

ARTICLE

Making the Best of a Bad Election

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Over the past few months, various cease-fire groups and ethnic civil society leaders have formed political parties in order to contest the forthcoming election. In fact, some two-thirds of the 42 parties which applied for registration by the end of May represent ethnic communities. A good test of the election's credibility will be whether ethnic nationality parties are able to campaign freely—and above all whether votes are counted fairly on the day.

Those I have spoken with are aware that the 2008 Constitution is deeply flawed, and that the election will result in a presidential-style government strongly controlled by the military. They are also aware, however, that 60 years of armed conflict in the border areas have done little to promote ethnic nationalities' political objectives, and that the army and its cronies already dominate most aspects of politics and the economy. Their hope is that following the election a broader range of actors will at least have some space to operate.

In Burma's last election, held in 1990, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was able to garner more than 60 percent of votes, largely due to the iconic status of its general secretary, Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite the NLD's dominance, however, 65 representatives of ethnic minority parties won seats as well. They formed a loose grouping, currently known as the United Nationalities Alliance, which was close to the NLD due to their mutual interest in seeing the 1990 election results recognized.

With respect to this year's election, the NLD chose not to register and was subsequently dissolved by the military junta. From the perspective of ethnic minority politicians, the NLD's withdrawal has left the field open to minority parties, especially in ethnic nationality-populated areas where local parties will not have to compete with the NLD for opposition votes.

This development echoes the situation during the government-controlled National Convention in 1995, when the NLD's withdrawal from the convention meant that cease-fire groups were the only voices in the forum not controlled by the military government. Although they were largely unsuccessful in having their demands included in the 2008 Constitution, the cease-fire groups' participation in the convention allowed for ethnic grievances and aspirations to be discussed on the national political stage for the first time since the early 1960s.

In 2010, a range of ethnic minority parties will compete for seats in the two nationwide assemblies, the Amyotha Hlutaung and the *Pyithu Hlutaung*—the upper and lower houses, respectively. Most, however, will focus on winning seats in the 14 state and division (the latter,

renamed “regions” under the new Constitution) assemblies. Ethnic minority parties are hoping that, with significant blocks of seats in these provincial assemblies, they will be able to leverage some control over the allocation of government revenues (including from natural resource extraction), and over language policy in schools, public administration and the court system. They also hope to exercise some checks on government power and the appointment of chief ministers.

For many parties—particularly those representing smaller ethnic communities—the election is an opportunity to demonstrate their political significance, serving to reinforce ethnic identities. For some parties associated with communities that have long-standing histories of insurgency, such as the Karen, the formation of non-armed political groups represents something of a “declaration of independence” from the politics of border-based insurgency.

Many parties are currently in the process of registration, following which they will begin organizing on the ground. They can then also start to discuss among themselves how best to avoid splitting the ethnic vote. In some states, it seems likely that a single party will be able to mobilize large sectors of the community. This is perhaps why the government has yet to accept the registration of the Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP). If the KSPP and other independent parties are unable to compete in the elections, this will seriously undermine the polls’ credibility.

Elsewhere (among the Karen community, for instance), more than one party has emerged. It will be interesting to observe whether inexperienced political leaders—who do not always enjoy smooth relationships—will be able to agree among themselves how best to cooperate. Depending on demographics and local conditions, some areas will lend themselves to tactical coalitions—with parties agreeing to endorse each other’s candidates in order not to split the ethnic vote.

Once party registrations have been accepted (or officially rejected), more formal alliances may emerge, as was the case in 1990. Some ethnic nationality politicians will find it necessary to engage with pro-government candidates—local Karen, Kachin or Mon leaders who have been co-opted into standing on behalf of the regime-organized Union Solidarity and Development Party.

Those politicians and activists I have spoken to seem confident that their parties can do well, assuming the elections are free and fair. Undoubtedly, pro-government parties will enjoy significant advantages, both politically (through their access to the state-controlled media and other public resources) and in terms of funding. The 1990 election provides a precedent for votes being counted fairly, but given the regime’s disastrous showing in that election and clear determination not to have those results repeated, it remains to be seen whether they will refrain from fraudulent practices in this year’s election.

Given such uncertainties, members of ethnic minority parties are running considerable risks, not least to their own standing within their respective communities, if they choose to stand as candidates. For this reason, the 2010 polls may be regarded as an election-by-proxy, because many of the most able individuals will be unwilling to stand for election themselves, seeking instead to mobilize others rather than participate directly.

Those nongovernment parties seeking to participate in the election face a number of constraints. Although some of the emerging parties have a fair number of well-educated leaders, others have less experienced memberships. One of the main Karen parties, for example, is well-grounded in both the Pwo (predominantly Buddhist) and S'ghaw (mostly Christian) communities of Karen State, but they lack "human capital" and locally credible candidates.

One of the main challenges facing ethnic minority parties is lack of funding. Parties need money to register candidates and for campaign expenses. However, given that ethnic parties are confident of garnering significant numbers of votes if voting is free and fair, they are counting on not needing too much money to persuade the electorate.

The day after the polls close, and for some time thereafter, it will be impossible to judge the impacts of the election on Burmese society. Most probably, we will need to wait a year or so before making assessments of whether the election has produced significant change. In the meantime, there will be plenty of evidence available to those who seek to condemn the process and point to its flaws. However, critics of participating in the elections offer no credible alternative beyond the well-trying and largely unsuccessful politics of dissent.

It should be recognized that many (although, of course, not all) of those seeking to contest the elections are doing so because they want to do what they can to change Burma for the better. They see the election as a necessary evil.

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