

PERSPECTIVE

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Elections or War? The Dilemma Facing Rakhine State

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Rakhine State continues to be a hot potato in Myanmar politics.
- Elections likely will not be held in constituencies in northern Rakhine State on 8 November 2020. Should this eventuate, Rakhine people's distrust towards Myanmar's electoral democracy will worsen.
- Disunited as they are, ethnic Rakhine parties and politicians are not in a position to launch a united political front against the ruling National League for Democracy in the 2020 elections.
- Rakhine ethnonationalism seeks self-determination and autonomy from alleged Bamar domination in Rakhine State. In 2020, this quest faces a stark choice between electoral democracy or war.
- Ethnic Rakhines now see themselves on the losing side in Myanmar's 'democratic' transition since 2010. Myanmar must brace itself for more armed conflict in Rakhine State after the elections.

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INTRODUCTION

In Myanmar's transition to democracy, the politics of Rakhine State has been a hot potato. With less than a month to the general elections on 8 November 2020, two questions merit consideration:

1. Will parliamentary elections be held in all constituencies in Rakhine State on 8 November?
2. What will happen if elections are cancelled in some parts of the state?

This paper argues that elections will most likely be cancelled in northern Rakhine State if the fierce fighting between rebels belonging to the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military or Tatmadaw continues. The recent spike in Covid-19 cases in Rakhine State and the ensuing lockdowns, curfew, and movement restrictions in several townships across the state have lessened the likelihood of polling taking place there on November 8.

The political party configuration in 2020 is also different from what it was in 2015. More Rakhine ethnic parties have emerged, in competition against each other as well as against the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party. At a time when party mergers are taking place in other ethnic regions of Myanmar,¹ the disunited Rakhine parties and politicians have their task cut out to compete for seats in southern Rakhine State. Three Rakhine parties and the NLD will likely share seats in the post-election parliament at both Union and Rakhine state levels. People in Rakhine will therefore see their voice and representation diminished in the Union of Myanmar. Such a scenario will only increase distrust in electoral democracy among ethnic Rakhines, and may even tip them further towards armed rebellion.

THE PRESENT LANDSCAPE OF RAKHINE POLITICS

Rakhine State is composed of 17 townships – nine in the north including capital Sittwe, and eight in the south. The state has 17 lower house seats, 12 upper house seats, and 34 state parliament seats. In 2014, Rakhine State had 3.2 million residents – 2.1 million Rakhines and 1.1 million Rohingyas.² After about 750,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh from August 2017, Rakhines now constitute the absolute ethnic majority in Rakhine State. Most if not all of the remaining Rohingyas in the state no longer have voting rights. The Rohingyas are thus not in a position to challenge Rakhine parties in constituencies in northern Rakhine State via voting for non-Rakhine parties, their own Rohingya party (Democracy and Human Rights Party), or independent Rohingya candidates, like most of them did in 2010.

Therefore, there are only three main players on the stage at the moment. They are the Rakhines (both the AA and Rakhine ethnic parties), the Tatmadaw, and the ruling NLD.

Taking a different approach from the AA, which has been engaged in armed rebellion for autonomy, self-determination, or secession against the Tatmadaw and the state of Myanmar, Rakhine parties position themselves against the NLD. However, strong ethnonationalist sentiments unite the AA, Rakhine parties, and many ordinary Rakhines. They allege that the central state and Tatmadaw are in the hands of the Bamar ethnic majority and thus the Bamar dominate the Rakhine.

In the eyes of the Rakhines, the ruling NLD is a Bamar-dominated party based at the centre complicit in the Tatmadaw's war against AA. The Myanmar Anti-Terrorism Central Committee declared the AA both a terrorist group and an unlawful association on 24 March 2020.³ Myanmar's State Counsellor and de facto leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who also chairs the NLD, issued a statement on 21 April 2020 strongly condemning the AA as a terrorist group and paying tribute to Tatmadaw soldiers fighting AA rebels.⁴ This, in the eyes of the AA and its Rakhine supporters, puts the NLD and Tatmadaw on the same page.

In electoral or democratic politics, Rakhine-Bamar relations, especially in terms of party-to-party relations, have not been good since 2010. Relations were relatively better during the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) administration in 2011–15, with the USDP focusing more on countering the opposition then led by the NLD, and having a right-wing anti-Rohingya stance. These attitudes somehow created a unity of purpose between the USDP and Rakhines. However, Rakhine-Bamar relations deteriorated after the NLD won the 2015 general elections and took office in 2016. The NLD came up against the most popular Rakhine ethnic party, the Arakan National Party (ANP), which was outspoken in its advocacy for Rakhine rights.

Five issues stand out as the thorniest in NLD-ANP interactions. First, the NLD's appointment of its own member U Nyi Pyu as Chief Minister of Rakhine State in March 2016 despite the ANP's landslide win of 22 out of 35 seats in the Rakhine State parliament in November 2015 elections, resulted in strong opposition from the ANP.⁵ Second, the ANP objected – on nationalistic grounds – to the inclusion of three non-Myanmar representatives on the nine-member Advisory Commission on Rakhine State formed by the NLD in August 2016 and led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.⁶ Third, the NLD neglected ANP recommendations for constitutional reform (which were based on federalism principles) when the NLD initiated a parliamentary constitutional amendment process in 2019.⁷ Fourth, the NLD government issued a stern warning in January 2019 to Rakhine people, implicitly including the ANP, not to support the AA after the government had issued an order to “crush the [AA] terrorists”.⁸ Fifth, the shutdown of the internet in eight townships in Rakhine State for stated reasons of security lasted more than a year starting June 2019.⁹ Although the shutdown ended on 2 August 2020, the slow 2G internet connection has

hampered the connectivity of residents in those eight townships as well as Paletwa township in Chin State.¹⁰

Also in August 2020, the first cases of Covid-19 were found in Rakhine (in mid-August), as a second wave of the pandemic began in Myanmar. The following lockdown¹¹ and movement restrictions posed further logistical challenges for Rakhine parties. Campaigning has gone online; many candidates fielded by the three parties and several other independent candidates have taken to Facebook, the most popular social media in Myanmar.¹² But the reach of their electoral Facebooking is limited as many if not most of their voters in Rakhine State are living under Covid-19 restrictions and with limited connectivity.

Rakhine State politics thus presents a contested landscape in 2020. While the NLD and the ANP have been at loggerheads over the past four years, armed Rakhine ethnonationalism helmed by the AA has aggressively transformed parts of Rakhine State into a warzone.

WILL ELECTIONS BE HELD IN ALL CONSTITUENCIES IN RAKHINE STATE?

Thirty young Rakhines established the AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), in Laiza, Kachin State in April 2009. The USDP's political, economic and administrative reforms, particularly the liberalization of the telecommunications industry in 2013, gave the new Rakhine ethnonationalist army wider operating space, physically and virtually linking it more to Rakhine brethren in Rakhine State and across Myanmar. Although the AA launched a full-blown rebellion only in 2019, the political conflict between the NLD and the ANP and the marginalisation of Rakhines in parliament and in the governance of Rakhine State, had been grounds for deepening distrust in electoral democracy among Rakhines since 2016.

Several events in 2018 and 2019 added to this slow-burning distrust: a heavy-handed police crackdown on a Rakhine protest in Mrauk U in January 2018 that killed seven protesters;¹³ the immediate arrest of ANP Chairman U Aye Maung for alleged high treason,¹⁴ followed by a 20-year prison sentence in March 2019.¹⁵ In response, the AA's young, educated, eloquent, and media-friendly chief Twan Mrat Naing (Tun Myat Naing in Burmese) and deputy chief Nyo Tun Aung mounted a Rakhine nationalist campaign online and in the community among disgruntled Rakhines, and started propagating notions of *Arakan Dream 2020* and *The Way of Rakhita (Patriot)* that would pave the way for Rakhine self-determination from 2020 onwards.¹⁶

The AA had reportedly infiltrated into southern parts of Chin State first and later into the far north of Rakhine State since 2014. The sporadic fighting between the AA and Tatmadaw escalated into the most serious form of armed conflict between the two, starting in January 2019. The *Annual Peace & Security Review 2020* published by the Myanmar Institute for

Peace and Security reported that there were 654 clashes in northern Rakhine State and Paletwa township in Chin State in 2019.¹⁷ Over a thousand combatants from both sides¹⁸ and 86 civilians were killed,¹⁹ and 176 civilians wounded.²⁰ In late 2019 and early 2020, Tun Myat Naing's family members were arrested in various locations for allegedly assisting the AA: brother Aung Myat Kyaw in Singapore, sister Moe Hnin Phyu and brother-in-law Kyaw Naing in Yangon, and wife Hnin Zar Phyu and two children in Thailand.²¹ These arrests seemed to confirm the AA's perception of the NLD government as being complicit and on the side of Tatmadaw. Consequently, the AA became more confrontational, and retaliated by kidnapping and detaining NLD member of parliament Hawi Ting (an ethnic Chin) in November 2019 and the head of the NLD's Buthidaung township branch Ye Thein in December.²²

As of July 2020, the conflict in Rakhine has displaced 190,000 people; 62,000 are in internally displaced person (IDP) camps and the rest are scattered across Rakhine State.²³ The fighting has continued, showing no signs of abating, even after the Covid-19 pandemic hit Rakhine State in mid-August at the beginning of a second wave in Myanmar. Although Myanmar's Union Election Commission had initially committed to hold elections in conflict-stricken parts of Rakhine and Chin states, the electoral management body started hinting otherwise in late July 2020.²⁴ Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun, spokesperson of the Tatmadaw, said on 4 September that they had suggested to the UEC that elections not be held in northern Rakhine State.²⁵ Considered together, these developments present a basis for an argument that elections will most likely not be held in northern Rakhine State on 8 November 2020, although an official statement may be forthcoming only closer to the election date.

DISUNITY AMONG PARTIES AND POLITICIANS WEAKENS RAKHINES

Over the past three decades, Rakhine ethnic parties have won a majority of seats in the local assembly. The Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) won 11 seats in the 1990 elections,²⁶ the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) won 16 seats in the 2010 elections,²⁷ and the ANP 22 seats²⁸ in the 2015 elections. Rakhine ethnicity was undeniably a decisive factor behind the popularity of ALD, RNDP, and ANP. No less important than Rakhine ethnicity, however, is the consideration that there was only one dominant Rakhine ethnic party contesting in all the three elections. When the ALD did not contest the 2010 elections, the RNDP took its place. The ALD and the RNDP merged into the ANP in 2014 upon pressure by Rakhines, and became the most successful ethnic party in the November 2015 elections.

ALD-RNDP unity in the ANP proved short-lived, however. The ALD faction broke away citing unequal distribution of power between the two factions. It re-registered as the ALD in July 2017. Worse tidings for Rakhine unity followed. RNDP Chairman U Aye Maung,

who had also served as the ANP's chairman, resigned from the ANP in November 2017 alleging party in-fighting,²⁹ but the ANP treated U Aye Maung's resignation as a suspension. U Aye Maung's political career reached a nadir two months later, when he was arrested for treason. In May 2020 the UEC stripped him of his status as a lawmaker and barred him from running in elections. Still, U Aye Maung steered the registration process for a new party, the Arakan Front Party (AFP), in January 2019, while serving his prison sentence.

The 2020 elections will thus see three Rakhine ethnic parties competing against one another. The three parties are also competitors in other ways. The ALD and the AFP now are ex-ANP outfits. After U Aye Maung left the ANP, at least ten ANP members of parliament reportedly sought to resign in vain.³⁰ The ANP has barred the resignation of seven sitting MPs, and has also created additional barriers for those interested in contesting the 2020 elections under other party banners. Forced to run as independent candidates, these candidates would face financial and administrative/logistical challenges to going solo.³¹

Not least, the NLD is not a negligible force in Rakhine State, despite the widespread Rakhine view that it is a Bamar or Bamar-dominated party. The ANP's decisive victory in 2015 did not entirely push out the NLD's presence; it still won 3 lower house seats, 1 upper house seat, and 8 Rakhine State parliament seats – all in southern Rakhine State where the ALD is also said to be popular. Should elections be cancelled in northern constituencies, southern Rakhine State may see intense competition between the NLD, the ANP, the AFP and the ALD. In preparation for an unlikely scenario of elections in all Rakhine constituencies, the ANP and the NLD have registered candidates for all 63 seats in Rakhine State, but the AFP and the ALD are only fielding 42 seats and 26 seats, respectively.

Among the three Rakhine parties, the AFP has similar nationalist rhetoric to the ANP, making the choice between them difficult for Rakhine voters. The only possible Rakhine political 'partner' for the NLD post-2020 may be the ALD. There has been a legacy of cooperation between the NLD and the ALD since the 1990 elections. In 2016, the NLD-dominated parliament appointed U Aye Thar Aung of the ANP's ALD faction as Deputy Speaker of the Upper House.³² Notably, Dr Tin Mar Aung, former personal aide to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and daughter of ALD founder Dr Saw Mra Aung, is running in November 2020 a seat in Rakhine State parliament on the ALD ticket.³³

While it is clear that the NLD may not expect to win in Rakhine, who will turn out as the winner in Rakhine State is still difficult to forecast. What is certain though is that post-2020 Myanmar will see diminished Rakhine representation at the Union level and a more powerless Rakhine State parliament.

CONCLUSION

Faced with a binary choice between all-out war or electoral democracy, there seems to be no satisfactory political solution for Rakhine ethnonationalism.

There are two possible scenarios for Rakhine State post-2020. Following an NLD win at the Union level enabling it to dominate the parliament and form a cabinet, the party may strike a deal with the ALD by appointing someone from or approved by that Rakhine party, and leave Rakhine politics in the hands of Rakhines. If the NLD does not win a majority and has to form a coalition with one or more ethnic parties, there will be more uncertainties for Myanmar's political future. The clear continuities now are Rakhine distrust in electoral democracy, and armed conflict in Rakhine.

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- ²⁶ The 1990 elections were held for the unicameral parliament. The NLD won in a landslide, but the military junta in power then did not transfer power to the party. It is noteworthy that the NLD also won nine seats in Rakhine State, only two seats less than the ALD.
- ²⁷ The 2010 elections were held for the bicameral union parliament known as Pyidaungsu Hluttaw that comprises Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) and Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House). The RNDP won 9 lower house seats and 7 upper house seats.
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