



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Myanmar Elections 2020: An Analysis

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Vote counting underway at a polling station in Mandalay, November 8, 2020. Source: Frontier Myanmar

Aung San Suu Kyi supporters celebrate NLD's victory in the 2020 general elections. Source: Myanmar Times

The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) during a campaign in Shan, October 28, 2020. Source: Facebook/@SNLD

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Contents

Abstract	ii
I. Election: Process and Personalities	1
II. Election Results and Ethnic Politics.....	4
III. Elections and the State Hluttaw	8
IV. International Responses	13
V. Conclusions.....	14

Abstract

Political transitions often tend to be prolonged and dotted with many uncertainties. In the recent past, India's eastern neighbour Myanmar, with whom it shares a 1,468-km long border, has been undergoing such a transition. The country's current constitution came into effect in 2008, and after a prolonged rule by the military junta, elections were held in 2010. The election was widely criticised for a lack of transparency, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) did not participate. The military ensured that the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won comfortably. A relatively freer election in 2015 resulted in a landslide victory of democratic forces led by the NLD. However, with a constitutional reservation of at least 25 per cent of the seats for the military, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) continues to have a significant role in Myanmar politics.

The recent general elections held on November 8, 2020 have further strengthened the democratic component of the Myanmar political system. The NLD won comfortably, winning 396 seats (out of 476) in the Union Parliament on the back of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's dominant personality and popularity. However, deep fault lines, such as ethnic conflicts across the country and sectarian violence in the Rakhine province, persist in Myanmar. The Union Election Commission (UEC) suspended voting in 22 seats and more than 1.5 million people across the country were not allowed to vote. While the election results of 2020 at a broader level demonstrate that the NLD is the most dominant political force in the country, a closer examination, particularly of the state-level results, shows that there is a diversity of political actors. Therefore, while a stable central government is a welcome outcome, particularly from a regional security perspective, bridging the ethnic divide will also remain of vital importance.

This DPG Report provides a comprehensive assessment of the 2020 Myanmar elections and analyses the issues outlined above. The authors have delved deep into the electoral outcomes of the state Hluttaw (legislature), examined international responses and presented major takeaways in conclusion.

Myanmar Elections 2020: An Analysis

by

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

On November 8, 2020, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Myanmar successfully conducted a general election. The country witnessed a late onslaught in the number of COVID-19 cases coinciding with preparations for the elections. From just over 900 cases on September 1, Myanmar had reported over 61,000 cases of the [coronavirus](#) as on November 8.¹ Despite such a surge, the country witnessed [robust participation](#).² More than 37 million people were eligible to vote, and 87 political parties fielded candidates.³ Many among them were regional ethnic parties, with only two real contenders to form the Union government – the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

I. Election: Process and Personalities

The Union Election Commission (UEC) estimates that more than [70 per cent](#) of eligible citizens cast their votes.⁴ Masks were made compulsory, and physical contact was minimised. [Provisions](#) for COVID-19 patients were also made, even if they were in isolation.⁵ Myanmar also allowed its citizens to vote early. However, this was [limited to](#) citizens who were “unable to return to their constituencies because of COVID-19 restrictions, and voters older than 60 [years of age] in townships under stay-at-home orders”.⁶ On election day, the process was mostly smooth. Local civil society sources observed that close to 84 per cent of polling booths had opened on time, and [there were no hiccups](#) in the voting process.⁷ Even in cases where some citizens’ names were not included in the voter’s lists, they were [allowed to vote](#) after receiving a “ward recommendation letter”.⁸ In addition to the pandemic, other dynamics such as the ongoing ethnic conflict in various states and the location of polling booths had assumed considerable importance. For instance, in Kachin state, the UEC [ensured that](#) none of the polling booths was located in military areas.⁹



Myanmar citizens living in Thailand lined up for early voting. Source: Voice of America

5,639 candidates competed for 1,117 seats, which meant that on an average, five candidates contested elections in each constituency (see Table 1). For ethnic-national constituencies, the average was 6.31. This means that, at least in principle, the contest was not confined to just two parties. While the averages may not be as high as in older democracies such as India (average contestants per constituency was 15 in 2019), the numbers denote a relatively more successful process of democratic transition in Myanmar.

Nevertheless, the democratic process had to confront a few challenges. The UEC cancelled elections in “some village tracts in two townships of Bago region, 11 townships of Kachin state, six townships of Kayin state, one township in Mon state, 13 townships of Rakhine state and 23 townships of Shan state”.¹⁰ Overall, voting was [suspended](#) in 22 of the 498 Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) seats as they were deemed to be “unsafe or unstable for polling”.¹¹ As a result, close to 1.5 million ethnic minority voters across the country were not allowed to [participate](#) in the elections.¹² Moreover, as is well known, the Constitution mandates that 25 per cent (166 seats) in the national legislature are [reserved](#) for the Myanmar military.¹³ Therefore, while Suu Kyi’s NLD required 322 seats for a second term, the military-backed USDP could form the next government with only 156 seats. Moreover, in the run-up to the elections, some NLD members broke away and formed new political parties. For instance, the People’s Pioneer Party (PPP) was officially registered in October 2019 and is [led by](#) a former NLD party leader.¹⁴

Table 1: Average Candidates Per Constituency

Constituencies	Number	Candidates Competing	Number	Average
Pyithu Hluttaw constituencies	315	Pyithu Hluttaw candidates	1,565	4.96
Amyotha Hluttaw constituencies	161	Amyotha Hluttaw candidates	779	4.84
Region/State Hluttaw constituencies	612	Region/state Hluttaw candidates	3,112	5.08
National races constituencies	29	Ethnic constituencies candidates	183	6.31
Total constituencies	1,117	Total	5,639	5.05

Source: Global New Light of Myanmar, November 09, 2020.

In terms of personalities, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi continues to be the most dominant political figure in the country. In 2015, former General and President Thein Sein had the reputation of being a [proactive reformer](#) who supported liberalisation and Myanmar's turn towards a market economy. After his defeat in the 2015 election, former President Thein Sein served as a patron of the USDP for a while.¹⁵ Similarly, another ex-general and former Lower House Speaker U Shwe Mann, after his defeat in the 2015 general election, decided [not to contest](#) in 2020 despite being the chair of the Union Betterment Party (UBP).¹⁶ The absence of a well-known pan-Myanmar politician in the opposition meant that Suu Kyi was most the dominant personality in the country in the run-up to the elections. There is perhaps no historical parallel when an icon of democracy and a Nobel Prize winner is also considered as a party to perpetuating crimes against humanity. However, over time, there have been at least three criticisms of Suu Kyi's administration.

The first reservation expressed was whether the government would be too idealistic and, therefore, not be sufficiently cognizant of realpolitik in Myanmar. Such presumptions have been quickly dismissed by Suu Kyi, who seems to understand how the levers of power work in politics. While the Constitution prohibited her from becoming the President of Myanmar, she was able to create the office of State Counsellor, thus rendering the President a nominal head of the country. Over her first term, although Suu Kyi may have lost her international credibility, her domestic reputation remains intact and her [voters](#) "remain grateful for her past sacrifices and believe in her leadership abilities".¹⁷

Second, there was persistent criticism against Suu Kyi for running a highly centralised administration that did not offer space to the younger generation at the apex of the party structure. Reportedly, the [average age](#) of the top 12 leaders is more than 70 years.¹⁸ It should be a source of concern that even after a decade of a semi-democratic political system, there are no young, charismatic leaders in leadership positions. Besides, as almost all leaders in the party have experienced prolonged incarceration during the harsh military rule, questions have arisen over whether incarceration was the only criterion for inclusion in the apex decision-making apparatus of the party.¹⁹

Third, Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders were criticised for not advancing the cause of freedom and liberty. For instance, there have been continuous allegations that the freedom of the press is curtailed in Myanmar. Daw Suu Kyi had promised to disband [state media outlets](#) but continued to make use of them to spread the party's propaganda.²⁰ Myanmar ranked 139 out of 180 in the 2020 [World Press Freedom Index](#), with the infamous case of the seven-year imprisonment of two Reuters journalists in September 2018 further denting NLD's image.²¹ More recently, in March 2020, Myanmar issued an order to [block 221 news sites](#) for allegedly sharing fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic.²² Some of these sites reportedly served Myanmar's ethnic minorities. Moreover, in March, the Myanmar police [raided](#) the homes and offices of several news agency editors, besides arresting journalists on charges of 'terrorism'.²³

Despite such criticism, there is no denying that Suu Kyi is the most important political personality in Myanmar. However, there were a host of other issues such as ethnic conflict, sectarian violence and the COVID-induced economic slowdown that figured prominently in this election. The international media's pre-election coverage gave the impression that there was some [public disapproval](#) of Suu Kyi's style of governance, and that the delivery of public service has not improved significantly.²⁴ Domestically though, support for Suu Kyi has only increased as the NLD comfortably crossed the majority mark and once again formed the government in Nay Pyi Taw.

II. Election Results and Ethnic Politics

The results were officially released on November 14, with the NLD winning 396 (out of 476) seats in the Union Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw). "In terms of [the] [national legislature](#) and compared to the 2015 elections, NLD now holds six more seats", while the USDP holds eight fewer seats.²⁵ The NLD also won 501 seats in the State Hluttaw (Legislature) and 23 Ethnic National seats (See Table 2). The margin of victory for the NLD was such that out of a total of 1,117 contested seats, no other party managed to reach even three figures.



Aung San Suu Kyi supporters celebrate NLD's victory in the 2020 general elections.
Source: Myanmar Times

While the NLD thanked the people for the “encouraging election result”, the USDP called for a [vote recount](#) in some constituencies or even a re-run of the elections as they perceived that there was “fraud in compiling voting lists and vote counting”.²⁶ On November 11, a [joint statement](#) seeking the “formation of an independent commission to investigate alleged election malpractices”²⁷ was issued by 16 political parties, including the USDP. The USDP also officially “lodged more than [800 electoral complaints](#)” about the alleged malpractice.²⁸ However, the [Myanmar military](#) has not been as enthusiastic as the USDP, and the military spokesperson stated that calls for re-elections are not “the stance of the Tatmadaw”.²⁹

The Myanmar military had been critical of the functioning of the UEC and the Union government prior to the elections. On November 2, the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services issued a [seven-point statement](#) criticising the UEC and the union government for failing to ensure checks and balances.³⁰ Noting that although the Commission is supposed to be an independent body, in principle, “the Union Government is responsible for the commission and the commission reports to the former. Therefore, criticism about the freeness and fairness of [the] election is rather directed not at the commission but at the government.”³¹ As the Myanmar military leadership’s relationship with the NLD deteriorated, there were concerns that a coup may

be around the corner. However, after casting his vote, military chief Senior [General Min Aung Hlaing](#) said, "I will accept an election result that reflects the people's will."³²

Table 2: Party-wise list of elected Representatives in the 2020 General Elections

Party Names/Individual	Pyithu Hluttaw	Amyotha Hluttaw	Region/State Hluttaw	Ethnic National	Total
National League for Democracy (NLD)	258	138	501	23	920
Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)	26	7	38		71
Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)	13	2	27		42
Arakan National Party (ANP)	4	4	7		15
Ta-arng (Palaung) National Party (TNP)	3	2	7		12
Mon Unity Party (MUP)	2	3	6	1	12
Pa-O National Organization (PNO)	3	1	7		11
Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP)	2	3	3		8
Kachin State People's Party (KSPP)	1		3		4
Arakan Front Party (AFP)	1		2		3
Wa National Party (WNP)	1		2		3
Lahu National Development Party			1	1	2
Zomi Congress for Democracy Party (ZCD)	1		1		2
Lisu National Development Party			1	1	2
New Democracy Party (Kachin)		1	1		2
Kayan National Party (KNP)				1	1
Kayin People's Party (KPP)			1		1
Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP)			1		1
Chin National League for Democracy			1		1
Individuals			2	2	4
Total	315	161	612	29	1117

Source: Global New Light of Myanmar

There was also a marginally enhanced [representation of women](#) in legislatures following the 2020 elections. While 152 women legislators were elected in 2015, the number has increased to 194 in 2020.³³ However, concerns on whether the election will bridge the ethnic divide in the country still remain.

In 2015, the NLD registered a landslide victory, which included wins in ethnic areas. In 2020 as well, Suu Kyi had retained her popularity, even among the ethnic minority voters. NLD won elections even in states where various ethnic parties merged to contest seats. This was contrary to the opinion of political commentators who had predicted that Suu Kyi's position could be under threat as she had not come up with concrete plans to accommodate or resolve various ethnic aspirations in her first term.

Since ethnic parties did not perform well in these elections, there may be little incentive for them to continue negotiations within the existing political framework. There is a perception among ethnic groups that the establishment of true federalism in Myanmar is some distance away. As the chairman of the Kachin State People's Party ([KSPP](#)) [noted](#), "change in Myanmar is dependent only on the ruling party and the government, and how much they would like to build peace... We don't have a fair chance or a shot at federalism."³⁴ There could also be a temptation among armed wings of ethnic groups to resort to violence in order to achieve political objectives. Such a move may not find support from the international community and instead could further dent Myanmar's image.

In an interesting development, the NLD spokesperson stated after the elections that the ruling party is keen on forming a [government of national unity \(GNU\)](#), and added that approximately 40 ethnic parties had been invited to participate in the government.³⁵ Quite often, GNUs are formed in the face of a massive national crisis, but Myanmar is witnessing no such crisis at the moment. Further, there is no fragmented electoral verdict that mandates a broad coalition of parties to form a government. On the contrary, the NLD received a landslide victory. And yet, it is referring to the necessity of a GNU. This perhaps signifies recognition that the absence of adequate representation of ethnic parties may prompt some of these political forces to explore disruptionist tactics. Call for a GNU will also prevent the emergence of a nationwide coalition of ethnic parties.

The chairman of the [Mon Unity Party \(MUP\)](#) welcomed a GNU and noted that "The NLD's invitation is very good. Before the invitation came, I said within the party that this is the way to go."³⁶ Similarly, the [KSPP](#) also stated that it is ready to co-operate with the NLD in forming a "federal system of government".³⁷

However, others, such as the Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP) were not convinced. Soon after NLD's call, the [KySDP said](#) that the "statement is superficial. The NLD is unable to implement the federal system aspired by ethnics".³⁸

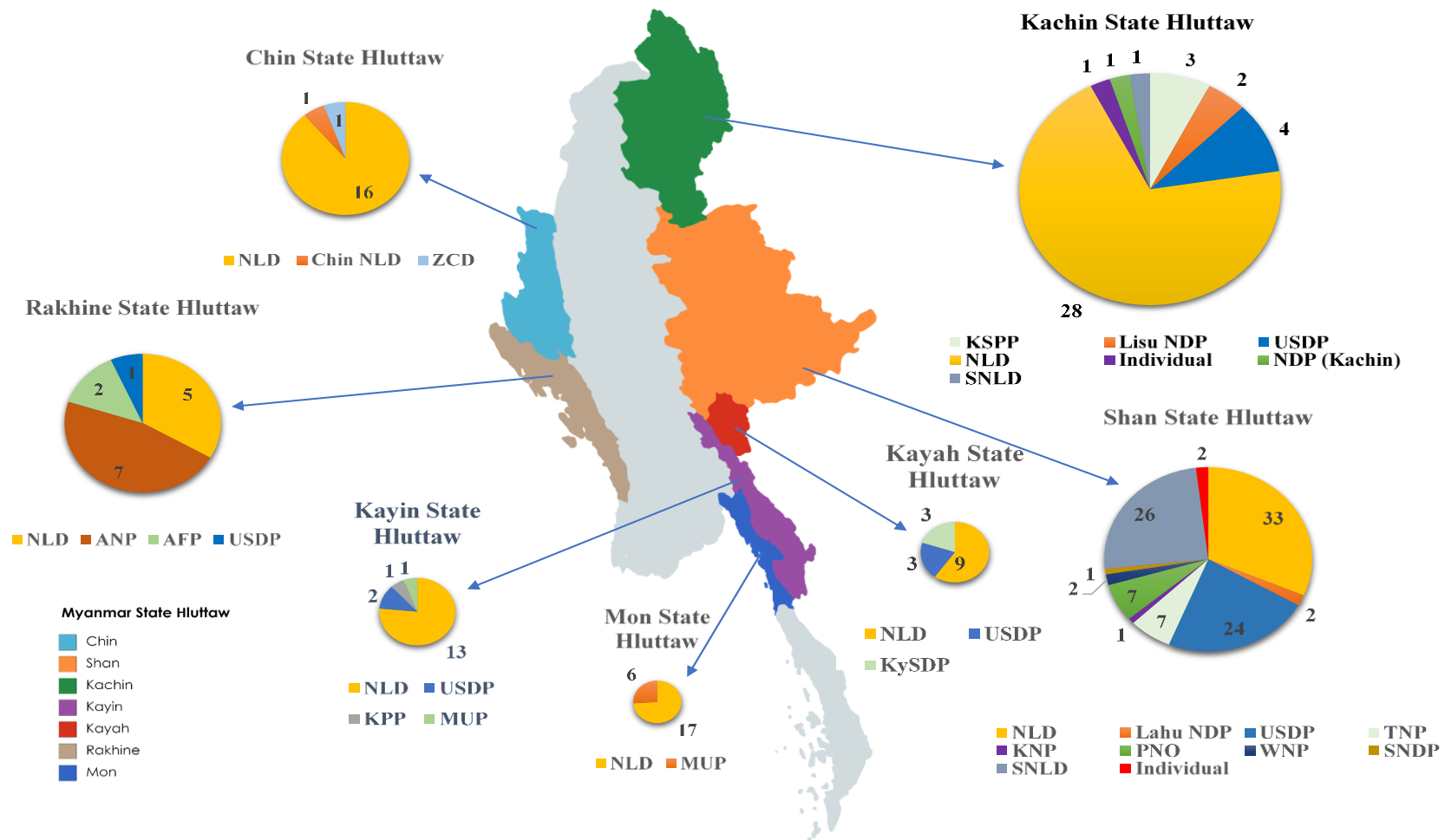
The NLD can also deploy constitutionally guaranteed powers generously to reach out to ethnic groups. The Myanmar constitution gives power to the Union President to appoint the state chief ministers. While all the previous chief ministers of the NLD won their respective seats in the 2020 elections as well, regional ethnic parties have performed relatively well in states such as Rakhine and Shan and would be keen to have a Chief Minister from their ranks. The genuineness of the NLD's attempt to reach out to the ethnic parties will be put to the test when the Union President appoints the chief ministers in these states.

III. Elections and the State Hluttaw

Myanmar is divided into seven states, seven regions and one union territory. The Bamar group is predominant in the regions while the states are populated with ethnic minorities. Therefore, the NLD, which enjoys the overwhelming support of the Bamar population, tends to dominate elections in the regions, while seat-sharing is relatively more evenly distributed in the states. Calls for federalism tend to emanate with greater vigour from various ethnic organisations who are dominant in these states. Therefore, to understand ethnic tensions in Myanmar, it is imperative to study the electoral outcomes in the state Hluttaw.³⁹

Mon

In the 2020 elections, NLD won 17 seats in State Hluttaw while the ethnic MUP won six.⁴⁰ Prior to elections the All Mon Democracy Party and Mon National Party [came together](#) to contest elections under the banner of the MUP.⁴¹ The merger of parties probably prevented a clean sweep for the NLD. Further, reports suggest that the MUP entered into an informal [non-competition arrangement](#) with "Karen, Pa-O and Dawei parties".⁴² However, the MUP also had to contend with the challenges of migration. Given the proximity of Thailand to Mon State, there was a significant migration of ethnic people in Mon to Thailand in search of employment. The pandemic and associated [travel restrictions](#) made it difficult for many of these voters to get back to their respective constituencies, and many could not register for an advance vote at the embassy.⁴³



Myanmar State Hluttaw (Legislature) Party-wise 2020 Election Results.
Designed by Authors from open-source information

Rakhine

Despite complete cancellation of voting in some townships and partial cancellations in others, the regional Arakan National Party (ANP) performed exceedingly well to win [15 seats](#) (seven in State Hluttaw and eight in Pyidaungsu Hluttaw).⁴⁴ The NLD came second with five seats in the State Hluttaw. This was also because the consolidation of regional parties – the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) and Rakhine National Development Party (RNDP) – under the [Arakan National Party \(ANP\)](#) ensured that the ethnic vote did not get divided.⁴⁵ Besides, it appears that the presence of another ethnic party, the Arakan Front Party (AFP), in the election fray did not adversely impact ANP's electoral fortunes. The AFP won two seats in the state legislature and one seat in the lower house of the Union parliament. Therefore, the regional ethnic parties performed well despite the cancellation of elections in their strongholds. Reportedly, some of the lawmakers from ANP and AFP were of the opinion that they should collaborate and appoint a legislator of their choice as the speaker of the house because the NLD would anyway “appoint one of their [loyalists as chief minister](#)”.⁴⁶ In their opinion, such an arrangement would ensure a good balance between administration and legislation.⁴⁷

A few days after the election, the [Arakan Army](#) called on civilian leadership and the military to conduct elections at the earliest in townships where elections were cancelled.⁴⁸ The Myanmar military has [welcomed the initiative](#) and endorsed the call for election.⁴⁹

Kachin

The NLD won majority seats (28 out of 40) in [Kachin](#) State Hluttaw.⁵⁰ Other parties which won seats in the State Hluttaw included the USDP (4 seats), Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) (1 seat), New Democratic Party (Kachin) (1 seat), Lisu National Development Party (2 seats) and the KSPP (3 seats). The [manifesto](#) of the KSPP included popular demands such as termination (not suspension) of Myitsone dam and realising the pledges of the Panglong Agreement.⁵¹ Moreover, various ethnic parties came under the banner of KSPP, which ensured a three-way fight between NLD, USDP and KSPP.⁵² However, despite the consolidation of opposition parties and the KSPP contesting in almost all constituencies, the NLD managed to win even in areas where it had lost in 2015.

The USDP also won 10 seats (4 in State Hluttaw and 6 in Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) in Kachin. There was an opinion that even though locals in some constituencies voted for the KSPP, “a large number of advance votes by the military personnel” [helped the USDP](#) win seats.⁵³ Some of the KSPP candidates

[did not sign-off](#) on voting reports alleging that “Tatmadaw soldiers’ votes skewed the results.”⁵⁴ KSP members also attributed their defeat to the [Bamar migrant workers](#) backing the NLD.⁵⁵ Even prior to the elections, in September 2020, the [KSP had noted that](#) the Union “government’s policies encouraged migration of workers into the Kachin state.”⁵⁶ A fortnight before the elections, there were also allegations that [KSP worked closely](#) with the military-backed USDP, which may have prompted some to vote for the NLD.⁵⁷

During this election, ethnic parties expressed apprehensions about migration as well as other demographic factors negatively affecting their electoral prospects. In the coming years, as developmental activities pick up momentum, there will be even greater movement of people. There will also be more intense debates about being an “insider” versus “outsider” in states.

Shan

Shan is one of the largest states in the country with remarkable ethnic diversity. The Shan regional parties have always constituted a dominant political force in the state besides the NLD and the USDP. Historically, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), which was a product of the student agitations in 1988, made their [presence felt](#) in the elections (1990, 2015 and 2017 by-elections) even when Suu Kyi’s NLD registered landslide victories.⁵⁸



The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) during a campaign in Shan, October 28, 2020. Source: Facebook/@SNLD

As in other states, the dominant ethnic parties, the SNLD and the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP), explored the possibilities of a merger, which did not materialise. However, despite the absence of an ethnic coalition, the SNLD emerged as the third-largest party in the 2020 election. SNLD won 26 seats while the NLD won 33 seats in the Shan State Hluttaw.

Given USDP's performance (24 seats in the State Hluttaw), even if it joins hands with the military nominated members of the state legislature, they will be unable to elect a speaker of their choice. On the other hand, if NLD [joins hands](#) with the SNLD, they will be able to elect the Shan state Hluttaw speaker.⁵⁹ Moreover, ethnic parties, which earlier had loose ties with the USDP, have moved away and either become independent or have associated themselves with other ethnic parties. For instance, in Shan, the USDP had a pre-election setback with the Pao National Organisation (PNO) Party breaking the previous alliance agreement. PNO and the Ta-arnng (Palaung) National Party (TNP) won 7 seats each in the State Hluttaw.

Chin

In Chin, which abuts the Indian state of Mizoram, the NLD registered impressive electoral victories (16 out of 18 seats in the State Hluttaw). As with Rakhine and Shan, elections were partially cancelled in the Paletwa region and the adjoining areas in Chin. [Paletwa](#) had been the site of military confrontation between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military.⁶⁰ It is [estimated](#) that only about 20 per cent of the population in Paletwa Township was able to participate in the election.⁶¹

Unlike in 2015, when the Zomi Congress for Democracy (ZCD) won 6 seats in all, it only registered electoral victories in two seats – one in the lower house of the union parliament and one in the state Hluttaw.⁶² The ZCD leaders attributed their losses to the [lack of financial resources](#) as compared to the NLD.⁶³

Kayah and Kayin

Based on available data, out of the [15 State Hluttaw seats](#) in Kayah, the NLD won nine seats while the USDP and the KySDP won three each.⁶⁴ A few months prior to the elections, the [former chief minister](#) of Kayah had joined KySDP, which had raised hopes of a better electoral performance by the party.⁶⁵

In Kayin, the NLD won 13 out of the 17 seats in the State Hluttaw. The USDP won two seats while regional parties Kayin People's Party (KPP) and the MUP won one seat each. The Kayin State (formerly known as Karen state) has witnessed a long insurgency dating back to late 1940s. It was only in 2015 that

the Karen National Union signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). However, despite the ceasefire, the security situation in some parts of Kayin remains volatile, which led to the [UEC cancelling](#) elections in 53 village tracts.⁶⁶ As in other states, the ethnic Karen parties also attempted to unite under one banner but were unsuccessful. The absence of a united front meant that there was a [split in the ethnic vote](#) and the NLD comfortably secured a majority.⁶⁷ The [ethnic parties](#), in turn, have blamed misinformation and a lack of funds as the primary reason for their loss.⁶⁸



Vote counting underway at a polling station in Mandalay, November 8, 2020.

Source: Frontier Myanmar

IV. International Responses

Not many international observers have questioned the election's fairness. While observers were disappointed with the cancellation in some constituencies, they did not raise questions regarding the elections in other constituencies. For instance, the Japanese election observer mission members noted that the Myanmar General Election was free and fair.⁶⁹ Japan's Prime Minister [Yoshihide Suga](#) congratulated the NLD and Suu Kyi and promised to "continue to fully support the country's democratic nation-building".⁷⁰ Indian Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) too congratulated Daw Suu Kyi and the NLD on November 12. He also stated that the "successful conduct of polls is another step in the ongoing democratic transition in Myanmar".⁷¹ [Thailand's Ambassador](#) to

Myanmar, after a quick tour of the polling stations in Yangon, commented favourably on the election process.⁷² The [Carter Centre's](#) international election observation mission noted that "voters were enthusiastic and able to freely express their will at the polls and choose their elected representatives."⁷³

Interestingly, the US [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#) in a statement on November 8 expressed concern about "the large number of unelected seats constitutionally reserved for the military".⁷⁴ He further stated that "the United States will continue to closely monitor the electoral process... [and called] on all relevant authorities to ensure [that] tabulation of votes and resolution of complaints is undertaken in a transparent and credible manner."⁷⁵ On November 21, the US [National Security Advisor](#) spoke with Daw Suu Kyi and congratulated her on NLD's victory. He also "reaffirmed US support for Burma's democratic transition".⁷⁶

The [European Union \(EU\)](#) said that it looks forward to continuing its engagement "with the next government towards fully civilian and democratic governance".⁷⁷ It also acknowledged the challenges and difficulties of the electoral process and said that "the people of Myanmar have clearly demonstrated their attachment to democracy".⁷⁸ Similarly, ASEAN leaders have also congratulated Suu Kyi on the NLD's electoral victory.

Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#), while congratulating Suu Kyi, stated that the China-Myanmar bilateral relationship should be built "within the frameworks of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor".⁷⁹ It should be noted that Suu Kyi has maintained cordial relations with the Chinese leadership and, contrary to expectations, has not tried to constrain Chinese economic presence in Myanmar.

V. Conclusions

This election heralds continued stability in Myanmar, which is a welcome development. However, it should also be noted that on the Eastern (Shan state) and Western (Rakhine state) frontiers, the electoral verdict is fragmented, and local ethnic parties have performed well. The Union Government will need to handle Shan and Rakhine with some political sagacity. Overall, there are at least six major takeaways from this election.

One, quite often the Suu Kyi government has been criticised for lacklustre economic performance. However, such criticism rarely points to a historical or a comparative reference point. Myanmar has not only endured sustained military dictatorship with autarkic economic policies but also has had to endure multiple insurgencies across the country for decades. Moreover, a

measure of success for the civilian leadership is also contingent on the presence of the military in the executive and legislative domain with a very weak administrative apparatus. Suu Kyi's domestic audience is much more sympathetic in its assessment of the economic progress that the NLD has made so far.

Two, even though election results depict a landslide victory for the NLD, senior NLD leaders have mentioned that competition was fierce in the states. The vote share of the parties in various states is still not available. However, initial numbers indicate that voters who chose USDP in the previous elections may have gravitated towards the NLD this time. If that is indeed the case, then it is possible that the vote shares of ethnic parties may have improved, but it was insufficient to gain more seats. However, it should be noted that the NLD hardly won any seats in the Tatmadaw polling stations. In Nay Pyi Taw, the NLD "won all constituencies except Zeyathiri, where the office of the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services is located".⁸⁰

Three, sectarian violence in Rakhine, the sustained international pressure and legal action on international platforms, and Suu Kyi's robust defence of Myanmar's military seems to have played an important role in the outcome of the elections. While Suu Kyi substantially lost her international credibility as an icon of democracy and human rights, her support base within the country has grown. As summed up by Min Zin for the [New York Times](#), the majority of the voters felt that "voting for Ms Aung San Suu Kyi was partly an expression of gratitude to a mother figure who is seen as having sacrificed her personal well-being, her life and now, her iconic reputation worldwide for Myanmar's democracy and development".⁸¹

Four, it appears that the Myanmar military has not pumped in all resources at its disposal to dent the electoral prospects of Suu Kyi's NLD. Probably its reluctance to fight Suu Kyi tooth-and-nail stemmed from the recognition that they would require Suu Kyi to defend the Myanmar military on international platforms in the future as well. Nonetheless, the scale of the defeat of the USDP means that they might have to depend more explicitly on Myanmar's military members in parliament to advocate the Tatmadaw's point of view. This essentially means that members may have to become more proactive. The balance of power in civil-military relationships will now tilt slightly in favour of the civilian leadership. However, given the permanent institutional presence of the military in the legislature, the anxiety about a loss of power for the Tatmadaw may not be very strong.



A billboard depicting State Counsellor Suu Kyi and Myanmar military ministers with the International Court of Justice building in the background. The banner was displayed in the Karen state in November 2019, weeks before Suu Kyi was scheduled to travel to Hague to defend Myanmar against accusations of genocide. Source: New Straits Times/ AFP

Five, quite often, retired military personnel have been nominated in the elections by the USDP. However, during the 2020 elections, the USDP has reportedly tried to give township officials a [greater say](#) in the candidate selection process. If this is indeed the case, then it implies that the military leadership has initiated some efforts to reduce military presence in the legislatures, at least outside the 25 per cent reserved seats for the military.⁸²

Six, although the election provides for continuity in leadership, Daw Suu Kyi will be 80 years old by 2025 when the next elections are scheduled. Therefore, the NLD will have to bring in younger faces into the Cabinet so that they can be groomed into leadership positions for the next elections. The initial comments by senior members of the NLD suggested that the party is serious about not repeating the mistakes of 2015 in terms of Cabinet appointments. Party sources were [quoted as stating](#) that "it is certain that highly efficient people will be chosen for the ministerial positions... We have been urged to include some [people with] political backgrounds while we also need technocrats for national building."⁸³ The statement suggests that NLD is looking to rope-in highly qualified people into the Cabinet from outside the party. This could be a good strategy to build new leadership. Moreover, the NLD

leadership has [already stated](#) that the Cabinet will consist of both politicians as well as domain experts.⁸⁴



Myanmar Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. Source: Travel Naypyitaw

If one can compare Myanmar's transition to democracy with other recent global examples, such as the failed Arab Spring, it has been relatively successful. Contrary to expectations, political transition (to democracy) is not a big-bang event where change takes place overnight. Often, political transition is a slow and iterative process. Myanmar also seems to be on a similar path. It is, therefore, also important for the international community to continue supporting the process and working with Myanmar to build requisite capacities for a robust and functioning democracy.

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