

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Unpacking Myanmar's 2020 Vote

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A Resounding Mandate for the Incumbent

On November 8, Myanmar's electorate spoke with a resounding vote that returned the incumbent National League for Democracy (NLD) to a second term with a higher number of seats in the Hluttaw, Myanmar's legislature.

The NLD's victory was an assured outcome, as there continues to be [strong and unwavering support](#) for its leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD's wins in many ethnic areas, along with a high voter turnout despite a COVID-19 surge across Myanmar, proved incorrect the many assumptions about a lower vote for the NLD amid criticisms of its performance and claims that its popularity had declined, especially in ethnic states.

That the NLD would receive a second mandate was a certainty among analysts, commentators, and observers. There were, however, differing views on the extent of that returned mandate and how strong it would be for the reasons mentioned above. Thus, the "surprise"—a very pleasant one for the NLD, its supporters, and the people who voted to continue the democratic transition under the NLD's leadership—was the overwhelming majority of votes for the NLD. The ruling party, running for the first time as an incumbent, secured 396 seats in Myanmar's legislature, well beyond the 322 seats needed for a comfortable two-thirds majority to form a government and six seats more than they secured in their 2015 landslide win. The 2020 vote thus constitutes a second landslide in Myanmar's second openly contested multi-party elections.

What Caused this Second Landslide?

Analysts are now assessing [several factors](#) that contributed to the high voter turnout and the NLD's resounding mandate. Foremost is the consolidation of support for the NLD led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. People across Myanmar, and particularly in the traditional "stronghold" areas that have voted for the NLD in the past, view her as taking on the defense of national interests in the face of international scrutiny of Myanmar over the Rohingya issue. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, she demonstrated a new kind of leadership conducted entirely online, communicating and coordinating responses to the public via her Facebook page which she set up in April 2020 expressly for that purpose.

There was also some confidence in the government's COVID-19 response during the initial stages of the pandemic, when caseloads and casualties were among the lowest in Southeast Asia despite the challenges faced by Myanmar's testing and response capacity. Even when the election campaign period coincided with a surge in COVID-19 cases, the government's lockdown measures in urban areas met with some approval and compliance, but there was a release of pent-up energy post-election, starting with early community [celebrations](#) of the NLD victory. During the election campaign period, opposition political parties initially called for postponing or delaying the vote despite joining the campaign fray themselves. The lockdown measures and COVID-related travel and movement restrictions affected election campaigning for smaller and ethnic political parties. However, the introduction of staggered and early voting for senior citizens (as well as other eligible voters applying to vote early) allowed senior citizens above the age of 60 to cast their votes early either at home or at local polling stations. These measures also garnered more overseas votes.

[Statements](#) made by [the military](#) days before the polls also galvanized people to turn out and vote for the NLD as the only choice to continue with the democratic transition. The Myanmar electorate still harbors a substantial disinclination for any return of a larger military role in politics. Thus, at the ground level, the choice seemed binary, regardless of policy platforms or candidates. Many voters took the attitude of "we vote for the NLD because we don't want the military."

The NLD also managed to outperform ethnic political parties in several areas. The ethnic political parties were keen to win a larger share of seats in the legislature at both the Union and the State/Region level, and thus competed in the elections on a platform of being better able to promote or represent the various needs and concerns of ethnic constituencies. Opposition parties presented alternative approaches or visions to tackling change and transition. The NLD's election strategy seemed to have taken all this into account and its candidates in several of Myanmar's states and regions worked the ground accordingly. The NLD thus managed to flip some votes that went to the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in 2015, while the ethnic political parties in Shan State and Rakhine State still secured a larger number of seats, consistent with the pattern of 2015.

The 2020 general election constituted Myanmar's largest democratic exercise, and was largely a safe and fair experience for the more than 30 million voters who participated. Political parties who competed for seats and lost conceded defeat graciously, with the exception of the USDP which called for a re-run of the elections and encouraged its supporters to stage public demonstrations.

Who Did Not or Could Not Vote?

Media at home and abroad had earlier picked up on the controversy of disallowing voting in certain ethnic areas. International media also highlighted the disenfranchisement of Rohingya communities.

There were thus more than a million who could not vote in Myanmar's 2020 general election. While the Rohingya communities in Myanmar and in the refugee camps in Bangladesh were topmost in the international community's minds regarding disenfranchisement, many in Myanmar voiced their concern over the [UEC's late announcement of voting cancellation](#) in large swathes of Rakhine State and Shan State, as well as parts of Kachin, Kayin, Chin, and Mon States, and Bago Region. Voting in these areas was cancelled for security reasons due to

ongoing civil conflict. While such an announcement had been expected, there was outcry over how late it was made and the lack of clarity on whether and how the UEC had sought views and recommendations from ministries and departments dealing with security issues. The voting cancellations barred candidates from competing in 15 Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house) constituencies and for seven Amyotha Hluttaw (upper house) seats. The voting cancellations and disenfranchisement of voters are indeed unfortunate; yet, they do not disqualify the democratic mandate received by the incumbent. There are now [some indications](#) that supplementary or additional elections may be held in some of these areas where voting was cancelled. Several post-election analyses and discussions have highlighted the importance of reviewing the current electoral system to address the flaws in it that prevent inclusive elections with a level playing field for all.

What Will a Second Mandate Bring? Will Foreign Policy Change?

The returned mandate for the NLD has reassured businesses and investors of continuity in key economic policies, especially with regard to business and investment plans and projects. The NLD administration in its second term will also need to tackle the urgent priority of mitigating the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing this, the government started drafting the Myanmar Economic Response and Recovery Plan in September 2020 as a successor to the COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan which was issued in April. Days after the election, the government also issued a new 90-page Development Assistance Policy 2020.

Another area of continuity will be the country's [foreign policy](#), with more nuance placed on economic diplomacy and diversification. There are also hopes to engage the incoming Biden administration in the US within the ASEAN context and in bilateral relations. In other words, the NLD will prioritize engaging with international partners on key aspects of the country's continued democratic transition.

One of these aspects will be managing the long-pending repatriation of Rohingya communities. Myanmar's domestic security situation is linked to the country's external role and image with regard to this issue. The requirement to create safe and conducive conditions for Rohingya repatriation has been affected by the security situation in Rakhine State, and is unlikely to be able to proceed until the overall security situation improves there. The ethnic Rakhine Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, continue to engage in conflict in Rakhine State. Prior to the election, the AA abducted three NLD candidates and [still had not released them](#) as of November 18, 2020 despite calls from the NLD and [concerns expressed by the US and French Embassies in Myanmar](#).

The Military and its Future Role

The military continues to hold 25 percent of the seats in Myanmar's legislature at Union and State/Region-levels. The Commander-in-Chief still appoints three ministerial portfolios: Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. However, there is recognition that civil-military relations need to return to more constructive ground after the election.

The government and military made a recent overture to ethnic armed groups—a larger number than before—to continue with the nationwide ceasefire negotiations under the Union Peace Process. This overture is an early indicator of an interest to reach a constructive understanding wherein the civilian government and the military can work together in pursuit of broader national interests. The NLD's election manifesto included several points on its vision for the military's future role. The NLD pledged to ensure that the military's first duty would be to protect the citizens and that it (the military) would uphold the policies of the country's democratically elected government. The NLD also pledged to develop the military in line with modern standards in terms of combat ability and equip it with advanced technology.

What Does the 2020 Vote Mean for Myanmar's Future Democratization?

If anything, the higher voter turnout in 2020 demonstrated that Myanmar's public is aware of the importance of participating in one of the rituals of democracy, elections. Various electoral awareness and pre-election surveys have shown that between 2015 and 2020, political awareness and engagement has increased. However, elections are just one aspect of democracy. In addition to the right to vote and stand in an election, there are also other key elements such as freedom of expression and respect for the rule of law. Myanmar is still continuing along the path to entrench these fully in society.

Myanmar's current democratization process is one that the military government scoped and scheduled via a seven-step Roadmap announced in 2003. The 2008 Constitution, which currently frames Myanmar's political life, was a result of this seven-step process. The Constitution is viewed as a constraint to Myanmar's full democratization unless and until constitutional amendments can be successfully negotiated. However, even with these constraints, the Global Democracy Index developed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, or International IDEA, places Myanmar squarely in the mid-range of democratic performance.

There is still much more to be done. The recent vote has highlighted areas where Myanmar's nascent democratic institutions can be further strengthened. With the challenge to respond to the economic and social fallout of COVID-19 at the top of governance responsibility for many governments around the world, topics of inclusion, equality, consultation, and evidence-based decision making will underpin national, regional, and global responses. These topics are also important elements for the future of democracy in Myanmar, and may provide the basis for a new roadmap towards a healthy, inclusive, and genuine democracy in the country. Myanmar's 2020 vote is another step taken along this journey.

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