

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Parties and their Significance in the Myanmar 2020 General Election**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Political parties in Myanmar are organized around two cleavages: notions of ethnicity, as represented by the struggle between Bama/Burman and other ethnic groups; and contrasting definitions of nationalism, i.e. the military's tenets of sovereignty, unity and stability as opposed to pro-democracy principles.
- Parties that will contest the upcoming general election may be grouped into multi-ethnic parties originating from and maintaining close links to the military; multi-ethnic parties stemming from the pro-democracy movement; and single-ethnic parties representing the interests of non-Bamar/Burman groups.
- Single-ethnic parties established during the protests and pro-democracy movement between 1988 to 1990 have strong links to the NLD. Those formed in 2010 to contest the general elections that year worked pragmatically with the USDP government between 2011 and 2015.
- The NLD's continued dominance in the polls is threatened by the single-ethnic parties. However, the latter's historically lacklustre electoral performance means that unless they act strategically, they may not garner enough votes to make a difference.

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## INTRODUCTION

About 100 political parties have registered to contest the general election in Myanmar that is to be held on 8 November. This article situates the multitude of political parties in the complex political landscape of the country and considers their role and significance in the upcoming general election.

The general consensus is that the election is the National League of Democracy's (NLD) to lose although it is unlikely that it will sweep the board as it did in the previous general election. The NLD's electoral performance will be determined by the way that it has managed the economy, its record on amending the 2008 Constitution, the increased armed conflict in various parts of the country, the deadlock in the nationwide peace process, and the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Early indicators of voters' confidence in the NLD may be gleaned from its performance in the by-elections in 2017 and 2018 when it only won nine out of 19 contested seats, and six out of 13 seats, respectively.

In addition, the NLD's loss in the by-election of 2017 of several seats to single-ethnic parties represents ethnic communities' dissatisfaction with the NLD's handling of ethnic demands for greater autonomy over territory, language and recognition.<sup>2</sup> Although single-ethnic parties have performed poorly in the general elections since 2010, they are the only players who may be able to thwart the NLD's dominance in the elections.<sup>3</sup> Given the poor track record of single-ethnic parties though, it is unlikely that they will pose a genuine threat to the NLD's election performance.

## THE SEATS UP FOR ELECTION

There are 1,171 seats up for election at the national, regional and state levels. At the national level, the Assembly of the Union (*Pyidaungsu Hluttaw*) – the national-level legislature of Myanmar – is made up of two bodies: the House of Nationalities (a 224-seat upper house, *Amyotha Hluttaw*) and the House of Representatives (a 440-seat lower house, *Pyithu Hluttaw*). Three quarters (498) of the national seats in each House are filled through elections; the remaining seats (166) are filled by army representatives selected by the Commander-in-Chief, as enshrined in the 2008 Constitution.

At present, the NLD holds about 80 per cent of the available seats in the upper and lower houses; the military-backed USDP about 10 per cent, the Arakan National Party (ANP) about 4 per cent and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) about 3 per cent. The rest of the seats are spread out among eight single-ethnic parties, independents, and the National Unity Party (NUP).

At the regional level, elections will take place in the 14 major administrative regions and states, and altogether, 644 regular seats and 29 for ethnic minorities will be contested. Myanmar is divided into 21 administrative subdivisions (by state, region, union territory, self-administered zone, self-administered division). Members will be elected to the 14 administrative areas, i.e. seven regions and seven states (see map in Figure 1), each with their own Assembly (Region *Hluttaw* or State *Hluttaw*). Once elected, parliamentarians will also be involved in the Leading Body in self-administered zones and divisions. The regions – Ayeyarwady, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Yangon – are

predominantly ethnically Bamar. The states – Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan – on the other hand, have higher proportions of non-Bamar ethnic populations.

**Figure 1: Administrative Map of Myanmar**



The NLD dominates in the state and regional assemblies as well except in Rakhine State and Shan State. The Arakan National Party (ANP) has the most number of seats in the Rakhine State parliament. It is worth noting that the number of single-ethnic parties is larger (17) at the state and regional level than at the national level (10).

## **HOW PARTIES ARE ORGANIZED IN MYANMAR**

The numerous political parties in Myanmar are not organized around class or religion. Instead, they are divided along two cleavages. The first centres around ethnicity and is most commonly manifested as the contestation between Bama/Burman and other ethnic groups. The second divide centres around notions of nationalism – the military’s (sovereignty, unity and stability) and that of pro-democracy groups. At present, the former is most widely represented by the military and its political party, the USDP, and the latter by Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD.

Thus, parties may be grouped in the following ways: multi-ethnic parties that originate from and maintain close links to the military; multi-ethnic parties that stem from the pro-democracy movement; and smaller single-ethnic parties representing the interests of non-Bamar (non-Burman) groups.<sup>4</sup> The first two groups are usually referred to as political parties and the latter as ‘ethnic’ parties. I have refrained from using these terms as they promote the view that the Bamar ethnic group and its interests represent those of Myanmar in general, thereby framing the interests of non-Bamar ethnic groups as being unrelated to the rest of the Myanmar populace.

### **MULTI-ETHNIC PARTIES WITH CLOSE LINKS TO THE MILITARY**

This group of military parties is dominated by the USDP. The USDP was formed in 2010 as a way for many of the country’s former military leaders to participate in the general election that year. It won the 2010 elections (which was boycotted by the NLD) and under President U Thein Sein implemented many political and economic changes during its term as the ruling party. It currently styles itself as the opposition to the NLD government.

Other parties in this group include the National Unity Party (NUP) and the Union Betterment Party (UBP). The NUP is the successor of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which was formed by Ne Win’s military regime which seized power in 1962. It was the only political party allowed to exist legally in Myanmar under military rule (1964 to 1988). Like the USDP in 2010, the NUP was founded in 1988 as a proxy party of the military and the BSPP in order to contest the 1990 general election. Although the NLD won in 1990, the military junta nullified the result.

The UBP was formed in early 2019 by Shwe Mann, a former top general previously affiliated with the USDP, and former Speaker of Parliament. November will be the first time that this party participates in an election.

Since 2015, representation of military interests has to a large extent relied on the 25 per cent of parliamentary seats reserved for military appointees.

## **MULTI-ETHNIC PARTIES STEMMING FROM THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT**

The NLD is the forerunner of the democracy parties and the current ruling party. Born out of a series of protests in 1988, the NLD was formed with Aung San Suu Kyi as leader and with the aim of establishing multi-party democracy in the country. The NLD won decisively in the 1990 general election but the military junta nullified the result and kept Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for almost 15 years. In 2010, the NLD boycotted the general election but participated in the 2012 by-elections and the 2015 general election, winning the overwhelming majority of the votes in the latter.

Other parties in this group include the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the People's Party (PP). The latter was formed in 2018 by Ko Ko Gyi, one of the leaders of the student protests in 1988 and is supported by some former members of the NLD.

Interestingly, several new democracy parties such as the NDF, formed as a splinter group from the NLD for the purpose of electoral participation, won a number of seats in 2010 but were defeated by older movement parties such as the NLD in the 2015 election. Given the choice between the NLD and these newer parties, voters chose to put their faith in the NLD. The question now is whether this will continue to be the case in November.

## **SINGLE-ETHNIC PARTIES**

The common factor in this group is the belief that the interests of non-Bamar ethnic groups are best represented by non-Bamar ethnic parties. In addition, such parties are mostly organized around the idea of greater autonomy or a stronger federal system.<sup>5</sup> However, they are highly diverse, varying in size, ideology and affiliation.

One of the ways of distinguishing between these parties is the era in which they were founded. Those parties created between 1988 and 1990 have had strong links to the NLD. These include the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), the Mon National Party (MNP) the Arakan Patriotic Party (APP) among others. In 2010, these parties were prevented from re-registering or refused to participate in elections as a protest against the 2008 Constitution. In 2002, this group formed an alliance of ethnic parties called the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA).

On the other hand, single-ethnic parties created in 2010 to contest the general elections that year engaged pragmatically with the USDP government between 2011 and 2015. They include the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP), the Chin Progressive Party (CPP), the Chin National Party (CNP), the Phalon- Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP), and the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP). They formed the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF) in 2010. Once again, it is interesting to note that many of these parties were represented in the union parliament from 2010 to 2015 but performed poorly in 2015 when the UNA parties also contested the election.

Another way of differentiating between these parties is the spatial concentration of the electorate they represent. Many of the larger single-ethnic parties such as the SNLD represent a sizeable ethnic group spread out across the country. In contrast, there are minor single-ethnic parties representing small ethnic groups that are spatially concentrated in a

few electoral districts within ethnic states. These include the Kokang Democracy and Unity Party, the Lahu National Development Party, the Pa-O National Organization, the Ta'arng (Palaung) National Party, and the Wa Democratic Party in Shan State.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, these smaller ethnic groups won seats in the last general election but their major ethnic counterparts such as the Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, and Mon remained under-represented. Nevertheless, apart from the SNLD and the ANP, on the whole, most single-ethnic parties performed poorly in 2015, winning only 9 per cent of the seats. In fact, their track record has been lacklustre. At the union level, ethnic parties won 11 to 15 per cent of the seats in the 1990, 2010, and 2015 elections. Given that about a third of the population identifies as part of an ethnic minority, this means that, historically, single-ethnic parties have not managed to provide adequate representation for non-Bamar ethnic groups.<sup>7</sup>

Single-ethnic parties are at a disadvantage in that small, ethno-regional parties tend not to do well in single-member plurality-rule elections.<sup>8</sup> They run the risk of splitting the vote and diluting the vote share of lesser-known parties. In fact, one of the reasons the Arakan National Party (ANP) became the third most popular party in the 2015 elections was because it was formed from the merging of the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) with the new Rakhine National Development Party (RNDP). As a result, many ethnic parties have now decided to merge in preparation for the 2020 elections. Additionally, pragmatic parties will probably avoid fielding candidates in highly competitive constituencies.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Will the 2020 general elections cement the NLD's rule or will voters seek more plurality in representation?

The NLD continues to be popular but there are some signs of voter dissatisfaction, particularly in the ethnic states. The NLD faces the possibility of losing its majority, and in this, it is the single-ethnic parties that pose a challenge. However, since single-ethnic parties have performed poorly historically. Whether they will pose a genuine threat now hinges on who non-Bamar voters believe can best champion their interests—the NLD or the single-ethnic parties.

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<sup>2</sup> Tan, N. and Preece, C. (2020). "Electoral System, Ethnic Parties, and Party System Stability in Myanmar." *The European Journal of Development Research* 32(2):431–456.

<sup>3</sup> Nyi Nyi Kaw. (2019). "Old and New Competition in Myanmar's Electoral Politics". *ISEAS Perspective* No. 104. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Kempel, S., Chan Myaw Aung Sun and Aung Tun. (2015). *Myanmar Political Parties at a Time of Transition: Political party dynamics at the national and local level*. Yangon: Pyoe Pin Programme.

<sup>5</sup> Lall, M., Nwe Nwe San, Theint Theint Myat, and Yin Nyein Aye. (2015). *Myanmar's Ethnic Parties and the 2015 Elections*. European Union: International Management Group (IMG).

<sup>6</sup> Transnational Institute. (2015). *The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?* Amsterdam: TNI Myanmar Policy Briefing.

<sup>7</sup> Stokke, K. (2020). “Political Representation by Ethnic Parties? Electoral Performance and Party-Building Processes among Ethnic Parties in Myanmar”. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38(3): 307–336.

<sup>8</sup> Selway, J. (2015). “Ethnic Accommodation and Electoral Rules in Ethno-Geographically Segregated Societies: PR Outcomes Under FPTP in Myanmar Elections”. *Journal of East Asian Studies* 15 (3): 321–360.

<sup>9</sup> Tan, N. and Preece, C. (2020). “Electoral System, Ethnic Parties, and Party System Stability in Myanmar.” *The European Journal of Development Research* 32(2):431–456.

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