

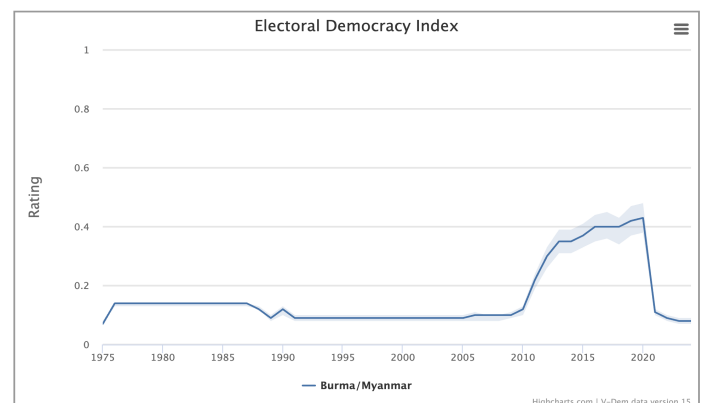


Myanmar (Burma)'s 2025 Election: Significant or Spurious?

Elections in Myanmar are set to begin on December 28th, 2025, but the legitimacy of the contest is in doubt following the 2021 military coup d'état that seemingly ended the country's brief democratic experiment. China and other authoritarian countries have emerged as strong backers of the military regime. Despite the government's optimistic statements, election monitors, international organizations, and local civil society groups have pronounced the election as illegitimate. The Burmese government has lobbied regional governments to accept the election as admissible, while at the same time removing all viable competition.

The NLD won a supermajority, defeating the civil successor party of the junta, even though 25% of legislative seats were reserved for military appointees. The period from 2015 to 2020 formally granted power to the democratically elected civilian government, though military leaders still held significant power.

Figure 1



Political Background

After a brief experiment with democracy from 1948 to 1962, Myanmar (or Burma) has been ruled by a military junta and is commonly considered among one of the most autocratic regimes in the world. Democratic movements emerged in 1988, 1996, and 2007, but were violently repressed by the government. Aung San Suu Kyi, founder of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and opposition leader, remained under house arrest for 15 years between 1989 and 2010.

Myanmar experienced a democratic opening with the release of some political prisoners and announced a transition to nominal civil rule in 2011. The 2015 elections represented a notable increase in their freeness and fairness compared to previous contests (See Figure 1).ⁱ

The 2020 elections again saw a significant victory for the NLD, winning 68% of the vote, 82% of open legislative seats at the national level, and 83% at the regional level.ⁱⁱ Three months later, however, the military brought an end to this democratic era through a coup d'état, and the military junta reformed as State Administration Council (SAC). This strongly echoed the 1990 election, where the NLD won, but the military refused to respect the results, arresting and forcing into exile many NLD officials. The February 2021 coup d'état reveals the limitations of civilian control, showing the military has always retained the ability to intervene in the political process at will. Political repression has accelerated since the 2021 coup, with an estimated



7,400 Burmese citizens killed and 22,600 detained by the current military regime through 2025.ⁱⁱⁱ

The December 2025 Elections

The first phase of the upcoming general election is set to begin on December 28th, 2025, covering 100 townships, including the capital city. A second phase is slated to start January 11, 2026, to cover the remaining townships.^{iv} The election has been continually delayed since August 2023, requiring an end to the state of emergency declared during the coup.^v Over 60 parties across Myanmar's 330 townships have registered to run, as per the Union Election Commission. Nine of the registered parties will compete nationwide while the rest will run in regional or state constituencies. Despite the Election Commission's claim that elections will be held in 330 townships, many of the townships are under resistance control. In fact, a 2024 analysis estimated that the military junta only fully controls 21% of the country's territory, with 42% controlled by resistance groups and the remaining contested.^{vi}

The electoral process, however, clearly lacks the basic tenets of democratic conduct. Critically, a January 2023 electoral law led to the banning of the top two leading opposition parties - NLD and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD),^{vii} who, if not for the coup, would be in power today.^{viii} In January 2025, the military regime announced another draconian law in which "anyone who orates, speaks, organizes, incites, protests, or distributes letters to disrupt any part of the electoral process shall be punished with three to 10 years' imprisonment."^{ix} Such legal changes under authoritarian governments that directly oppose democratic rights and processes cannot be considered legitimate.

The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is the proxy party for the military junta, and without any meaningful competition and a significant climate of fear,

is expected to win the election. The election will be held under proportional representation rules, and 25% of the seats in the legislature are still reserved for military representatives. Also breaking with standard democratic practices, the results are only expected to be announced around one month after the election, raising significant concerns of voter manipulation, falsification, and lack of transparency.^x It is also likely that polls will not be held in peripheral territories that were largely controlled by ethnic minority groups.^{xi}

Elections under Authoritarian Regimes

Pariah states like Myanmar's military junta commonly seek minimal legitimacy through the creation of basic institutions like legislatures, judiciaries, and electoral systems.^{xii} Just because elections are held, however, does not mean they are democratic.^{xiii} Scholars of democracy highlight the need for elections to follow certain standards to ensure contestation and inclusiveness in the process.^{xiv} Free and fair elections require a balanced pre-election environment and access to campaigning resources, open participation from political parties, minimal levels of vote buying or pressuring and violence, a robust and independent electoral management body, full suffrage, inclusive registration and access to polling stations, and transparent and accurate vote tabulation, among other criteria.^{xv} Furthermore, without organizational freedom for media, civil society, and political parties, elections become meaningless as voters do not experience real choices and lack access to accurate information.

Authoritarian regimes hold elections as theaters of legitimation. Citizens and international governments who support the regime can point to the existence of elections to justify their positions of power, while minimizing actual competition. Elections in Myanmar



and other autocratic countries in the region have also been shown to provide leaders with information and help them more effectively manage elites through co-optation.^{xvi} Autocrats seek to gain the benefits of perceived popularity over the opposition and a democratic veneer in the international arena, while also limiting the risk of losing power.^{xvii}

Autocratic Backers

China has long taken a strong interest in the politics of its neighbors, with more attention and support towards the government of Myanmar in recent years. China's top leadership, including President Xi Jinping, has held multiple meetings with Burmese leader General Min Aung Hlaing, overtly supporting the electoral exercise. China has played "kingmaker" in northern Burma, pressuring ethnic armed groups to sign ceasefires in exchange for *de facto* autonomy elsewhere. Reports suggest that the Chinese government has heavily lobbied other countries in the region to accept and not speak out against the upcoming election in Myanmar.

Authoritarian governments require financial stability to secure cohesion within the military,^{xviii} either through the exploitation of natural resources, like oil,^{xix} or a powerful external sponsor^{xx}. The flow of money and resources helps cohere elites within autocratic regimes, resulting in fewer coup attempts and thus a more stable authoritarian regime.^{xxi} Not only has China played a stronger diplomatic role in support of the military junta, but reports show extensive financial and military aid since 2021, including fighter jets, artillery, surveillance drones, and IT systems that have already been deployed against civilians.^{xxii}

A U.N. report showed that from 2021 to 2023, the military junta received over \$1 billion worth of military equipment, primarily from Russia, China, and Singapore.^{xxiii} Insiders also report that China is

contributing significant financial resources to the administration of the upcoming polls.

A Valid Election?

General Min Aung Hlaing has sought to build regional diplomatic support ahead of this year's elections, meeting with the leaders of China, Russia, and India.^{xxiv} Of central focus has been lobbying leading ASEAN countries, which hold more democratic legitimacy, to endorse the process. The Burmese government has been clear about how they wish the upcoming election to be viewed. Over the past year, Min Aung Hlaing has stated that the government is committed to "strengthening the multiparty democratic system and returning to the correct democratic path,"^{xxv} and that the election will be a "genuine, disciplined multiparty democratic system and the building of a union based on democracy and federalism." The Chinese foreign minister has echoed these sentiments, referring to the election as "all-inclusive" and a "peace and reconciliation" effort.^{xxvi} Local reports also indicate the military junta is attempting to coerce citizens to support the election through creating art and films, and cracking down on critical social media posts through monitoring and arrests.

International pressure from leading democracies increased following the 2021 coup, with the United States, European Union, and United Kingdom adding to and retaining significant sanctions on the Burmese government.^{xxvii} At the 47th ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Summit, Thomas Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, not only described the election as a sham, but also spoke out against the acceptance of the election in any capacity stating: "To recognise the junta's fraudulent election would be to move Myanmar backward and defend the indefensible. ASEAN leaders

must refrain from doing anything to legitimise the junta's charade, including sending observers to monitor the polls."^{xxviii}

Domestic political and civil society actors have also condemned the upcoming election. The General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN), a multi-ethnic organization opposing the junta government, announced in September that 315 Myanmar civil society organizations had sent a joint letter to ASEAN leaders lobbying them to reject the "illegitimate" election.^{xxix} Representatives of Myanmar's Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) speaking at the 151st Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Assembly in Geneva, called on the international community to reject the legitimacy of the military regime's election.^{xxx}

Additionally, Kaja Ollongren, the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, stated that "the necessary conditions for the free and fair elections in Myanmar have not been met."^{xxxi} Furthermore, she affirmed that election observers will not be sent to Myanmar which is not expected to be representative, fair, or legitimate.^{xxxii} On October 13th, Myanmar's UN Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, who was appointed prior to the 2021 coup, addressed the UN Security Council, claiming that there cannot be a free, fair, and inclusive election under the rule of the junta. He lists the lack of democratic institutions, the corruption of the rule of law, the escalation of widespread violence against civilians, the lack of effective control by the government, and the lack of legitimacy of the junta by the people as reasons why the validity of the election must be rejected.^{xxxiii} U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has further commented that, "I don't think anybody believes that those elections will be free and fair."^{xxxiv}

A collection of election monitoring groups has also arrived at the same conclusion regarding the validity of the elections. The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections

(BERSIH) opposes the "sham elections" and calls on ASEAN to reject the election, which "lacks all credibility and legitimacy." Leading monitoring groups, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), concluded in a joint statement that "a genuine election in Myanmar is impossible under current conditions."

On October 11th, multiple former ASEAN foreign ministers called on ASEAN as an organization to reject the sham election and delegitimize the rule of the junta in a joint statement.^{xxxv} They concluded, "For ASEAN to have any hope of reversing the damage that its years of failure have inflicted on both Myanmar and itself, it must act now." ASEAN's foreign ministers concluded that "the cessation of violence and inclusive political dialogue must precede elections," and will therefore not be sending election observers.^{xxxvi}

Despite a strong diplomatic effort by the governments of Myanmar and China to cast the election in a positive light, the overwhelming consensus of the broader international community and democratic advocates from Myanmar is that the upcoming elections are a far cry from the basic conditions required to allow for free expression of the Burmese people.

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