

**Myanmar's electoral landscape vibrant, but fraught with uncertainties** by Phuong Nguyen

*Phuong Nguyen (pnguyen@csis.org) is a research associate with the Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. This analysis originally appeared in "Southeast Asia from Scott Circle," the newsletter of the Sumitro Chair.*

On Sept. 8, Myanmar entered a two-month election campaign period, the culmination of at least a year of excitement, political intrigue, and wrangling among different players. The United States and other international players have been concerned that the elections, expected to take place on Nov. 8, will not be entirely free and fair. But a closer look reveals a very dynamic and fluid picture.

A total of 93 political parties and roughly 6,300 candidates will compete in almost 1,200 constituencies, including for the 498 elected seats in the national legislature – 75 percent of the total seats – which means on average almost 9 candidates are contesting each seat. (The remaining 166 seats are appointed by the military commander-in-chief.) Equally striking is that the majority of candidates across the political spectrum reportedly believe that they have a fair shot at winning in the polls, an energy unleashed by years of repressive rule and bottled-up dissent in Myanmar's society.

The ruling, military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), whose senior members engineered the reform process that started after President Thein Sein took office in 2011, sees the elections as essentially a game of seats. The USDP is prepared to lose a significant number of seats given the more intense and direct competition among the various parties and candidates – a stark contrast to the 2010 election in which the USDP carried the majority of seats and which was widely regarded as a sham election.

Senior government sources have privately said that the USDP hopes to win around 15 percent of contested seats, which, when combined with the 25 percent reserved for military representatives, would account for about 40 percent of the next Parliament. The USDP could also seek to form a coalition with ethnic political parties to reach a simple majority, potentially allowing it to maintain a dominant role in politics beyond 2015.

The USDP is, for the time being, still the only party in Myanmar with the financial resources and party network to provide direct assistance to local constituencies, and has at different times sought to deploy this leverage. Fifty-one percent of people in Myanmar surveyed last year by the International Republican Institute said they had a favorable view of the ruling party – possibly a nod to the positive changes ushered in by Thein Sein. But it remains to be seen

whether the USDP can fully tap into the advantages of its incumbency.

For opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), its best outcome would be to win at least two-thirds of available seats, thus having the power to nominate the next president and call the shots in the new Parliament. While a few years ago the NLD was expected to carry the day in a fairly free election, it is clear that the party now faces more challenges than previously thought.

In recent months, both the party and Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership style have been openly criticized for the first time. Her exclusion of a number of prominent members of the Generation 88 pro-democracy group, along with other popular activists, from the party's candidate list has been controversial and raised questions about whether Suu Kyi is more interested in preserving the NLD as her own political vehicle or building it into a genuine force pushing for greater democracy in Myanmar.

Like the USDP, the NLD is fielding mostly ethnic Burman candidates, even in the ethnic states home to large minority populations. Yet, with a proliferation of ethnic-based political parties – most large ethnic-based political parties boycotted the 2010 elections, and although many reentered the fold for the 2012 by-elections, the number of seats in 2012 was considerably smaller – ethnic voters may well vote for candidates who share their background and grievances. Thus the NLD will almost inevitably have to pursue coalition building with ethnic parties following the elections.

Suu Kyi dismissed an offer to forge an alliance with the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), a coalition of eight ethnic-based parties, and chose to run candidates in constituencies in which the UNA is also competing. While the NLD could seek to cobble together a coalition after the elections, the decision to compete against ethnic parties could suggest to ethnic politicians that the NLD is most concerned about its own success and make them wary about what an alliance with the NLD would look like.

Ethnic parties are not contesting nationwide like the USDP and NLD, but they will most likely have a say in the makeup of the ruling coalition in a future government. The prospect of the USDP and the NLD forging an alliance in 2016 – which was seen as possible before the removal of Aung San Suu Kyi's political ally Shwe Mann from the USDP's chairmanship – has dimmed significantly. That said, how Suu Kyi approaches the military and the USDP after the November elections will still be a crucial determinant for the stability of the post-election political climate.

It is impossible to predict how the elections will play out. In addition to the complex and fluid dynamics among the major players, a range of other factors may further complicate

an already volatile environment. For example, while the Union Election Commission (UEC) [has taken a leading role](#) in engaging civil society and political parties, local governments and election subcommissions have made uneven or no effort to engage their jurisdictions, according to a [Carter Center field report](#) released in August.

The United States should prepare to deal with risks and challenges that could emanate from different places, most notably the risks of electoral or communal violence. Although the presence of international and domestic observers at a large number of polling stations will help boost the credibility and transparency of the voting process, it may not lessen the potential security risks that could come from either popular dissatisfaction with authorities or tensions between communities of different ethnic or religious backgrounds.

It also remains to be seen whether the police, along with its auxiliary of at least 20,000 recruited volunteers, and the active ethnic armed groups and militias in rural areas will agree to behave professionally and peacefully. Many observers believe that the widespread use of social media in recent years will further complicate the picture. Even as it adds more transparency to the process, social media can be a platform to fuel tensions and dissent, especially on issues of ethnicity and religion in Myanmar.

While it may be tempting to focus on the list of things that could go wrong in the elections – after all, politics are fraught everywhere, especially in a young, fledgling democracy – for the first time in Myanmar’s history there is both real competition in politics and a will shared by virtually all stakeholders to make the democratic process work. This is the lens through which outside observers should look at the elections.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*