





Workers in Yangon remove an NLD campaign poster ahead of the 2020 election, which the NLD won in a landslide. (Frontier)

# From the coup to something called an 'election'

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OPINION

**Myanmar's junta appears determined to hold a national election this year, but the vote will be a sham, logistically difficult to pull off and will almost certainly provoke greater violence.**

By MARY CALLAHAN | FRONTIER

Just a handful of autocrats will endorse the results. Precious money and resources will be wasted. Violence will almost certainly worsen. And yet, the junta led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing remains committed to holding an “election” in 2023 that few in Myanmar want.

After thousands of deaths, at least a [million people displaced](#), a massive nationwide drop into severe poverty, war crimes on at least a weekly basis and the broad militarisation of society, the regime believes it will hold an election by August 1 this year, the legally mandated end of its emergency rule provisions.

Whatever else this theatrical undertaking turns out to be, it does not appear to be either an “exit strategy” for senior military officials or an attempt to achieve peace. Moreover, there will be no independent findings that the results represent a credible reflection of Myanmar's electorate.



Throughout Myanmar's post-independence history, the country's military rulers have concocted elections on their own terms. The 2015 election remains the outlier – the only instance since General Ne Win's 1962 coup d'état where the military lost and accepted the results. It refused to recognise the National League for Democracy's similar landslide election victories in 1990 and 2020, while the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party won amid an NLD boycott in 2010.

This next election is rooted in Min Aung Hlaing's fabricated justification for the February 2021 coup – that the NLD led by then-State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi won the 2020 election due to massive voter fraud.

This narrative, which invokes the founding claim of the military to be the only reliable guardian of the nation, obscured what were arguably the real factors behind the takeover, such as the senior general's personal ambition, legally required retirement in 2021 and growing rancour at Aung San Suu Kyi.

The commander-in-chief and his handpicked [Union Election Commission](#), consisting of 15 elderly men, have appeared confident from day one of delivering what they frequently describe as a much better, cleaner and – rather improbably – more inclusive election than the NLD oversaw in 2020.

But even meeting the August 1 deadline is a challenge. Since independence in 1948, Myanmar has never held a general election in July – the middle of Buddhist Lent and peak rainy season.

May, just before the rains, is a more common month but time is running out. Before then, the UEC must compile voter lists, register and vet political parties and candidates, organise an expected shake-up of constituencies, change the electoral system from first-past-the-post to one based on proportional representation, and allow time for campaigning – rumoured to be extended from 60 days to 90 days.



The expected introduction of an entirely new voting system is **clearly intended to benefit pro-military candidates**, as the NLD had won more seats than its proportion of the popular vote in the winner-take-all system in 2015 and 2020, while the USDP suffered the reverse fate.



NLD supporters celebrate outside party headquarters in Yangon, after a landslide election victory in 2015, the only electoral loss the military has accepted since the 1962 coup. (AFP)

The junta may adopt what is known as the “largest remainder” system of proportional representation, with candidates running on party lists and numbers of seats assigned by quota. The administrative focal point would shift from 330 township-based constituencies to 100-plus districts. Potentially the use of a smaller number of geographically larger constituencies makes it easier for the military-appointed UEC to exert control. Presumably the army can secure a few polling stations in at least half of those districts? Maybe even all?

Combined with the constitutionally-mandated 25 percent of seats in both parliamentary chambers that are directly appointed by the commander-in-chief – along with an expected boycott by many parties and voters – Min Aung Hlaing might think he is assured victory.

But regardless of constituency size and seat allocation, compiling voter lists is fraught with difficulties and danger. Ministries have never maintained a centralised registry of citizens, leaving that kind of record-keeping to ward and village tract offices, which in theory (but rarely in practice) updated records at the township administrative office. In many parts of the country since the coup, local officials have been chased out or killed by resistance forces, and residency ledgers have been torched or blown up.

Any serious attempt at a voter list update will require on-the-ground data collection in places where anyone involved in any kind of regime project – and the election in particular – will be considered a target by anti-junta groups.

Whatever way the regime manipulates the process, the scene is set for Myanmar’s most violent election in history. Electoral violence was not unusual in the 1950s “parliamentary” era, when many politicians of the ruling Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League campaigned with so-called pocket armies (*gabaik-saung tat*). In 1951-52, fighting was so widespread that delayed elections were unconstitutionally held in three stages, with turnout reaching just 18pc.

Rumours have circulated that the junta is thinking of replicating this kind of staggered election, starting with a first round of polling in places it can protect from resistance attacks. There is a recent precedent of sorts: in the 2020 election, most parts of Ann Township in Rakhine State were cancelled for “security reasons”, except for the large area occupied by the Western Regional Command, where soldiers and their families voted. Afterwards, the military proposed holding **supplementary elections** in cancelled areas after agreeing a ceasefire with the Arakan Army, but they were never held.

Areas where the military has a strong presence, like Nay Pyi Taw, Pyin Oo Lwin, Mingaladon and Meiktila (at least around the airfield), could possibly sustain security for some campaigning and one day of voting. In other parts of the country where daily violence is occurring, there remain islands of military security. For example, Magway Region has vast areas occupied by as many as 20 military weapons factories, with possibly up to 50,000 soldiers, employees, guards and their families in massive and highly secured compounds, which could also host campaigns and polling stations.

Voting could also possibly be held in the more than 200 villages across the country controlled by pro-military Pyusawhti militias, and more than 2,000 military landholdings, garrisons, arms factories and agribusiness plantations, such as the giant oil palm and rubber concessions in Tanintharyi Region.

There is even a remote chance that first-round elections could be held in territory controlled by some ethnic armed groups that have not joined the fight against the junta, like the United Wa State Army or New Mon State Party. Other ethnic armed groups have made it clear this electoral exercise won't be tolerated. The chairman of the Kachin Independence Organisation, a key player in the resistance, warned that any party that participates in the election is “standing with the enemy” – another hint of the violence the vote could bring.

Attempts to reach even half the number of districts will put large numbers of civilians in harm's way.



Anyone who votes, no matter who they vote for, will be considered complicit and therefore a legitimate target for radical guerrilla groups. Meanwhile, anyone who refuses to vote could find their homes raided by police – or worse, given the army’s penchant for airstrikes, artillery attacks and arson against civilians.

Given the challenges and dangers, it is possible to imagine two scenarios. In the first, the commander-in-chief runs polls in around 200 to 400 places, down from 40,000 in 2020, with heavy air and ground support. In the second, he orders a legal advisor to find a way around the August 1 deadline and postpone the election. The latter, however, would involve a significant loss of face for Min Aung Hlaing, because he is a product of a military that fetishises elections, even though it almost always loses the ones it holds.



A woman votes in the 1990 election, which the NLD won in a landslide, but the military refused to recognise. (AFP)

Who will run in the election? Hundreds of high-ranking military officers have been or will be pensioned off to stand for the USDP or some other military-aligned party. A motley crew of political parties with no real support base will also be expected to contest. They include the Shan Nationalities Development Party (considered a USDP proxy in 2010) and former human rights activist Ko Ko Gyi's People's Party. The National Democratic Front and People's Pioneer Party – both NLD

breakaway parties – will also undoubtedly join, as both of their leaders hold senior positions in the junta.

Of more concern to the pro-democracy movement would be if credible ethnic minority parties, with grievances against the NLD, decide to contest. The Mon Unity Party has already confirmed its intention to participate, and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy and Arakan National Party have both declined to rule it out (although neither have made any moves that indicate they are preparing for an election). All three had relatively strong showings in 2020 and are considered among the most influential ethnic parties.

But despite [reports](#) of a recent ham-fisted attempt to get the blessing of Aung San Suu Kyi, there seems no possible scenario in which the NLD would participate, a prerequisite for a legitimate election in Myanmar.

Finally, which countries would lend their blessing to this sham? China and Russia, providers of weapons and a diplomatic shield in the United Nations Security Council, are the most likely. India and Thailand, important neighbours with their own agendas, may also recognise the process and the results. Few other countries, though, can be expected to pay the election any regard.

Yet, regardless of its attempts to stage-manage the vote, the military has a mixed record on controlling the process and fallout of elections. The military's political proxies lost elections in 1960 and 1990, despite the playing field being heavily tilted in their favour, forcing it to take more drastic measures to reassert control. And even when the USDP won in 2010, a small number of handpicked military generals and admirals went on to hijack the implementation of the 2008 Constitution and steer it in an unexpectedly reformist direction. While the military likely hopes an election will help stabilise its rule, it may instead be unleashing something it can't control.

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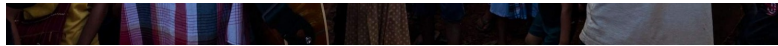
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