in social media from pro-NLD elements. In addition, some prominent leaders of the 88 Generation have not joined the party.<sup>89</sup> As a sign of protest against the formation of the new party, hundreds of members of the 88 Generation in Kayah State switched to the NLD in 2017.<sup>90</sup> However, because of current political developments and the well-known and veteran leadership of the People's Party,<sup>91</sup> its importance of should not be discounted.<sup>92</sup>

Another party that is scheduled to be set up by veteran politicians is known as “the old generation” since its leaders are people who had competed and won in the 1990 general elections. These veteran politicians set up the 1990 Elected Pyithu Hluttaw Representatives Group in 2014<sup>93</sup> and have now decided to participate in the 2020

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<sup>87</sup> *Global New Light of Myanmar*, “Granting permission to ‘The People’s Party’ to register as a political party”, 24 August 2018, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> Institute for Societal Leadership, “Digital Narrative of Asia”, 10 December 2014 <<https://isl.smu.edu.sg/dna/interviews/ko-ko-gyi>>.

<sup>89</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “88 Generation to form political party in 2018”, 3 March 2017 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/yangon/25165-88-generation-to-form-political-party-in-2018.html>>.

<sup>90</sup> BNI Multimedia Group, “Kayah State’s 88 Generation members join forces with NLD”, 9 August 2017 <<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/karenni-state/item/3347-kayah-state-s-88-generation-members-join-forces-with-nld.html>>.

<sup>91</sup> Voice of America (VOA), “Myanmar Democracy Activists Break Ranks With NLD Party”, 30 June 2018 <<https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-democracy-activists-break-ranks-with-nld-party/4460354.html>>.

<sup>92</sup> 7-Day TV, “U Ko Ko Gyi’s party prepares to submit the UEC lists of party members and party leaders”, 31 August 2018 <<http://7daydaily.com/>>.

<sup>93</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Winners of Annulled 1990 Election Plan Silver Jubilee”, 24 April 2015 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/winners-of-annulled-1990-election-plan-silver-jubilee.html>>.

elections.<sup>94</sup> The Group has said it will choose younger people as candidates in the elections.<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, some former Tatmadaw generals who served under the previous USDP administration are also planning to set up a new party called the “National Politics Party”.<sup>96</sup>

### *Muslims in the Elections*

Myanmar’s 2014 Census showed that 4.9 per cent<sup>97</sup> of the total population of Myanmar is Muslim, but the current political configuration indicates a very low possibility for Muslim voices to be heard in the 2020 general elections. Because of religious tensions and communal violence relating to the crisis in Rakhine State, one of the criteria for a fair Myanmar election is how freely Muslim politicians in Myanmar are able to participate in the electoral process. The 2015 elections were known for being “Muslim-free”. According to the European Union Election Observation Mission’s final report on Myanmar’s 2015 general elections,<sup>98</sup> both the major parties, the NLD and the USDP, failed to field any Muslim candidates and the UEC also rejected most candidates from Muslim parties, citing citizenship criteria. In the elections, there

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<sup>94</sup> 7-Day Daily, “1990 MPs announces they will join in 2020 elections”, 7 August 2018 <<http://www.7daydaily.com/story/133499>>.

<sup>95</sup> The Fifth Wave, “The 1990 general elections elected representatives to set up a new political party”, 7 August 2018 <<http://www.fifthwavenews.com/fwn/21954>>.

<sup>96</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Former military generals plan to set up a new political parties called ‘National Politics Party’”, 27 August 2018, <<https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2018/08/27/167918.html>>.

<sup>97</sup> Ministry of Information, Republic of Union of Myanmar, “Religious data from 2014 Census released”, 22 July 2016 <<http://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=news/22/07/2016/id-7783>>.

<sup>98</sup> EU EOM Myanmar General Election 2015 Final Report, “III. Political Background”, <[http://www.eods.eu/library/myanmar\\_final\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.eods.eu/library/myanmar_final_report_en.pdf)>, pp. 8 and 19.

were 6,038<sup>99</sup> candidates, but only 28 were Muslim. None of them was elected.

The NLD is often labelled a Muslim-friendly party — referred to in degrading terms as the Kalar party<sup>100</sup> — by nationalists because it has approached Rakhine crisis in a more moderate way and because some prominent members<sup>101</sup> of the NLD are Muslims. Before the 2015 general elections, some leading monks from the Organization for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) were accused of conducting no-vote campaigns against the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>102</sup> To fend off those attacks and avoid misunderstanding from voters,<sup>103</sup> the NLD decided not to choose Muslim candidates in the 2015 elections. However, some Muslims expressed the belief that suspicions and prejudices towards Muslims were coming not only from nationalists and the MaBaTha but also from their comrades within political parties,<sup>104</sup> meaning there is not likely to be Muslim candidates in the 2020 elections in major parties. However, one Muslim religious leader in Mandalay recognized that Muslims could more freely conduct religious activities under the current NLD government and feel mentally safe compared to the period under the USDP government.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Union Election Commission, “Report on the 2015 general elections”, 2015 <[http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၅\\_အထွေထွေ\\_ရွေးကောက်ပွဲ](http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၅_အထွေထွေ_ရွေးကောက်ပွဲ)>.

<sup>100</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “NLD alleges dirty tricks in Pyawbwe”, 17 November 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/mandalay-upper-myanmar/17646-nld-alleges-dirty-tricks-in-pyawbwe.html>>.

<sup>101</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “A personal tribute to U Ko Ni”, 1 February 2017 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/24778-a-personal-tribute-to-u-ko-ni.html>>.

<sup>102</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Guardians of ‘race and religion’ target NLD”, 2 October 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/16801-guardians-of-race-and-religion-target-nld.html>>.

<sup>103</sup> BBC News, “Aung San Suu Kyi’s party excludes Muslim candidates”, 8 September 2015 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34182489>>.

<sup>104</sup> Personal experience in Myanmar with political parties, 2014 to 2018.

<sup>105</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with Muslim religious leader in Mandalay, 4 August 2018.

Muslim parties mainly contested in Rakhine State in the 1990<sup>106</sup> and 2010<sup>107</sup> general elections but in 2015, most Muslim candidates in Rakhine State were not allowed to run by the UEC. There are currently three Muslim parties in Myanmar, who call themselves “Rohingya”.<sup>108</sup> They mainly focus their activities in Rakhine State: the Democracy and Human Rights Party (DHRP), the National Democratic Party for Development (NDPD) and the National Development and Peace Party (NDPP).<sup>109</sup> The DHRP and the NDPD often closely work together,<sup>110</sup> releasing joint statements relating to Muslim populations in Rakhine State. The DHRP (formerly known as NDPHR<sup>111</sup> in 1990 elections) had close relations with the NLD before and after the 1990 elections, but the relationship has since then completely stalled.<sup>112</sup> An official from a Muslim party in Yangon has shared that there are very few possibilities for Muslim parties to fairly contest in Rakhine State in 2020 since the voting rights of Muslims there are unsolved as yet. Muslims in Rakhine

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<sup>106</sup> 1990 Multi-Party Democracy General Elections, Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangyaung-2, “National Democracy Party for Human Rights (NDPHR)”, 1 February 2003, p. 33 <[http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990\\_elections.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990_elections.htm)>.

<sup>107</sup> Union Election Commission, “2010 General Election” <<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၀အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>>.

<sup>108</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Muslim Party Facing Political Oblivion After Candidates Rejected”, 1 September 2015 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/news/muslim-party-facing-political-oblivion-after-candidates-rejected>>.

<sup>109</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Rohingya Party Prevented from Campaigning”, 22 October 2010 <[http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=19801](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=19801)>.

<sup>110</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Muslim Political Parties Seek Rohingya Census Recognition”, 10 January 2014 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/muslim-political-parties-seek-rohingya-census-recognition.html>>.

<sup>111</sup> 1990 Multi-Party Democracy General Elections, Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangyaung-2, “National Democracy Party for Human Rights (NDPHR)”, 1 February 2003, p. 33 <[http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990\\_elections.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990_elections.htm)>, National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR) won 4 seats out of its 8 candidates in 1990 elections.

<sup>112</sup> Personal experience with DHRP and NDPD in Yangon, 2015 and 2018.

State were allowed to vote in the 1990 general elections,<sup>113</sup> and in 1993, they were given “white cards”<sup>114</sup> by Myanmar officials and allowed to vote in the 2010 general elections. However, these temporary identity papers were revoked by the USDP government in March 2015,<sup>115</sup> and Muslims in Rakhine State were not allowed to vote in the 2015 general elections.

Muslim parties are not happy with the current political environment but in order to avoid from being delisted altogether, they are scheduled to contest in the 2020 general elections.<sup>116</sup> Under the current Political Parties Registration Law,<sup>117</sup> a political party needs to contest in at least three constituencies at three levels of the parliament in the general elections.

In addition to the three Muslim (Rohingya) parties, there is another Muslim party called the United National Congress Party (UNC), which represents Myanmar Muslims in general.<sup>118</sup> The UNC first applied for registration as Pathi National Congress (PNC) in 2012 but they were told by the UEC not to use the word “Pathi” as “Pathi” is not among the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups of Myanmar. “Pathi” is a generic term for Myanmar Muslims. The Kaman National Development Party (KNDP) is also known as a Muslim party but it officially represents Kaman ethnic people<sup>119</sup> in Rakhine State who are recognized as one of

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<sup>113</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Rohingya to Form Political Party, Contest Elections”, 30 March 2010 <[http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=18154](http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=18154)>.

<sup>114</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Uncertain future for hundreds of thousands as white cards are revoked”, 1 April 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/13852-uncertain-future-for-hundreds-of-thousands-as-white-cards-are-revoked.html>>.

<sup>115</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “White Cards Expire, Rohingya to Enter Citizenship Verification Process”, 1 April 2015 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/news/white-cards-expire-rohingya-to-enter-citizenship-verification-process>>.

<sup>116</sup> Phone conversation with an official from NDPD in Yangon, August 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Political Parties Registration Law, Myanmar, 8 March 2010, Chapter III: “No Entitlement to subsist”, provision 12(A)(1), p. 7.

<sup>118</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Muslim political group gets greenlight under condition”, 2 November 2012. Pathi is a generic term for Myanmar Muslims.

<sup>119</sup> Frontier Myanmar, “The Kaman: Citizens who suffer”, 28 May 2018 <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-kaman-citizens-who-suffer>>.

the 135 ethnic groups of Myanmar. The KNDP stays distant from other Muslim parties, saying their policies are mainly based on race and not faith.<sup>120</sup>

The ANP that has controlled Rakhine State Assembly<sup>121</sup> openly said that it would not oppose the citizenship of Muslims in Rakhine State by current laws, provided those who are lawfully citizens should be allowed to travel across the country, and not be restricted to Rakhine State.<sup>122</sup> The MaBaTha also informally said it would not oppose allowing Muslims in Rakhine State to be citizens, given that the recognition procedure is transparent and within the boundaries of the 1982 citizenship law.<sup>123</sup>

## THE CURRENT POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

### *Rakhine State*

People have argued for different solutions to the Rakhine State crisis, but in this paper, the development of the crisis after the NLD government came into power in 2016 will be highlighted. The President's Office announced the creation of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State on 23 August 2016, which is widely known as the "Kofi Annan Commission".<sup>124</sup> The military representatives, the USDP and the ANP strongly objected to the inclusion of foreigners in the Commission,

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<sup>120</sup> Field Research Mission, Phone call to an official from the KNDP on 5 August 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), "Myanmar's Rakhine Parliament Impeaches State Municipal Affairs Minister", 2 January 2018. Twenty-one of the seats in the Rakhine State parliament are held by the ANP, nine by the NLD, three by the USDP, one by an independent, and 12 by the military.

<sup>122</sup> 3rd session of 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference, Nay Pyi Taw, "Arakan National Party's speech", Daw Aye Nu Sein, Vice Chairperson, the ANP, 11 July 2018.

<sup>123</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with MaBaTha in Mandalay, 3 August 2018.

<sup>124</sup> President Office, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, "Establishment of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State", 23 August 2016 <<http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=issues/rakhine-state-affairs/id-6535>>.

calling for the NLD government to remove them.<sup>125</sup> The Lower House of the Union Parliament rejected an ANP motion on 6 September 2016<sup>126</sup> to reorganize the Commission with only local scholars. Unsurprisingly, the Rakhine State Assembly, which is controlled by the ANP, rejected the legitimacy of the Commission on 14 September 2016.<sup>127</sup> Subsequently, in October 2016, Muslim militants attacked three police outposts and nine policemen were killed.<sup>128</sup>

The Commission submitted its final report to the President of Myanmar on 23 August 2017.<sup>129</sup> On 25 August 2017, more than thirty police outposts in northern Rakhine State were simultaneously attacked by the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Army (ARSA).<sup>130</sup> This attack led to military clearance operations in northern Rakhine State, causing thousands of refugees to flee to Bangladesh.<sup>131</sup> The President's Office

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<sup>125</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "ANP Demands Cancellation of Kofi Annan-Led Arakan State Commission", 25 August 2016 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/anp-demands-cancellation-of-kofi-annan-led-arakan-state-commission.html>>.

<sup>126</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "NLD Rejects ANP Proposal to Remove Intl Reps from Arakan Advisory Commission", 6 September 2016 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/nld-rejects-anp-proposal-to-remove-intl-reps-from-arakan-advisory-commission.html>>.

<sup>127</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "Rejection of Rakhine advisory body approved by state hluttaw", 15 September 2016 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/22535-rejection-of-rakhine-advisory-body-approved-by-state-hluttaw.html>>.

<sup>128</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "Rakhine border raids kill nine police officers", 10 October 2016 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/22992-rakhine-border-raids-kill-nine-police-officers.html>>.

<sup>129</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), "Annan Commission Submits Final Report on Rakhine State to Myanmar Government", 23 August 2017 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/annan-commission-submits-final-report-on-rakhine-state-to-myanmar-government-08232017161336.html>>.

<sup>130</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "Muslim Militants Stage Major Attack in Rakhine", 25 August 2017 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/muslim-militants-stage-major-attack-rakhine.html>>.

<sup>131</sup> BBC News, "Myanmar Rakhine: Thousands flee to Bangladesh", 30 August 2017 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-41094485>>.

formed the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State on 12 September 2017,<sup>132</sup> and then on 14 December 2017, an Advisory Board for the “Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State”, which includes five foreigners.<sup>133</sup> Again, the President’s Office announced setting up an Independent Commission of Enquiry to investigate the violation of human rights and related issues following the terrorist attacks by ARSA on 31 May 2018<sup>134</sup> and did set up the Commission on 30 July 2018, chaired by a foreigner.<sup>135</sup> The USDP,<sup>136</sup> the ANP<sup>137</sup> and military representatives<sup>138</sup> strongly objected to the formation of the inquiry commission. The International Criminal Court (ICC) sent Myanmar a prosecution request regarding Rakhine

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<sup>132</sup> President Office, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, “Establishment of the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State”, 9 October 2017 <<http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/orders/2017/10/12/id-7748>>.

<sup>133</sup> President Office, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, “The Establishment of the Advisory Board for the “Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State”, 14 December 2017 <<http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/announcements/2017/12/15/id-8146>>.

<sup>134</sup> President Office, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, “Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar will establish an Independent Commission of Enquiry”, 31 May 2018 <<http://www.president-office.gov.mm/zg/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2018>>.

<sup>135</sup> President Office, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, “Establishment of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State”, 30 July 2018 <<http://www.president-office.gov.mm/zg/?q=briefing-room/statements-and-releases/2018/07/30/id-15251>>.

<sup>136</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “USDP-Led Alliance Protests Rakhine Investigation Commission”, 7 August 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/usdp-led-alliance-protests-rakhine-investigation-commission.html>>.

<sup>137</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Inquiry Commission to ask all those who were involved in Rakhine northern Rakhine State’s affairs”, 17 August 2018 <<https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2018/.html>>.

<sup>138</sup> Ties to the Independent Commission of Enquiry”, 11 August 2018 <<https://voicejournalmm.com/archives/12220>>.



State in June 2018<sup>139</sup> and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) called for Myanmar generals to be prosecuted for genocide<sup>140</sup> in August 2018. In response to the UNHRC's action against the military, thousands of Myanmar's Facebook users wrote anti-UNHRC-comments on the UNHRC's page within 24 hours, saying "*This is Fake News ... the UN lied.*"<sup>141</sup>

Viewing the Rakhine crisis as an assault on the sovereignty of Myanmar and as part of an Islamization plot, some Buddhist monks set up the MaBaTha in 2013<sup>142</sup> to protect race and religion. Many Myanmar Buddhists viewed the MaBaTha as the shield of Buddhism and the military as the shield of the race (nationalities). Some senior MaBaTha monks even called for voters not to vote for the NLD in the 2015 elections.<sup>143</sup> The MaBaTha was ordered to be abolished in 2017 and as a result, it changed its name to Dhamma Wantharnu Rakhita Association (DWRA))<sup>144</sup> — but in July 2018, it was again ordered to

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<sup>139</sup> "International Criminal Court Says Myanmar to Respond on Rohingya Case by July 27", 22 June 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/international-criminal-court-says-myanmar-to-respond-on-rohingya-case.html>>.

<sup>140</sup> *The Independent*, "Rohingya: UN calls for Myanmar generals to be prosecuted for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity", 27 August 2018 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/un-investigators-myanmar-latest-news-prosecuted-genocide-investigated-a8509466.html>>.

<sup>141</sup> UN Human Rights Council, "#Myanmar: Tatmadaw leaders must be investigated for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes — new report by UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission", 27 August 2018.

<sup>142</sup> Reuters, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist group moves toward Myanmar's mainstream", 1 September 2015 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-buddhists-insight/anti-muslim-buddhist-group-moves-toward-myanmars-mainstream>>.

<sup>143</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with MaBaTha monks in Mandalay and Mawlamyine (2–9 August 2018).

<sup>144</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "Ma Ba Tha to continue under new name", 29 May 2017, also known as "Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation" <<https://www.mmmtimes.com/national-news/yangon/26171-ma-ba-tha-to-continue-under-new-name.html>>.

be abolished.<sup>145</sup> MaBaTha monks<sup>146</sup> and nationalists repeatedly opposed amendments of provision 59(f) that has prohibited Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming the President of Myanmar.<sup>147</sup> Nationalists believe that the NLD wanted to weaken MaBaTha and the military so that the 2008 Constitution could be effectively amended or completely abolished with the help of pressure from international bodies such as the UN Security Council,<sup>148</sup> Responsibility to Protect,<sup>149</sup> the International Criminal Court (ICC)<sup>150</sup> and UN Human Rights Council.<sup>151</sup> This, they felt, would be to stab the military in the back.

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<sup>145</sup> The Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN), “Nationalist Buddhist group banned again in Myanmar”, 23 July 2018 <<https://www.ucanews.com/news/nationalist-buddhist-group-banned-again-in-myanmar/82894>>.

<sup>146</sup> Interview: “These Principles Are Necessary to Protect the Country”, 5 October 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/19118-nationalists-plan-rally-to-protect-59-f.html>>.

<sup>147</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Nationalists plan rally to ‘protect’ 59(f)”, 23 February 2016 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/19118-nationalists-plan-rally-to-protect-59-f.html>>.

<sup>148</sup> Channel News Asia (CNA), “UN Security Council team meets Myanmar’s Suu Kyi over Rohingya”, 1 May 2018 <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/un-security-council-team-meets-myanmar-s-suu-kyi-over-rohingya-10190946>>.

<sup>149</sup> Channel News Asia (CNA), “Myanmar has failed to protect Rohingya from atrocities: UN”, 19 October 2017 <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/myanmar-has-failed-to-protect-rohingya-from-atrocities-un-9322874>>.

<sup>150</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “International Criminal Court Says Myanmar to Respond on Rohingya Case by July 27”, 22 June 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/international-criminal-court-says-myanmar-to-respond-on-rohingya-case.html>>.

<sup>151</sup> *Washington Post*, “U.N. report calls for Myanmar generals to be prosecuted for genocide, war crimes”, 27 August 2018 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/un-report-calls-for-myanmar-generals-to-be-investigated-prosecuted-for-genocide-and-war-crimes/2018/08/27/>>.

## *The Peace Process*

In accordance with the 2008 Constitution,<sup>152</sup> the military junta had attempted to transform ceasefire groups into state-controlled Border Guard Forces (BGF) subordinate to the military's regional commanders before the 2010 general elections. The failure of negotiating efforts in April 2009 to convince the ceasefire groups to relinquish their power is what many believe sparked government attacks on certain ethnic armed groups.<sup>153</sup> The Thein Sein government strived for achieving peace starting in 2011 and the process continues up to this in what we now call "The Peace Process".

The NLD government held three Union Peace Conferences as part of the "21st Century Panglong Conference" process in August 2016,<sup>154</sup> in May 2017<sup>155</sup> and July 2018,<sup>156</sup> ratifying thirty-seven principles out of forty-one.<sup>157</sup> However, there are questions about the effectiveness of the outcome. On the ground, there was more fighting between the military and ethnic armed groups<sup>158</sup> and sometimes it grew more intense. Two

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<sup>152</sup> Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), "Defence Services", Chapter VII, Provision 338. *All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services.*

<sup>153</sup> Burma News International: Myanmar Peace Monitor, "Background and Overview" <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/background/background-overview>>.

<sup>154</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "21st Century Panglong Conference Kicks Off in Naypyidaw", 31 August 2016 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/21st-century-panglong-conference-kicks-off-in-naypyidaw.html>>.

<sup>155</sup> *Mizzima*, "Second Panglong conference sees significant breakthroughs", 1 June 2017 <<http://www.mizzima.com/news-opinion/second-panglong-conference-sees-significant-breakthroughs>>.

<sup>156</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "Panglong talks end on a positive note", 16 July 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/panglong-talks-end-positive-note.html>>.

<sup>157</sup> Ministry of Information, Myanmar, "37 points signed as part of Pyidaungsu Accord", 30 May 2017 <<http://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=announcement/30/05/2017/id-10756>>.

<sup>158</sup> Voice of America (VOA), "Fresh Fighting Another Setback to Myanmar Peace Process", 10 January 2018 <<https://www.voanews.com/a/civil-war-in-myanmar-continues/4201275.html>>.

additional ethnic armed groups, the New Mon State Party (NMSP)<sup>159</sup> and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU)<sup>160</sup> joined the nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) in February 2018,<sup>161</sup> but these are relatively small and not major ethnic armed groups. Taking the example of the UN's response to the crisis in Rakhine State, some ethnic groups such as Kachin,<sup>162</sup> Karen<sup>163</sup> and Rakhine<sup>164</sup> groups are planning to put more pressure on the government and the military by lodging their complaint letters to international organizations and the UN.

The Peace Process involves not only ethnic armed groups but also ethnic political parties and ethnic civil organizations. Hence, it can have an impact on the 2020 polls especially in ethnic areas as well as on civil–military relations. Many ethnic political parties are known to have close ties with ethnic armed groups and militia such as the SNLD and the SSPP (a Shan ethnic armed group),<sup>165</sup> the PNO and the Pa-O militia.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Myanmar Peace Monitor, “New Mon State Party”, <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/myanmar-peace-center/164-nmsp>>, its armed wing is Mon National Liberation Army (MNL).

<sup>160</sup> Myanmar Peace Monitor, “Peace meetings”, <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/peace-process>>.

<sup>161</sup> Frontier Myanmar, “NMSP, LDU formally sign Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement”, 13 February 2018 <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/nmsp-ldu-formally-sign-nationwide-ceasefire-agreement>>.

<sup>162</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Kachin Groups Urge UN to Refer Myanmar to ICC”, 24 April 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/kachin-groups-urge-un-refer-myanmar-icc.html>>.

<sup>163</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “KNU Concerned Group releases a statement to support the ICC's trail against Myanmar”, 14 September 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/knu-concerned-group-statement-09142018063307.html>>.

<sup>164</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “The crimes against Rakhine people to be lodged to international organizations, says United League of Arakan (ULA)”, 15 September 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/ula-statement-09152018064807.html>>.

<sup>165</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Shan State under watchful eyes”, 31 March 2017 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/by-election/25540-shan-state-under-watchful-eyes.html>>.

<sup>166</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Parties accuse Pa-O militia of threats and intimidation”, 29 October 2015 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/17256-parties-accuse-pa-o-militia-of-threats-and-intimidation.html>>.

In addition, political parties in Rakhine, Mon, Karen, Kayah and Kachin States are known to have close ties with ethnic armed groups within their own states. Ethnic armed groups view the 2008 Constitution as the main barrier to the creation of a genuine federal union that will allow for equal rights in Myanmar, pointing out Articles 6(f), 17(b) and 20(b) and (c) as giving the military too much power.<sup>167</sup> It was in hoping for the amendment of the 2008 Constitution that some ethnic armed groups urged their people to vote for the NLD in the 2015 elections.<sup>168</sup> In Shan State, in contrast, the SSPP<sup>169</sup> and the Pa-O<sup>170</sup> militia were accused of forcing their voters to vote for their own ethnic parties.

Some ethnic parties were not happy with the NLD for the way it offered Cabinet positions to leaders of some ethnic parties without consulting their own parties. These leaders included individuals such as Naing Thet Lwin from the Mon National Party (MNP), U Aye Thar Aung from the ANP and Sai Nyunt Lwin from the SNLD. From that point of view, some ethnic parties are suspicious that the NLD is using divide-and-rule policies to weaken ethnic parties. Since the progress of the peace process is slow and work towards the amendment of the Constitution is not visible, some ethnic people are disappointed with the NLD, viewing that the mindset of the NLD is no different from that of the military-backed USDP and that the NLD, the USDP and the military are no more than Bamar ethnic organizations.

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<sup>167</sup> Myanmar Peace Monitor, “Constitutional concerns for Ethnic rights”, <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/background/constitution>>.

<sup>168</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with ethnic political parties in Mon and Karen States and Yangon Region, 6–11 August 2018.

<sup>169</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “NLD campaign team threatened by armed group”, 31 March 2017 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/by-election/25547-nld-campaign-team-threatened-by-armed-group.html>>.

<sup>170</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Parties accuse Pa-O militia of threats and intimidation”, 29 October 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/17256-parties-accuse-pa-o-militia-of-threats-and-intimidation.html>>.

## *Civil–Military Relations*

Following the setting up of an independent inquiry commission on Rakhine State in July 2018<sup>171</sup> and the report of the UN Human Rights Council in August 2018<sup>172</sup> calling for the prosecution of Tatmadaw leaders over the Rakhine crisis, nationalists and the pro-military camp believe the NLD government to be putting pressure on the military by mobilizing international pressure. This view is not popular but has become louder and, looking at past experience and a review of current situation, this trend is serious and dangerous.

By voting for the NLD in every election, Myanmar people had been expressing their dislike for the military and military-related political parties, but this situation has changed. Many nationalists are not happy with the NLD's way of handling the crisis in Rakhine State, especially Aung San Suu Kyi personally, viewing her as the puppet of the international community, dominated by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the West. At the same time, the relationship between the military and ethnic armed groups especially in the northern part of Myanmar who have strong anti-Bamar sentiments has become tense. As a result, nationalists feel that their Buddhist religion is under threat from Islam and their race is in danger from ethnic armed groups who presumably hate the “Bamar” race.

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has expressed in his speeches that the military would help safeguard Buddhism<sup>173</sup> and would protect the national interests of

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<sup>171</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “Myanmar to Set up Inquiry Commission to Examine Human Rights Violations in Rakhine”, 31 May 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-to-set-up-inquiry-commission-to-examine-human-rights-violations-in-rakhine>>.

<sup>172</sup> UN Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar”, 27 August 2018, pp. 8 and 17.

<sup>173</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Snr Gen Min Aung Hlaing pledges to help safeguard Buddhism”, 24 June 2016 [www.myanmartimes.com/national-news/21035-snr-gen-min-aung-hlaing-pledges-to-heip-safeguard-buddhism](http://www.myanmartimes.com/national-news/21035-snr-gen-min-aung-hlaing-pledges-to-heip-safeguard-buddhism)>.

Myanmar.<sup>174</sup> As a result, more people have begun to view the military and the Constitution as protectors of race and religion, making some confused as to whom they should vote for in the next elections.

Civil–military relations in Myanmar go beyond voters’ views of the military. They also concern relations between the NLD and the military. Many are of the view that there are two parallel governments in Myanmar:<sup>175</sup> the elected NLD government and the military. The latter however has occasionally said that it is subject to the government<sup>176</sup> in accordance with the 2008 Constitution. There are many rumours that Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing do not have good personal relations. Officials from the NLD<sup>177</sup> and the military<sup>178</sup> occasionally tend to express the idea that NLD–Tatmadaw relations are fine. Min Aung Hlaing said in July 2018 that his relations with the government were good,<sup>179</sup> and Aung San Suu Kyi also said in August 2018 that her relations with the military were not bad.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief, “Every citizen has the duty to safeguard race, religion, cultural identities and national interest”, 28 October 2017 <<https://www.seniorgeneralminauhlaing.com.mm/en/2279/every-citizen-has-the-duty-to-safeguard-race-religion-cultural-identities-and-national-interest/>>.

<sup>175</sup> Eleven Media Group, “Constitution needs changing ‘as we have two governments’”, 5 May 2017 <<http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/9233>>.

<sup>176</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Is the President Truly Above the Commander-in-Chief?”, 1 June 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/editorial/president-truly-commander-chief.html>>.

<sup>177</sup> Personal meeting with an official from the NLD in Yangon, 25 April 2018.

<sup>178</sup> Tatmadaw True News Information Team <<https://www.facebook.com/Cincds/posts/information-released-by-the-tatmadaw-true-news-information-team-on-the-findings/>>.

<sup>179</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Relations with government good: Senior General”, 2 July 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/relations-government-good-senior-general.html>>.

<sup>180</sup> Reuters, “Myanmar’s Suu Kyi says relations with military ‘not that bad’”, 21 August 2018 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-myanmar-suukyi/myanmars-suu-kyi-says-relations-with-military-not-that-bad>>.

However, there have been some serious confrontations between the military and Aung San Suu Kyi's close aides<sup>181</sup> in 2017, and military representatives in the Myanmar Parliament have also protested against some NLD motions, including the creation of the position of State Counsellor position for Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>182</sup> One of the latest protests made by military's representatives was in June 2018 when the NLD government decided to include foreign experts in a new inquiry commission for human rights abuse in Rakhine State.<sup>183</sup> However, the military later pledged full cooperation with the commission.<sup>184</sup>

### *Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing*

One of the issues that can be raised in the run-up to the 2020 general elections would be whether Senior General Min Aung Hlaing could become the President of Myanmar or not. Since Myanmar has been beleaguered by perceived external threats because of the crisis in Rakhine

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<sup>181</sup> Frontier Myanmar, "U Win Htein backpedals on prosecution threat after military rebuke", 8 May 2017 <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/u-win-htein-backpedals-on-prosecution-threat-after-military-rebuke>> and *Myanmar Times*, "Yangon chief minister apologises to military chief: Tatmadaw", 17 July 2017 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/yangon/26823-yangon-chief-minister-apologises-to-military-chief-tatmadaw.html>>.

<sup>182</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "'State counsellor' bill approved despite military voting boycott", 5 April 2016 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/19844-military-protests-but-parliament-passes-state-counsellor-bill.html>>.

<sup>183</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "Who is Ruling the Country?: Military Representative", 12 June 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ruling-country-military-representative.html>>. Members of the new commission include two foreign and two Myanmar nationals: former Philippine deputy foreign minister Rosario Manalo, Japan's former UN representative Kenzo Oshima, the former chair of Myanmar's constitutional tribunal U Mya Thein and Dr Aung Tun Thet, who heads up the Myanmar government body dedicated to the Rohingya crisis.

<sup>184</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "Military Pledges Cooperation with Commission of Inquiry on Rakhine", 30 August 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/military-pledges-cooperation-commission-inquiry-rakhine.html>>.



State and by internal threat because of ethnic conflicts, nationalists widely view Min Aung Hlaing and the military as the guardians of Myanmar and call on him in social media to take care of the country. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's Facebook page had millions of followers before it was banned in August 2018. Regarding the crisis in Rakhine State, there were a series of pro-military protests in Yangon<sup>185</sup> and other cities in 2017 and in the response to the report of the UNHRC, members of the Myanmar Veterans' Organisation also launched pro-military protests in Yangon and Mandalay in September 2018.<sup>186</sup>

Current politics show that public support for the NLD especially in ethnic areas has become weaker though Aung San Suu Kyi still remains the most popular politician in Myanmar. There are also some predictions that the NLD may not win enough seats to set up the government in the 2020 elections, so the 25 per cent of the military representatives in the Union Parliament may play an important role as a deciding factor in selecting the President of Myanmar. Referring to the Constitution's provision 60,<sup>187</sup> regarding the possibility of Min Aung Hlaing becoming

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<sup>185</sup> Frontier Myanmar, "Big turnout at pro-Tatmadaw rally in Yangon after international condemnation", 30 October 2017 <<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/big-turnout-at-pro-tatmadaw-rally-in-yangon-after-international-condemnation>>.

<sup>186</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "Myanmar Veterans' Organization stages a pro-military protest", 13 September 2018 <<https://myanmar.mmtimes.com/news/115332.html>>.

<sup>187</sup> Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), Chapter III, The President and Vice-Presidents, provision 60. (a) The President shall be elected by the Presidential Electoral College. (b) The Presidential Electoral College shall be formed with three groups of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly) representatives as follows: (i) group formed with elected Hluttaw representatives in the Hluttaw with an equal number of representatives elected from Regions and States; (ii) group formed with elected Hluttaw representatives in the Hluttaw elected on the basis of township and population; (iii) group formed with the Defence Services personnel Hluttaw representatives nominated by the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services for the said two Hluttaws. (c) Each group shall elect a Vice-President from among the Hluttaw representatives or

the President in 2020, the *Irrawaddy* asked the spokesperson of the USDP in July 2018 what would happen if the USDP won the 2020 elections by 26 per cent and the combined USDP and military representatives could thus elect Min Aung Hlaing as the President. The spokesperson did not give an exact answer.<sup>188</sup>

When I met with USDP officials in Yangon and Mandalay in August 2018, I also asked them about the possibility of Min Aung Hlaing becoming President in 2020 with the support of the USDP. The officials did not reject this question outright, but did not give an exact answer either. Some analysts are of the view that Min Aung Hlaing may prefer the status quo in which the military has the upper hand under the 2008 Constitution. No one knows what the role of Min Aung Hlaing would be in 2020 but the Senior General's website showed him doing his routine work in September, visiting Shan State and meeting with military officers, trainees, other ranks and their families and local farmers there.<sup>189</sup>

## **VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA THAT REFLECT ON CURRENT POLITICS**

This section will contribute some thoughts on sensitivities in Myanmar's politics and how they may have an impact on the 2020 general elections.

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from among persons who are not Hluttaw representatives. (d) The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and a Body comprising the Heads and Deputy Heads of the two Hluttaws in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw shall scrutinize whether or not the Vice-Presidents possess the qualifications prescribed for the Presidency. (e) The Presidential Electoral College comprising all the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw representatives shall elect by vote one of the three Vice-Presidents who are Presidential candidates, as the President. (f) Necessary law shall be enacted for the election of President and Vice- Presidents.

<sup>188</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "USDP Talks 2020 Elections, Peace Process", 11 July 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/made-ready-fulfill-wishes-expectations-needs-people-usdp-spokesperson.html>>.

<sup>189</sup> Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services <[https://www.seniorgeneralminauhlaing.com. mm/en/](https://www.seniorgeneralminauhlaing.com.mm/en/)>.

According to Internet World Stats in 2017,<sup>190</sup> 33.4 per cent of the population of Myanmar is Internet users and most of them have Facebook accounts. Some may point out that information coming via Facebook is not reliable,<sup>191</sup> but no one can deny that Facebook has rapidly become the main communication tool in Myanmar. The views of general public below are summarized from daily monitorings of social and printed media and printed media (in Burmese), and from meetings with political parties and activists over 2011–12, and 2014 to date.

### *On Rakhine State*

#### Nationalists' Views

The Rakhine State is a domestic affairs and sovereignty issue. We do not trust Aung San Suu Kyi. She underestimates our race (Myanmar). She overestimates foreigners especially Westerners. Her title is the State Counsellor but with no foreign expatriate advice, she won't be able to manage the country. She always includes foreign experts in the Rakhine commissions. She is just an agent of the West. Muslims in the Rakhine State are supported by the United Nations (UN), International Organizations (INGOs) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and their birth rates are so high so one day, Muslims there will be majority in the Rakhine State and native ethnic people there will be the minority. Finally, it will lead to setting up the Islamic State in northern Rakhine State by extremists on Myanmar territory. Myanmar's sovereignty is now under threat. We do not need to care about the R2P (Responsibility to Protect) but we must care about our sovereignty. We will join with the military to protect Myanmar.

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<sup>190</sup> Internet World Stats, "Internet usage in Asia", 2017 <<https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia>>. As of 31 December 2017, Population: 53,855,735; Internet User: 18,000,000; Facebook User: 16,000,000.

<sup>191</sup> Nikkei Asian Review, "Myanmar faces onslaught of social media fake news", 30 May 2017 <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Myanmar-faces-onslaught-of-social-media-fake-news>>.

## Pro-NLD Views

Rakhine State is not domestic affairs. It goes beyond Myanmar. We trust in the wisdom of Aung San Suu Kyi. She is the daughter of our national hero and will never betray Myanmar. Due to her stance on the Rakhine State, her reputation especially in the West has already declined. She is not a puppet of the West but in order to convince the world, Myanmar needs to closely cooperate with UNs and INGOs and world-respected expatriates must be included in the commissions related to the Rakhine State to earn trust and confidence from the world. The R2P and the International Criminal Court (ICC) are not paper tigers. This is a real threat to the existence of Myanmar. Those who criticize Aung San Suu Kyi regarding the Rakhine State are ultra-nationalists. They just want to defame Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD and want the military-backed USDP to come back.

## *On the Peace Process*

### Pro-ethnic Views

Myanmar is said to be composed of 135 ethnic tribes, although key national institutions are dominated by the Bamar ethnic group. Since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, we have been fighting for equal rights and self-determination but by far, our goal to create genuine a federal union has not been reached. The main obstacle to creating a federal union is the military-controlled 2008 Constitution. We sided with the NLD in the 2015 elections since one of the major promises of the NLD was to amend the Constitution. However, no progress has been seen so far. Before the 2015 elections, the NLD repeatedly talked about “federal union” but when it won a landslide victory, only NLD members were appointed to Chief Minister positions of all ethnic states, failing to concede to the demand of ethnic parties who won a majority in Shan and Rakhine States. We worked closely with the NLD in hardest times under the military junta but the NLD has now forgotten us. Same as with the military and the USDP, the NLD is also just another Bamar organization and we suspect that Aung San Suu Kyi may even happen to like the Constitution which favours the Bamar majority. There might be some

hidden agreements between the military, the USDP and the NLD as they are all Bamar. We will urge our people to vote for our own ethnic parties in the next elections.

### Pro-NLD's Views

The NLD is composed of multiethnic people. It is not the Bamar party. The NLD mainly appointed ethnic people (but NLD members) to all ethnic states for Chief Minister positions. One of the vice-presidents and incumbent speakers of both the lower and upper houses are also ethnic people and Christians. We should now focus on the peace process and upon the success of peace process, we move on to the constitutional amendment. Amending the constitution is still one of NLD's key tasks and the President and the State Counsellor repeatedly reaffirmed it in their speeches. Leaders are not giving up the amendment of the Constitution and the NLD itself could not control the military because of restrictions in the Constitution. Be patient and wait for the right time. It is very important to realize that a powerful people-centred party can only counter the power of the military and can effectively get the constitutional amendment done. This is the NLD.

### *On the Economy and General Matters*

#### Some Public Issues

Commodity and fuel prices are rising. Job opportunities are evaporating. Plus, there are more taxes levied and the real estate market is not going well. The government services remain poor and are not improving. Many youths leave Myanmar to work in neighbouring countries as general workers and housemaids. In order to create a new and developed Myanmar, it is necessary to change people's mindset but none seems able to change. Crimes such as rapes and killings are on the rise. We feel our daily life is not safe. People's daily routines in the time of the previous Thein Sein government were more comfortable than under the current NLD one. What Myanmar now needs is a strong government led by a right person such as Lee Kuan Yew or Mahathir Mohamad. Or we need more leaders like Rodrigo Duterte. The nature of Myanmar people is to be submissive to the powerful person/group, which suits the military-

style administration. Next time, we are not voting for any one. We will just stay home and abstain from voting.

## Pro-NLD Views

Commodity prices cannot be controlled and they go up in every regime. Economics get slow because unlike previous government, the NLD government works more systematically in economics through rules and regulations. The NLD had no administrative experience so some works might be delayed but no major corruptions are reported. In addition, some senior officials in government departments appointed by previous regimes intentionally delayed current government works. As we all know, due to the current constitution, the NLD administration cannot control important government ministries that are mainly responsible for rules and laws such as the Ministry of Home Affairs. Some people simply express their discontentment with daily life but some intentionally provoke anti-government sentiments through rumours and hate speeches. The elections are drawing near and we hear more anti-Aung San Suu Kyi and anti-NLD voices especially in social media. This trend is not genuine and this may be a kind of plot to defame the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi. Suspects behind these plots are groups sponsored by or are close to the military, even former dictator Than Shwe. The more people are disappointed with the NLD administration, the greater likelihood they miss the military regime or want the USDP to fill the void. We will have to give more time to the NLD, at least next five years.

## **EMERGING POLITICAL CONFIGURATIONS**

### *The NLD in 2020*

Current political developments indicate that the NLD is more and more isolated in politics and that, instead of allying with other parties, it will travel alone<sup>192</sup> to win the 2020 general elections. It seems that

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<sup>192</sup> Frontier Myanmar, “NLD goes it alone, raising ethnic party ire”, 2 May 2016 <<http://www.dvb.no/news/shan-party-accuses-nld-neglecting-ethnic-minority-relations/78073>>.

the NLD has been more and more in confrontation with nationalists and ethnic political parties. In the past, before the 2015 elections, the NLD was strongly supported by the media,<sup>193</sup> celebrities,<sup>194</sup> civil society organizations<sup>195</sup> and ethnic armed groups,<sup>196</sup> and news, articles and comments that were negative to the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi were rarely seen in local print and social media. However, today, the situation may have been slightly changing. Because of the poor efficiency of the government in politics and economics, people started comparing the current NLD administration with the previous USDP one and criticizing the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi more. The trend has been more obvious in 2018 after Aung San Suu Kyi gave a lecture in Singapore in August 2018.<sup>197</sup> In response to a question related to the economics of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, intentionally or inadvertently, urged people to vote for the NLD in the 2020 elections. One Myanmar print media outlet reported the news with the heading that read, “Vote for the NLD in the 2020 general elections if you want business transactions in Myanmar

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<sup>193</sup> Reuters, “Myanmar media stack the deck for ‘Mother’ Suu Kyi ahead of polls”, 29 October 2015 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-election-media>>.

<sup>194</sup> Democratic Voice of Burma, “Actor Lu Min reprimanded for NLD endorsement”, 14 October 2015 <<http://www.dvb.no/news/actor-lu-min-reprimanded-for-nld-endorsement/58167>>.

<sup>195</sup> David I. Steinberg, “Myanmar civil society – new politics, new rules?”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 14 March 2016 <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/David-I-Steinberg-Myanmar-civil-society-new-politics-new-rules>>.

<sup>196</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with ethnic political parties in Yangon, Mon and Karen States, 6–11 August 2018.

<sup>197</sup> ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, “The 43rd Singapore Lecture by H.E. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, ‘Myanmar’s Democratic Transition: Challenges and Way Forward’”, 21 August 2018 <<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/event-highlights/item/8148-the-43rd-singapore-lecture-by-he-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-state-counsellor-of-the-republic-of-the-union-of-myanmar-myanmars-democratic-transition-challenges-and-way-forward>>.

to continue smoothly” on 22 August 2016.<sup>198</sup> There were thousands of comments underneath of the news within 24 hours and the majority were not in favour of the NLD. This trend is unprecedented, though many do not agree with anti-NLD comments in social media and view them as mostly fake accounts<sup>199</sup> set up to intentionally defame the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi personally.

Rakhine politicians think that Aung San Suu Kyi has a poor understanding of the on-the-ground situation in Rakhine State. Other ethnic politicians are of the view that Aung San Suu Kyi is manipulated by the military in the peace process. Some Muslim politicians take the view that Aung San Suu Kyi is practising surrender policies to the military in fighting for human rights. Many civilians are also disappointed with the NLD government especially over the rise of general commodity prices and the increase in crime rates. Some media,<sup>200</sup> celebrities,<sup>201</sup> civil society organizations and ethnic armed groups<sup>202</sup> started pointing out the NLD government’s flaws on a variety of topics. Starting from 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi has been touring the whole country to conduct series of talks with villagers, youth and students<sup>203</sup> on peace, development and

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<sup>198</sup> Eleven Media Group, “Vote for NLD in 2020 elections if Myanmar’s economic condition to be improved”, 22 August 2018 <<http://news-eleven.com/news/76343>>, this news got 3,225 comments within 24 hours from 22 to 23 August 2018.

<sup>199</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “Facebook vows to take action against fake news, hate speech”, 14 May 2018 <[mtimes.com/news/facebook-vows-to-take-action-against-fake-news-hate-speech.html](http://mtimes.com/news/facebook-vows-to-take-action-against-fake-news-hate-speech.html)>.

<sup>200</sup> Khit Thit Media, “Myanmar Herald Daily Burmese stopped”, 31 July 2018 <<http://khitthitmedia.xyz/>>.

<sup>201</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “ယောမင်းကြီးဖရိုတ် စကားပိုင်း” [U Phoe Chit, President of Central Myanmar Thabin Artists Association, Yaw Min Gyi Zayut Talks], 12 August 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/yawmingyizayat-talk.html>>.

<sup>202</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with ethnic political parties in Yangon, Mon and Karen States, 6–11 August 2018.

<sup>203</sup> *Myanmar Times*, “State Chancellor tells university students the virtues of reading”, 29 August 2018 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/state-chancellor-tells-university-students-virtues-reading.html>>.



education but some people view this as a kind of soliciting of votes ahead of the elections.

This situation does not mean the NLD is losing the majority<sup>204</sup> but it may face some risk in 2020. Because of Aung San Suu Kyi's charisma and personality cult following, the NLD will still enjoy majority support in the Bamar-dominated regions, but it will face more challenges in ethnic dominated states. In addition, Aung San Suu Kyi's health and security are often referred to reflective of the health and security of the NLD and of Myanmar's democratization. Any circumstances related to her health<sup>205</sup> and security<sup>206</sup> will definitely have an impact on politics.

### *The USDP in 2020*

Adopting a nationalist platform,<sup>207</sup> the USDP is currently more likely to strive to form a coalition network with small political parties in the regions and a network of friendly ties with ethnic parties to weaken the NLD's position in the run-up to the 2020 general elections.

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<sup>204</sup> I interviewed 40 people by phone and 40 through Facebook messenger while I was in Myanmar on 23–25 May 2018. 30 interviewees out of 40 by phone and 29 out of 40 through Facebook messenger said they voted for the NLD in the 2015 general elections and only 4 interviewees out of 80 by phone and Facebook messenger said they voted for the USDP. 10 interviewees out of 40 by phone and 19 out of 40 through Facebook messenger said they will vote again for the NLD in the 2020 general elections and only 4 interviewees out of 80 by phone and Facebook messenger said they would vote for the USDP. However, the rest of the 47 interviewees said they had not decided yet for the 2020 elections.

<sup>205</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Govt Denies Rumors of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s Paralysis”, 3 January 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/govt-denies-rumors-daw-aung-san-suu-kyis-paralysis.html>>.

<sup>206</sup> The President Office of Myanmar, “Request to the People”, 15 August 2018 <<http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/news/2018/08/16/id-8938>>.

<sup>207</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “‘You Can Label Us As Nationalist,’ USDP Chairman Says”, 21 March 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/can-label-us-nationalist-usdp-chairman-says.html>>.

Realizing the current political situation, the USDP seems to be laying down three strategies for developing friendly relations — towards the Buddhist majority,<sup>208</sup> the minority ethnic people and the military. In order to attract the majority “Bamar” Buddhist votes, the USDP pays attention to the crisis in Rakhine State by releasing joint statements together with small parties to criticize the NLD government stance on the situation in the state.<sup>209</sup> The USDP may welcome the rise of the new party led by former 88-generation student leaders since the new party is assumed to split the votes of the NLD. In order to win over minority ethnic peoples, the USDP hinted in its interviews that it may not compete in some ethnic areas in the 2020 elections.<sup>210</sup> As a gesture, the USDP decided to compete only for ten seats<sup>211</sup> out of thirteen seats in the by-elections in November 2018, setting out polls in Rakhine and Shan States. In order to maintain trust with the military, the USDP firmly adheres to “Our Three Main National Causes — non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuity of sovereignty”,<sup>212</sup> which are widely viewed as the propaganda of the previous military junta.

Currently, the USDP has kept pressuring the NLD government by releasing joint statements regarding the Rakhine State issue,<sup>213</sup> the peace

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<sup>208</sup> UNFPA Myanmar, “The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census: The Union Report: Religion,” July 2016, p. 03 ([https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNION\\_2-C\\_religion\\_EN\\_0.pdf](https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNION_2-C_religion_EN_0.pdf)).

<sup>209</sup> The Irrawaddy, “USDP and Allies Call on Security Council to Intervene,” 25 January 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/usdp-and-allies-call-on-security-council-to-intervene.html>.

<sup>210</sup> The Irrawaddy, “USDP Talks 2020 Elections, Peace Process,” 11 July 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/made-ready-fulfill-wishes-expectations-needs-people-usdp-spokesperson.html>.

<sup>211</sup> USDP, “Announcement on approving candidates for 2018 by-election,” 12 July 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/pyikhinephyomyanmar/>.

<sup>212</sup> New Light of Myanmar, “Our Three Main National Causes: 1) Non-disintegration of the Union, 2) Non-disintegration of National Solidarity & 3) Perpetuation of Sovereignty”, 24 April 2012.

<sup>213</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “USDP-Led Alliance Protests Rakhine Investigation Commission”, 7 August 2018.

process,<sup>214</sup> the UNHRC report on top military leaders and the closure of their Facebook accounts.<sup>215</sup> Citing rumours on current civil–military tensions, the USDP also warned the NLD in September 2018 that the government has the responsibility to prevent a military coup.<sup>216</sup>

### *Ethnic Political Parties in 2020*

Current trends give the best opportunity in the last thirty years for ethnic political parties to effectively challenge the NLD. The NLD is now under criticism from inside and outside Myanmar, and it will have to struggle with its critics throughout the election year. The USDP, the opposition, said it has now been transformed into a people-oriented party, but it is not easy to be accepted by the majority especially in ethnic areas since it is still led by former military generals with roots in the previous military junta. Some voters in the Bamar-dominated regions get confused about whom to vote for in 2020 but many voters in the ethnic-dominated states may turn away from the NLD to support ethnic political parties. In other words, hard times for the Bamar-majority parties means opportunity for the ethnic parties.

The current situation indicates that ethnic parties will merge more in the run-up in the 2020 general elections and strong ethnic parties that represent each state are likely to appear. There have been mergers among ethnic political parties in Kayah, Karen, Kachin and Mon States in 2017 and 2018. Not all ethnic parties are joining in the mergers though. For example, in Karen State, four Karen parties headquartered in Hpa-An merged into a single party but the powerful Phalon-Sawaw Party is not

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<sup>214</sup> BNI Multimedia Group, “14 Political Parties Oppose General Aung San Bridge Name”, 10 April 2017 <<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/mon-state/item/2931-14-political-parties-oppose-general-aung-san-bridge-name.html>>.

<sup>215</sup> *Mizzima*, “USDP calls for the government to firmly stand by the military (Tatmadaw)”, 29 August 2018 <<http://www.mizzimaburmese.com/article/42711>>.

<sup>216</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “NLD Must Act to Avoid Another Coup: USDP Spokesperson”, 17 September 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/nld-must-act-avoid-another-coup-usdp-spokesperson.html>>.

fully involved, along with two Karen parties headquartered in Yangon which are also still out of the merger. In addition, it should be noted that there were huge gaps between the votes received by the NLD and the combined votes received by all ethnic parties in some ethnic areas. For example, in Mawlamyine constituency of the Lower House of the Union Parliament in 2015, the NLD got 75,151 ballots while all Mon parties there together gained only 5,817 ballots.<sup>217</sup> Similar electoral results were also seen in the constituencies in Karen State in 2015. This indicates that even if ethnic parties merge into single strong parties, their combined votes may not compete well against the NLD. Not all ethnic constituencies can be assumed as having an ethnic majority and some ethnic constituencies such as Mawlamyine, Kyaikto, Thaton and Belin have larger Bamar ethnic populations,<sup>218</sup> and furthermore, the NLD won resounding victories there in every election.

From that point of view, there is likely to be a trend of establishing friendly relations between ethnic parties and the USDP as the USDP has said that it may not compete in the elections in some ethnic areas. There are also some predictions that after the 2020 elections, ethnic parties may play an important role in selecting the President of Myanmar in accordance with the Constitution, provided the NLD does not win enough seats to select the President. The NLD and the USDP may therefore court ethnic parties in the run-up to the elections. Because of their past experience with the NLD, the current situation may push some ethnic parties to get closer to the USDP.<sup>219</sup> Current politics have created a new

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<sup>217</sup> Union Election Commission, Union Election Commission, <<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၅အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>>.

<sup>218</sup> Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), General Administration Department, “Township Profile, Mon State & Karen State”, October 2017. Mon State (Mawlamyine: Bamar 147,218; Mon 50,285), (Kyaikto: Bamar 130,352; Mon 770), (Thaton: Karen 83,130; Bamar 76,764; Pa-O 50138; Mon 4,888), (Belin: Bamar 114,578; Karen 60,608; Mon 351), Karen State (Myawaddy: Karen 55,941; Bamar 55,189; Shan 10,674), (Kawkareik: Karen 88,418; Bamar 74,486; Mon 59,337).

<sup>219</sup> Field Research Mission, Meeting with ethnic political parties in Yangon, Mon and Karen States, 6–11 August 2018.

environment that favours ethnic parties, but the success of ethnic parties depends the extent to which they can effectively merge.

### *Civil–Military Relations in 2020*

Observers may not agree on the possibility of another military coup, pointing out that the military’s interests are guaranteed by the 2008 Constitution and staying behind the civilian government is as good for the military as staying in the front line; but the question is how long this situation will persist.

The ICC announced that it has launched a preliminary examination of Myanmar’s human rights violations in Rakhine State on 18 September 2018.<sup>220</sup> A report relating to human rights violations in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States released by the United Nations fact-finding mission also called for the removal of the top military leaders from Myanmar on 18 September 2018.<sup>221</sup> Since the ultimate goal of activists and pro-democracy elements is to remove the military from politics, this UN call is viewed by analysts as a divide-and-rule strategy to create misunderstandings between the NLD and the military. Myanmar is not located in the Middle East but judging from the experience of Iraq,<sup>222</sup> Libya<sup>223</sup> and Syria,<sup>224</sup> the situation appears to be serious. In fact, Myanmar

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<sup>220</sup> BBC News, “ICC opens Myanmar Rohingya crimes probe”, 19 September 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45568946>>.

<sup>221</sup> Radio Free Asia (RFA), “UN Report on Rohingya Crisis Calls For Removal of Myanmar Military From Politics”, 19 September 2018 <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/un-report-on-rohingya-crisis-09182018164955.html>>.

<sup>222</sup> *The Guardian*, “Iraq war was illegal and breached UN charter, says Annan”, 16 September 2004 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/16/iraq.iraq>>.

<sup>223</sup> BBC News, “Libya: UN backs action against Colonel Gaddafi”, 18 March 2011 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12781009>>.

<sup>224</sup> BBC News, “UN envoy: How the world failed Syria”, 26 August 2016 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-37192703/un-envoy-how-the-world-failed-syria>>.

people are used to international pressure and there is no doubt that any pressure relating to Rakhine State will make the military stronger and the civilian government weaker.

In future, the NLD government may face a difficult situation, caught as it is between increasing international pressure and the defiance of the military in face of that pressure. Amid concerns about a coup, the military-owned Myawaddy television broadcasted a documentary TV series on 18 September 2018, the thirtieth anniversary of the military coup, treating the 88 Uprising as what led to the coup.<sup>225</sup> The current trend indicates that the civil–military relation could be doomed at any time and rumours of the military coup will persist in the run-up to the 2020 general elections.

## CONCLUSION

Overshadowed by international pressure and political uncertainty, the 2020 Myanmar general elections will be the most challenging election for all parties involved. It is very clear that the NLD is adopting a more democratic platform focusing on the amendment of the Constitution<sup>226</sup> while the USDP follows a more nationalist line, emphasizing prevention of foreign interference regarding Rakhine State. Aiming at the 2020 elections, ethnic political parties in each state are merging into single parties and new political parties are now being registered.

Voters in Myanmar are in a dilemma. Many indicators suggest that the NLD is now in a defensive position. However, because of Aung San Suu Kyi’s personality cult and the ingrained hatred of the military dictatorship, the NLD is still expected to win the majority of seats in Bamar-dominated regions but is at risk in ethnic-dominated states.

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<sup>225</sup> MWD TV, “A TV documentary of the event of the 88 Uprising in which some people were beheaded by the mob in Yangon in August and September in 1988”, “သမိုင်းရေးစီမံ လှိုင်းကြီးလှေထန်ဖြစ်ရန်မှန်”, 18 September 2018 <<http://www.myanmarvchannel.com/mwd.html>>.

<sup>226</sup> *Mizzima News*, “The government says only when the Constitution is amended, current democratization will be granted”, 19 September 2018 <<http://www.mizzimaburmese.com/article/43322>>.

The NLD focused on the establishment of a federal democratic union in its election campaign speech<sup>227</sup> for the 3 November 2018 by-elections, broadcast on state-run television and radio on 10 September, while the USDP emphasized the territorial integrity and independence of Myanmar in its speech on 8 September 2018.<sup>228</sup> The NLD's slogans for the 2015 general elections and the 2017 by-elections were "Time for Change"<sup>229</sup> and "Continue the Change"<sup>230</sup> and the USDP's slogan of the 2018 by-elections is "Time to Think".<sup>231</sup> This trend will continue, but we will know if the voters will continue as before or rethink things only when the ballots are counted.

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<sup>227</sup> *Mizzima News*, "Continue to vote for the NLD to overcome the challenges", 11 September 2018 <<http://www.mizzimaburmese.com/article/43035>>.

<sup>228</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "USDP Vows to Protect Territory, Independence in By-Election Speech", 10 September 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/usdp-vows-protect-territory-independence-election-speech.html>>.

<sup>229</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "'Time for Change' says Opposition Leader Aung San Suu Kyi", 21 August 2015 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/news/time-for-change-says-opposition-leader-aung-san-suu-kyi>>.

<sup>230</sup> *Myanmar Times*, "NLD seniors weigh in on by-election campaigning", 3 March 2017 <<https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/yangon/25168-nld-seniors-weigh-in-on-by-election-campaigning.html>>.

<sup>231</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, "USDP Vows to Protect Territory, Independence in By-Election Speech", 10 September 2018 <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/usdp-vows-protect-territory-independence-election-speech.html>>.

**ISEAS**

**PUBLISHING**

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614  
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

TRS1/19s

ISBN 978-981-4843-36-2



9 789814 843362