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Ethnicity and Myanmar's Elections

By Kyaw San Wai and Naoko Kumada

Synopsis

Ethnicity is an important factor in Myanmar's upcoming general elections. Understanding the nuances and context of ethnicity are crucial in solving the country's woes.

Commentary

MYANMAR WILL vote on 8 November in the country's first inclusive polls since 1990. 32 million voters will choose representatives for 1171 seats (or three-quarters) of the national and regional parliaments. In addition, the head of the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) will appoint the remaining quarter (around 380 seats) as provided in the constitution.

A mosaic of 92 parties and 304 independent candidates are contesting. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) is expected to perform well, but the ruling military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) aims to retain a crucial number of seats. There are concerns about whether the elections will be free, fair and inclusive, and the results honoured. Suu Kyi remains constitutionally barred from executive office while ethnic conflict and religious tensions threaten to mar an already unpredictable vote.

November Elections

While being widely portrayed as a two-horse race between the USDP and the NLD, the upcoming polls highlight the complex role of ethnicity in Myanmar's politics. In ethnic areas, 60 parties are canvassing votes by appealing to ethnicity and on platforms of greater ethnic rights. They will go head-to-head with the majority Bamar-

dominated USDP and NLD, both of which are also fielding ethnic candidates who will campaign along similar platforms.

Ethnic regions make up around 30% of all parliamentary seats and could become a formidable voting block if interests converged: 23 ethnic parties have formed the “Nationalities Brotherhood Federation” in hopes of amplifying minority voices in parliament and push for greater rights. Many ethnic parties perceive their causes as overlapping but distinct from the NLD: they support its campaign for democracy but primarily desire greater ethnic rights and worry that Suu Kyi might continue the dominance of the Bamar, albeit with a democratic veneer. They are also weary of the popular NLD splitting the ethnic vote. Complicating the landscape further are ethnic armed groups and their political wings that subscribe to similar goals of minority empowerment but operate outside parliamentary politics.

The hope with the upcoming elections is that there might finally be a democratically elected, representative government that can sit sincerely with ethnic groups at the negotiation table. If no clear winner emerges in the November vote, these ethnic parties will become pivotal in the ensuing horse-trading. The parties will also get a second chance when the parliamentary electoral college convenes to elect the president and vice presidents, possibly in January. Ethnic parties hope that a more inclusive government reflective of the country’s ethnic diversity will be better suited to tackle issues such as resource allocation and the devolution of political authority.

Ethnic-centric identity

Ethno-centric identity, nationalism and grievances have been major underlying factors in the country’s long-running civil war, and continue to pose one of Myanmar’s main challenges. Ethnicity, often hand in hand with religion, is an integral pillar of identity for many inhabitants in Myanmar. Ethnic groups often believe that these identities and differences have existed since time immemorial and are hardwired. Such entrenched perspectives tend to make communities obstinate on issues pertaining to ethnicity and religion. And the emphasis on these differences only serves to reinforce mutual distrust between the groups.

No precise statistics exist for Myanmar’s ethnic makeup, and criteria used to delineate ethnicity are often controversial and arbitrary. Officially, Myanmar recognises 135 indigenous ethnic groups (*Taing-yin-thar*), defined as groups that had settled before the onset of British colonisation in 1824. The 2014 census included controversial tallies based on ethnicity and religion but these specific results will be released only after the elections. With such absence, it is roughly estimated that the Bamar form two-thirds of the population. The remainder comprises both recognised *Taing-yin-thar* and unrecognised/‘non-indigenous’ ethnic groups. Compounding these divisions are different religious affiliations that sometimes overlap with ethnic divisions – the Bamar, Shan and Rakhines are mostly Buddhists whereas the Kachins and Chins, along with urban Karen elites, are overwhelmingly Christians. Religion often overlaps into ethno-nationalist narratives and become entangled with ethnic and political grievances.

Ethnicity is also tied to citizenship. The controversial *jus sanguinis* 1982 Citizenship Law classifies three citizenship categories with different socio-political group-based

rights – only *Taing-yin-thar* can become full citizens while non-indigenous groups (any group considered to have arrived only after 1824) are relegated to ‘associate’ or ‘naturalised’ citizens. Communities and candidates not meeting the cut have been disenfranchised, raising concerns of inclusiveness for the elections and Myanmar’s political future in general.

The Bamar, while subscribing to the idea of a multi-ethnic Myanmar, see themselves as first amongst equals due to demographics and the exploits of the pre-colonial state. The minorities however desire complete equality, wishing to be part of the ‘Myanmar state’ but not the ‘Bamar nation’. Some ethnic activists have even advocated replacing Burmese, the lingua franca of at least 80% of the populace today, with English as Myanmar’s official language. There are also those still calling for the dissolution of the union, pointing out that Myanmar is a colonial construct incorporating certain peoples and regions that historically were not under Burmese suzerainty.

Federalism, once anathema to the military establishment, is the proffered panacea to Myanmar’s ethnic conflicts. Most political personages discussing federalism appear to have only vague, or even romanticised, notions of ethnicity-based federalism. Transplanting a foreign model of federalism divorced from Myanmar’s context would be unwise. And there is no guarantee that Myanmar’s ethnicity question will be resolved with just democracy, federalism and equal rights.

The partial nation-wide ceasefire agreement inked on 15 October after four years of arduous negotiations is a marked achievement but the process promises to be long and arduous. Having effective ethnic voices in parliament will hopefully make the negotiations more substantive and inclusive. Ethnic organisations themselves still need to better reflect segments of their constituencies, such as the women, sub-groups and the diaspora.

Best chance for minorities

The upcoming election represents the best chance Myanmar’s ethnic parties have had in decades to champion for greater minority rights from within the system. Understanding the underlying sentiments and complexities is also crucial for a peaceful and viable solution to this chronic malady. Many hope that this election will take the country a step closer towards the betterment of all of Myanmar’s inhabitants regardless of ethnicity.

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