

PERSPECTIVE

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Myanmar’s Current Politics: Implications for the 2020 General Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Developments relating to Rakhine State, the peace process and the possible emergence of a “third force” as a strong new political party will shape Myanmar’s political landscape between now and the general elections projected for 2020.
- Religious nationalism in Bamar-dominant regions has been increasing in response to the NLD government’s handling of the crisis in Rakhine State.
- Ethnic-based nationalism in states dominated by ethnic nationalities has also been increasing in response to the NLD government’s approach to the peace/ceasefire negotiations.
- In preparation for the November 2018 by-elections, and the 2020 general elections, popular former student leaders of the “88 Generation” have formed a new political party.
- The NLD will need to take these developments into consideration to maintain its electoral legitimacy.

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INTRODUCTION

At the mid-way mark of the NLD government's first term in office, political parties and ambitious politicians are now preparing for Myanmar's 2020 general elections. The local media reflects this interest in the 2020 elections in the topics and discussions that are carried on there.¹

The politics of Myanmar ahead of the 2020 general elections are likely to be shaped by identity politics rooted in the sense that Buddhism is being degraded; issues relating to religion exacerbated by the Rakhine State crisis; ethnic politics related to fears of Burmanization among minorities and to the peace process; and the rise of what local media have coined 'the third force'² appearing in the form of a powerful new political party.

Myanmar has already seen three general elections since 1990. Except for the 2010 general elections which National League for Democracy (NLD) boycotted, general public support for the NLD ahead of the 1990 and 2015 general elections was easy to read.³ Predicting who would win was easy.

Will this be the case again in the run-up to the 2020 general elections? The article offers some thoughts on this question.

THE RISE OF A NATIONALISM BASED ON RELIGION

Before the 2010 democratization process began, the general discontent of Myanmar's people was aimed at the ruling military junta. After 2011, as the political situation changed, people began to focus on democratic reforms instead.

In 2012 and 2013, severe cases of communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims broke out in Rakhine State.⁴ The violence spilled out of Rakhine State to places such as Meikhita,⁵ Lashio⁶ and Okkan.⁷ Amid calls from some majority Barmars for the protection of their race and religion, the 969 movement⁸ emerged and led to the creation in 2013 of the Organization for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha),⁹ led by Buddhist monks. MaBaTha proposed four laws¹⁰ on interfaith relations. They were passed by Myanmar's Hluttaw (Parliament) and approved by President U Thein Sein,¹¹ while the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi objected to them.¹² MaBaTha was unhappy with the NLD but grateful to the President's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

Before the 2015 general elections, some influential monks called for Buddhists not to vote for those who had opposed the enactment of the four laws on interfaith relations, referring to the NLD.¹³ This call did not work, however, and the NLD won a landslide victory. After the NLD took office, it dissolved MaBaTha in 2017. After being declared illegal, MaBaTha changed its name to "Dhamma Wantharnu Rakhita Association (DWRA)"¹⁴ and continued its activities. The DWRA was ordered on 20 July 2018 to stop its activities and to take down its signboards within 45 days¹⁵. Its spokesperson said on 22 July 2018 that the DWRA is a legitimate organization¹⁶ and so would not be dissolved.

The crisis in Rakhine State heated up again in 2017, when the insurgent Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked Myanmar security forces in northern Rakhine State¹⁷, occasioning one of the strongest responses from the military. The NLD government established an international advisory commission to find long-term solutions to the problem. Nationalists and Arakan National Party (ANP) were not happy with the NLD government’s response, and complained that State Counsellor ASSK had yielded too much to Western pressure and was counting on foreign advice in solving domestic problems, especially those in Rakhine State.¹⁸ She had once acknowledged that solving the Rakhine State conundrum required listening to the Rakhine people’s voice. But the NLD government has not managed to maintain a constructive relationship with the ANP, which controls the majority of the seats in the Rakhine State Assembly.¹⁹ ANP-NLD relations reached a new low point when the vice chairperson of the ANP, (Daw) Aye Nu Sein, gave a speech at the 3rd session of the Union Peace Conference in Nay Pyi Taw on 11 July 2018²⁰ which was widely viewed as being critical of the NLD government. While attendees cheered her speech, whether in support or out of courtesy, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the President were not seen joining the applause.²¹

THE MEIKTILA ELECTION AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

The NLD’s 2015 electoral victory was viewed as the mark of the failure of nationalism and the death of MaBaTha. But reality belied this view. In the 2015 elections, one of the best examples of the impact of nationalism and MaBaTha on the NLD came in Meiktila constituency in Mandalay Region, the Bamar heartland and NLD’s stronghold.²² Meiktila was the site of communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims in 2013, which claimed at least 40 lives and displaced more than 12,000 people.²³ The NLD had won all seats in Meiktila constituency in 1990²⁴, and in 2012 and 2015, it was badly beaten by the USDP. Observers were of the view that one of the main reasons for NLD’s failure in Meiktila was the MaBaTha campaign against the NLD led by Buddhist monks, and some comments against Buddhists there made by the NLD’s elected representative in Meiktila, a close aide of Aung San Suu Kyi.²⁵

Table I. Election results for Meiktila Constituency, Mandalay Region

Party	2012 ²⁶ by-election	2015 ²⁷ general election			
	Lower House	Lower House	Upper House*	State Assembly Seat 1	State Assembly Seat 2
NLD	62,098	59,277	102,367	28,879	28,643
USDP	48,067	96,314	130,856	48,360	45,174

* Upper House Constituency 11 includes Meiktila and Mahlaing.

THE RISE OF ETHNIC NATIONALISM

Nationalism among the other ethnic groups in Myanmar against the majority ‘Bamar’ ethnic group has persisted since pre-colonial times.²⁸ Ethnic armed groups had revolted against the

central government since the time of Burma's independence, but after the 8888 democracy movement in 1988, some ethnic leaders tried to adapt to the new political environment. They set up ethnic political parties to channel their voices through Parliament and contested in the 1990 elections and Shan, Rakhine and Mon parties²⁹ won significant victories in their own states that year. However, the results of the 1990 elections were ignored by the military junta, and politicians including elected ethnic leaders were imprisoned.³⁰ Be that as it may, ethnic parties participated in the 2010 and 2015 general elections. In 2015, a majority of ethnic votes were heavily in favour of the NLD instead of ethnic parties.³¹

Why did the ethnic groups vote for the NLD? Some ethnic leaders thought that voters at that time wanted change and that the ethnic people hoped that the NLD would bring effective change such as constitutional amendments and allow them to realize their dream of a genuine federal union. Some ethnic armed groups, and especially their youth leaders, privately urged ethnic voters to vote for the NLD for these same reasons, even though that was not their organization's official position.³²

Knowing the current political landscape and the hardship of the ruling party, ethnic leaders, activists and members of ethnic parties have called for their parties to merge into single strong parties that could effectively compete in the 2020 general elections³³ in their own states. As a result, two Kayah parties in Kayah State³⁴ and three Karen parties in Karen State³⁵ merged into new parties in 2017 and 2018, respectively. Two Mon parties in Mon State³⁶ and four Kachin parties³⁷ have also agreed to merge. Chin parties in Chin State have also begun the merger process.³⁸

THE GENERAL AUNG SAN STATUE AND ETHNIC NATIONALISM

Recently, ethnic people have been angry with the NLD government because local people who generally support the NLD plan to erect statues of General Aung San in ethnic areas.³⁹ Aung San is the national hero of Myanmar and Aung San Su Kyi's father. However, in the eyes of some ethnic groups, he is viewed more as a Bamar hero, and they would prefer for the erection of statues of Aung San to be postponed until the genuine federal union that he had promised had emerged. In Kachin State, amid opposition from Kachin political parties and local people, a General Aung San statue was unveiled in 2017.⁴⁰ In Mon State, Mon civil society organizations also objected to the construction of such a statue in Mudon township in 2017.⁴¹ In 2018, Kayah State was shaken by protests against plans to erect yet another statue of Aung San.⁴² The Council of Naga Affairs also released a statement on 7 July 2018⁴³ urging Naga people not to join the ceremony to unveil the statue of Aung San in Khamti in Sagaing Region.

A comment in a Facebook post made on 3 July 2018 and relating to the statue of Aung San in Kayah State said,

“I am a Kayah and was born and raised in Kayah State. We love General Augn San and we support ASSK. In the 2015 general elections, the NLD won all seats in Kayah State except one where the majority ‘Bamar’ live. We are now opposing the erection of the status of General Aung San in Loikaw but this does not mean we hate Aung San. We want to oppose NLD members who do not respect our locals’ desire, showing their power by misusing the status of General Aung San. We have been bullied by Bamar for

many years. What we (who live in remote areas) need now is not a General Aung San statue but teachers, schools and clinics. We voted for the NLD for change as we wanted to liberate ourselves from fear (and we hate the USDP and dictators) but the NLD bluntly opposes us now. You are right that Aung San is the father of the independence, but tell us if we have already gained independence? Our (Kayah) State already enjoyed the status of independence a long time ago but we believed in Bamar (Aung San) so we suffer today. There are no military clashes here in Kayah State but you know why? Our resources (in Kayah State) have now been depleted, and you can see that there are landmines everywhere. (Our Kayah State) mainly produce electricity, but we do not enjoy full electricity. In short, we want (you) to implement what General Aung San said instead of the erection of the statue of him. If you really love Aung San, your Bamar should implement his words. Aung San is already in our heart. Sympathize with our painful emotion.”⁴⁴

On 22 July 2018, a statue of Aung San in Myitkyina, Kachin State, was vandalized. They covered its face with green paint, and the left and right sides of its pedestal were damaged.⁴⁵

THE CHAUNGZON INCIDENT

Another example of ethnic voters punishing the NLD for something related to Aung San happened in the 2017 by-elections in Chaungzon, in Mon State. Chaungzon is known as the stronghold of Mon political parties. In the 2010 general elections, the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP) won all state assembly seats in Chaungzon excepting one.⁴⁶ This was however in the absence of NLD which had chosen to boycott the election. In 1990, and again in 2015, the NLD had won all seats in Chaungzon except one seat in the state assembly that latter year.⁴⁷ In 2017, officials proposed a new bridge in Chaungzon named for General Aung San. Despite a series of protests⁴⁸ in Mon State in March, the Lower House of the Union Parliament, approved the proposal.⁴⁹ A by-election was held in 2017 in Chaungzon township on 01 April 2017. It was widely viewed by observers as a test for the ethnic people’s support for the party in Mon State. The NLD, the USDP, the National Unity Party (NUP), the AMRDP and the MNP contested, and, surprisingly, the USDP won by over 7,000 votes. Since the USDP is also reviewed as a Bamar party tightly linked to the Tatmadaw, this incident was a blow not only to the NLD but also to ethnic Mon parties as the majority of Chaungzon township voters are ethnic Mon people.⁵⁰

Table II. Comparison of the election results in Chaungzon Constituency, Lower House (2015 and 2017)

Party	2015 General Election ⁵¹	2017 By-election ⁵²
Voter turnout	44.46 %	38.45%
NLD	23,580 (41.68%)	12,636 (26.03%)
USDP	16,613 (29.37%)	19,667 (40.52%)
AMRDP	10,120 (17.89)	10,859 (23.02%)
MNP	2,981 (5.27%)	1,992 (4.22%)

THE THIRD FORCE

The “third force” refers to a powerful emerging political party led by prominent politicians in Myanmar. In fact, calls for a third party already had already been heard at the time of the 2010 general elections.⁵³ When the military junta announced that general elections would be held on 7 November 2010,⁵⁴ the NLD and powerful ethnic parties such as the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) decided not to contest in the election.⁵⁵ There were thus only two major parties – the USDP and the NUP – competing in the 2010 elections and both were close to the Tatmadaw. In order to fill this political vacuum, some senior members of the NLD, the SNLD and the ALD resigned from their parties to set up new parties with names such as the National Democratic Force, the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, and the Rakhine Nationalist Democratic Party.⁵⁶ Observers viewed them as a third force.

Before the 2015 general elections, there were calls made for a third force to attract voters disappointed with the NLD and the USDP.⁵⁷ Concurrently, a new political party “National Development Party” led by a former political advisor to President U Thein Sein emerged in July 2015.⁵⁸ It took a nationalist line but won no seat.

Today, amid an atmosphere of political depression, some people are again talking about a third party that might effectively counter the ruling party.⁵⁹ A third party emerging this time around seems more likely than in the past. Ko Ko Gyi,⁶⁰ one of the senior leaders of the “88 Generation Peace and Open Society” organization, together with other activists, strived to set up a new political party.⁶¹ They created the Central Committee to Form a New Party in 2017 and officially applied to the Union Election Commission (UEC) for registration of a party called the ‘Four Eight’ (Party) on 19 December 2017.⁶² But some people, including their ex-colleagues, disputed the choice of party name and consequently the UEC refused to approve it. In an interview with the *Speaker* news journal on 22 June 2018, Ko Ko Gyi expressed his views on the UEC and the NLD,⁶³ voicing suspicions regarding the delay in registration. The Committee has reapplied to the UEC for registration under the new name of ‘People’s Party’ on 9 July 2018,⁶⁴ leaving out the controversial ‘Four Eight’ wording.

The UEC approved the registration of ‘The People’s Party’ on 23 August 2018.

CONCLUSION

The 2020 Myanmar general elections are still some years away but the political structure has begun to take shape. It appears that the NLD, currently the ruling party, is now confronting nationalists, ethnic political parties and former student leaders who want to set up a new political party.

Voters in Myanmar are in a dilemma. The majority of the Bamar voters are now divided by the crisis in Rakhine State, and the other ethnic voters view the NLD as a Bamar-dominant party that does not recognize the feelings of ethnic people on the ground.⁶⁵ In short, the USDP, a new third force party, and small parties may likely take on nationalist roles with a focus on religion, while ethnic parties will take nationalist roles emphasizing race or ethnicity. Depending on how much these parties can work together either through mergers, strategic

alliances or friendly ties, the NLD may be vulnerable to losing some ballots from the Bamar majority in the regions and from ethnic minorities in the states.

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“There are many reasons (why NLD lost), but U Win Htein (an outgoing NLD MP in Meikhtila) once said he was ashamed to be a Meikhtila-born because of the riots. That resulted in protests against him,” she added.
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⁵⁹ Frontier Myanmar, “‘Third force’ looms for 2020 as 88 Generation announces political party,” 17 March 2017, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/third-force-looks-for-2020-as-88-generation-announces-political-party>

⁶⁰ Institutional Knowledge (InK) at Singapore Management University, “Ko Ko Gyi,” https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/isl_dna/3/

⁶¹ The Myanmar Times, “Founders defend name ‘Four Eights Party,’” 14 February 2018, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/founders-defend-name-four-eights-party.html>

⁶² Eighteen members, including Ko Ko Gyi applied to register the party under the name of the ‘Four Eights Party’ at the Union Election Commission (UEC) on 19 December 2017. There were some objections to the name of the party, citing the fact that “Four Eights” concerns all people and should not be usurped by one party. Officials from the “Four Eights Party” met with the UEC on 26 March 2018 regarding the registration. In accordance with the discussion, the name of the proposed party was changed into ‘Four Eights People’s Party’ and the application was resubmitted to the UEC on 06 April 2018. The UEC informed the ‘Four Eights People’s Party’ on 26 April 2018 that the new name of the party had now been allowed. The party submitted to the UEC its leaders’ names, flag, emblem and the constitution on 2 May 2018. The UEC announced on 05 May 2018 through state-owned media that objections to the name of the party, flag and emblem could be lodged during a period of one week, but until a month later, the party had not been informed of the UEC’s decision. It sent a letter to the UEC on 11 June 2018 asking for a meeting. The UEC responded that it would meet the Committee on 15 June 2018 but on 14 June 2018, the UEC informed the Committee by email that the name of the party, flag and emblem had to be changed again, referring to the resolution of the UEC dated 7 June 2018. The party was not happy with the UEC and so requested the UEC on the same date to reconsider the resolution.

⁶³ The Speaker Journal, “Interview with U Ko Ko Gyi,” 22 June 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/88kokogyi>

⁶⁴ A New Political Party Forum နိုင်ငံရေးပါတီတစ်ရပ် ဖြစ်မြောက်ရေးကော်မတီ, 09 July 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/ANewPoliticalPartyForum>

⁶⁵ Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), “The NLD ‘should understand the feelings of the ethnic peoples,’ 06 April 2016, <http://www.dvb.no/interview/the-nld-should-understand-the-feelings-of-the-ethnic-peoples/61672>

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