



Australian  
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# THE MEANING OF MYANMAR'S 2015 ELECTION

## SUMMARY PAPER

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*Image: Hpa-an, Justine Chambers, 2015*

# SUMMARY

November 8 2015 election saw the re-emergence of genuine and widespread voter engagement in contentious party politics. Despite fears of widespread electoral fraud or inaccurate voter lists, the process was generally orderly, violence-free and in accordance with standard procedure.

For many voters, including people in ethnic minority areas, the election was perceived as a referendum on authoritarian rule. The NLDs campaign focusing on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the repudiation of military rule and the promise of change resonated across constituencies — notably ethnicity.

The election results complicate many long-held assumptions about voter behaviour. This is especially true of ethnic voting in light of the failure of many ethnic parties that succeeded in the 2010 elections.

The electoral process was also contentious and divisive, especially given the questions about the status of Muslims in Myanmar that circulated during the campaign.

The elections should be viewed as part of a broader process of state-building, and a key mechanism in developing legitimacy and trust in Myanmar's civilian government — including the Union Election Commission (UEC) itself.



Image: Naypyitaw, Olivia Cable, 2015



# BACKGROUND

On 13 November 2015, a closed-session roundtable was held at University of Yangon's Department of International Relations in collaboration with The Australian National University's Myanmar Research Centre.

The session was attended by over 30 foreign and Myanmar scholars, journalists and electoral advisors who shared their thoughts on Myanmar's November 8 elections. While not comprehensive, participants shared their observations from experiences across the country in the lead up to elections and on polling day, including from Bago Division, Irrawaddy Delta, Kachin State, Karen State, Mon State, Naypyitaw, Rakhine State, Shan State and Yangon Division.

Discussions focused on the processes and interactions that occurred during Myanmar's 2015 elections, including party development, voter engagement and the campaign; the efficacy of the electoral process and perceptions of integrity; the management of election results; and the implications of initial outcomes for Myanmar's ongoing transition.

The session was held under Chatham House rules, with following outlining participants' observations without mentioning contributors specifically.



Image: Taungoo, Gerard McCarthy, 2015

## Party development, voter engagement and the campaign

### Conduct of the campaign

The most notable features of Myanmar's 2015 election were the high level of voter interest and the lively and open nature of campaigning by political parties. This contrasted with the 2010 elections, when campaigning was heavily restricted.

References to the concerns of 'the people' (*pyithu ludu*) were universal across political parties and geographical locations, including in ethnic minority areas. Many people at campaign events said it was their first time attending. A number of participants had been told by voters that they had become involved in party campaigns because "they are not scared anymore". Many people re-engaged in politics through small actions such as posting stickers on their motorbikes and flying flags from cars or bicycles. This is a notable change from the limited direct engagement of everyday people in the 2012 by-elections and especially the 2010 national elections prior to the liberalisation of media and party involvement.

Both the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the National League for Democracy (NLD) used photos of their leaders prominently in campaign materials, often superseding candidates themselves. The NLD in particular often focused solely on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, with campaigning in some areas around Yangon consisting exclusively of speeches by Daw Suu broadcast over loudspeakers. Candidates in these rallies received very little attention, an outcome that reflects directives from Daw Suu to focus on the party. While there were many critics of this 'party focused' strategy, it appears to have been successful.

A related concern was the relative absence of ideas and specific policies during the campaign — beyond abstract claims to representing the interests of 'the people'. The cornerstone of the NLD's campaign appeared to be the illegitimacy of the USDP government, while promising a vague idea of 'change'. Again, these themes resonated with many voters, and their perception that the elections were a referendum on authoritarian rule. The other recurring idea in the campaign was fear of Muslim ascendancy and the need to protect Buddhism — a notion which was promoted by Buddhist nationalist group Ma Ba Tha and which many felt compelled to comply with.

How parties campaigned varied according to their size and reach. For example, many people learnt about the elections from watching candidate speeches and news on TV. Various party platforms were revealed through stump speeches on TV, with the National Unity Party emphasising farmers and a mixed economy and the National Development Party (NDP) focusing on

a market economy and Buddhist nationalism. Many small parties struggled to make an impact, and some encountered sabotage or vandalism with their stickers and posters often being taken down within 12 hours of being posted.

Street campaigning often resembled Thingyan Burmese New Year floats, with singers and dancers gyrating to party anthems while draped in party shirts and flags. One attendee recounted a discussion with local USDP and NLD campaign managers who said that playing music from Thingyan-esque floats was essential to re-engaging people in politics through "infotainment".

Campaign events were also hierarchical. In many villages, candidates often sat on a slightly elevated platform near the household shrine and would largely speak at — rather than with — members of the local community. There was no real discussion about community problems.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was one prominent exception, taking Q&A sessions at a number of her campaign events. The format occasionally backfired for other candidates, with a USDP candidate taking questions at a campaign event from farmers who then claimed that his wife had stolen their land.

This hierarchical dimension sometimes seeped into images of candidates. One participant recounted her experiences with a photographer who was advising an USDP candidate. The candidate asked for images portraying him as a strong man, but was told that with the recent changes it would be better to be seen working with the people.

Social media was used sporadically throughout the campaign, especially by younger candidates and by members of the public. This was important in terms of voter knowledge and engagement. In ethnic Karen Hpa-an it was noted that a majority of people did not know about the election in 2010. In 2015 they say they felt much more confident about what they knew about candidates and party platforms — often as a result of a few members of a village having a smartphone with Facebook.

Many candidates seemed fearful of using Facebook as they said it was easy to lose control of the comments and spark abuse as the conversation shifted to individual users' pages. In one example, scrutiny of military voting became a focus of Facebook abuse, with many soldiers who put their role in the Tatmadaw on their profile allegedly receiving abusive comments as users assumed they had voted for the USDP. One participant recounted her experience with a soldier in Naypyitaw whose Facebook feed was filled with pictures of Min Aung Hlaing and other senior military figures. Given many soldiers are similarly proud of their military identity and institution, there was concern that Facebook could exacerbate pre-existing polarisation and compartmentalisation of civilian and military worlds.

A number of townships with a concentration of senior regime people appeared to see a large amount of USDP and religious campaigning in the weeks prior to the poll. For instance, U Wirathu spoke twice in the month prior to the vote in Zabuthiri in Naypyitaw, the constituency where former Senior General Than Shwe cast his ballot. Other USDP candidates appeared to have seen the impending NLD landslide coming. In Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's own seat, one of the USDP candidates actually campaigned on the fact that he was voting for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and asked people to support both him and her.



The absence of major violence during the campaign was significant, particularly given many people's fear that the rhetoric of Buddhist nationalist group Ma Ba Tha was likely to spark conflict. One reason for this may have been that campaign events tended to start early in the morning — often at or before 7am. This seemed to make the task of public order a little easier as there were fewer inebriated people in attendance. More broadly it was noted that military uniforms, weapons and violence were all largely absent from the campaign — a generalisation that certainly could not have been made of the 2010 elections. While the election might not be labelled as perfectly 'free and fair', all were impressed and proud that everyone — especially the Union Election Commission — performed so well.

## Dispute resolution

The contentious nature of the Myanmar 2015 election campaign was evident in claims by all parties that stickers and signboards were removed by rivals. This was particularly an issue for the National Democratic Force in some townships of Yangon. One participant mentioned that in southern Africa there is frequently systematic removal of posters, and that it often becomes a major source of tension during campaigns.

While there did not appear to be systematic removal of party posters in Myanmar, it appears that when individual instances did occur these issues required mediation. Issues were frequently escalated to the police, with many campaign managers and candidates demanding criminal investigations be launched after signboards were vandalised. This indicates the poor state of inter-party relations and trust, especially between the USDP and the NLD, at a local level.

In some cases, local committees run by the Union Election Commission mediated disputes between parties. One example was the well-publicised case in Rakhine State where it was claimed the USDP was seeking to deceive voters by using a similar green colour in their posters to the Arakan National Party. After mediation by the local UEC office the USDP ceased using those particular posters.

The development of a Political Party Code of Conduct — agreed by all major parties — was potentially a major factor in why the elections were so remarkably peaceful. The code's formulation brought together a wide-range of actors to discuss how to campaign responsibly and also encouraged formation of localised Union Election Commission mediation committees to help diffuse tensions. There was substantial variation in the degree to which these committees were successful, but in some places — notably in Rakhine State — they played major roles in avoiding dispute escalation. The local relationships created to resolve campaign disputes are only likely to be enhanced in future elections.



Image: Hpa-an, Justine Chambers, 2015

## Efficacy of electoral process

### Voter lists

Myanmar's media rich environment meant unprecedented exposure to and scrutiny of the voter list. The list was displayed in local ward offices over a series of phases. These were supported by radio, TV, print and social media campaigns, as well as over 18 million text messages sent by the UEC encouraging people to check lists.

The local display of voter lists often saw people check names on behalf of their family and friends. Many people took photos of entire voter lists in their wards, posting them to Facebook and tagging as many people as possible to encourage them to check their names.

There are few places in the world where 100 per cent of citizens will come to check their names on voter lists. However, the fact that there were four million changes in names from the first display through to the last suggests widespread engagement and an institution struggling to be as responsive as possible to citizen needs. The degree of citizen engagement in the electoral process is relatively new for Myanmar, and may have the important effect of developing the UEC's credibility and accessibility for everyday citizens in future election.

In areas of high migration such as Hlatharyar in Yangon, there was immense complexity in organising voter lists and election processes and a lot of criticism of the UEC administration. Despite the fact that they ran ad hoc campaigns of voter inclusion and education, many people who had filed forms did not manage to get on the voter list. Correcting the voter list and recording changes in household registration in these places of high migration was simply an overwhelming task for the UEC. In some areas the General Administration Department (GAD) could have taken a more active role in electoral administration.

Part of the challenge of verifying and improving lists was that the voter list was built on a combination of household registration and a GAD list. Data was incorrect and inconsistent, though there is an organisational culture in Myanmar where people are reluctant to blame another agency for inaccuracies. The result was that lists were inconsistent, and there was widespread popular complaint about subsequent inaccuracies without explanation for the origin of such flaws. In the end, however, the prevalent fear that large numbers of people would be turned away at polling stations simply did not eventuate as. Despite significant criticism of the digitisation of comprehensive voter lists, the UEC acknowledged that it was the right decision as it will assist in future election administration.

Some people's names were recorded incorrectly on initial lists, and then repeatedly needed to correct them during the various phases of voter list scrutiny. Meanwhile, in some areas there were attempts to take non-residents off lists. Migrants often wanted to remain on the registration list as it may impact their access to benefits and bureaucracy, especially in regions of high out-migration like Hpa-an in Kayin State. The result is that in those areas turnout was substantially lower — below 50 per cent in some regions.

Theoretically, those people could've come back from Thailand to vote. It was noted that the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi did focus on people returning to vote, though ethnic parties in Shan State did not emphasise this as much as perhaps they could've. However, if the UEC had opened polling stations around the border areas, the Thai police may have engaged in predatory visa checks to catch out over-stayers and request bribes.

Overall, people had to be proactive in securing their right to vote. Ultimately, this raises questions about Myanmar's legislative and bureaucratic processes and how it keeps records of citizens. Currently, it is a passive system, where interactions with government are taken as a record of citizenship. This was somewhat modernised during the election through the creation of a digitised voter list. But it is only one part of a much larger question of civil reforms and how Myanmar wishes to deal with processes of civil registration, state building and bureaucratisation.

### Voting process

Voters seemed to be well informed and knowledgeable about how to vote. In the stations observed by participants, there were fewer invalid votes than expected. Some voters were confused as to which box they needed to place various ballots, though if voters realised they had placed their ballot into the wrong box the presiding officer made a record and observers were informed. When polls closed, these votes were then transferred to the correct box and counted.

UEC officers at polling stations and township level were fair and firm with how they managed the voting process, ensuring that voters had a free choice. Where NLD representatives or supporters broke the Code of Conduct — for instance by wearing campaign t-shirts near polling stations — the presiding officer was quick to remind them of the relevant rules and regulations.

Depending on the ethnicity recorded on their National Registration Card (NRC) and their state or division of residence, voters received an additional ballot to vote for the relevant ethnic affairs minister in that region. However there was some confusion around identity — with only those whose NRC cards stated full minority ethnicity being permitted to vote in many cases, disenfranchising those whose cards recorded a dual ethnicity (eg Bamar-Kayin) or whose NRC did not reflect their felt ethnicity.

In one case, a Mon woman in Yangon — where there is no Mon ethnic affairs minister as the population is below the necessary threshold — was offered the choice to vote either for the Kayin or the Rakhine ethnic affairs minister after showing her NRC to the presiding officer. It seemed that as she was a member



of a 'national race' (*taiyinthar*), she should be entitled to vote for an ethnic affairs minister even if her own ethnicity was not represented.

Another voter was not able to vote for the Karen ethnic affairs minister in Yangon as her ethnicity was not correctly recorded on the voter list and she had not checked it earlier. This highlights the profoundly confusing and occasionally inconsistent understanding and treatment of ethnicity and 'national races' at various tiers of the Myanmar bureaucracy. On a broad basis, however, there was substantive interest from ethnic communities in voting for the relevant ethnic affairs minister despite ambiguity in their constitutional role.

The availability of advance voting seemed to be up to the presiding officer. In Kachin State it was very difficult for journalists to get authorisation for advance voting, whereas in Yangon others simply visited a local UEC office prior to polling with an air ticket and were permitted to vote early. There was extraordinary adherence to voter intentions during advance voting. At a small station in Yangon someone voted invalidly for the *Pyithu Hluttaw*. The presiding officer noticed the mistake, went searching for the voter and had them return to complete their other ballots validly.



Image: Naypyitaw, Olivia Cable, 2015

## Election results

### Counting, advanced vote and release of results

Generally, counting was orderly and often watched by a domestic observer and party officials within the polling station. In many places, results were posted on the outside of the polling station once counting had been completed, an important measure of electoral integrity.

The speed with which this process occurred varied greatly according to the capacity of the presiding officer. Depending on the counting system adopted — eg whether advance votes for all houses of parliament were counted prior to commencing the counting of polling day ballots — greatly impacted the speed of the count.

Advanced votes, the source of much criticism and many accusations of fraud during the 2010 elections, were managed differently in the 2015 elections. As opposed to releasing the advanced voting results after the election day count, these ballots were often counted first within the polling station. In some polling stations in Yangon many of these advanced votes went to the NLD, though this was not a pattern seen throughout the country. The NLD was much more involved in advanced voting than in 2010, even assisting in organising advanced voting for their supporters. This helped to build a sense of greater transparency about advanced votes, though scepticism still remained, especially in Kachin and Shan States where there were particular problems with the timely arrival and counting of advance votes.

Beyond the polling station, communicating counted results to the UEC in Naypyitaw and to the public varied from state to state. In theory, state and region sub-commissions were meant to collate the results before sending them to Naypyitaw. However, in some places — like Shan State — it was decided to cut the district from this chain in order to speed up the process. This created some confusion about what had happened with results, prompting speculation about fraud. However, the nationalisation of this process in Naypyitaw, and the release of results from Monday 9 November, was a healthy measure that also had the effect of capturing attention in the new capital.

Relatedly, there was considerable criticism of the speed of the results release — especially in the initial days after the elections. It was noted that results were released in half the time compared to 2010 — with 80 per cent of seats announced within five days after the poll. The UEC could have possibly better explained what the process of counting entails and why it takes time in order to help manage expectation.

The attention the release of results drew was in contrast to the 2010 elections, when it did not matter what the results were as

there were insufficient opposition candidates to beat the USDP. As the stakes of this election were different, and the opposition had a serious chance at taking government, there was much greater popular interest in 2015. Another major contrast between the 2010 and 2015 elections was that results from the townships were all accurate, in terms of their local tabulation and how they were released by the UEC. While this was not the case in 2010, the groups that monitored the process for the 2015 elections confirmed that the results were largely accurate.

The new media environment has been particularly important in allowing the local and international community to stay informed about counting. While there was clear potential for violence around the elections, the availability of information seemed to manage expectations and conflict. A contrast was drawn with southern Africa, where there were hundreds of complaints in Mozambique's 2014 election about the counting process — including claims that electricity and phone networks were deliberately cut in order to create an opportunity to alter the count.

The role that Facebook played as a mechanism for accountability was notable. In particular, the flooding of results onto people's Facebook feeds four times a day in the week after the poll helped to create a popular acknowledgement that a process was occurring — building a sense that the UEC was fairly open and transparent. There was, however, clear frustration that results from urban areas such as Yangon and Naypyitaw had not been released days after the poll despite the UEC in all likelihood possessing those results.

### Initial perceptions of voter behaviour

The results suggest complex and fascinating voting behaviour. In some areas it was a 'red-wash' for the NLD, though there were also pockets — such as in central southern Mandalay — where the USDP managed to pick up seats in places such as Meiktila.

The shallow stock of extant knowledge on historical voter behaviour in Myanmar is a major barrier for understanding the context of these results. Essentially, we do not know much about why many people actually voted the way they did in 1990, which gives us little historical counterpoint. Myanmar remains completely under-researched in this area, so the need to explore the logics behind voter behaviour — especially in ethnic minority areas — is essential prior to the 2020 elections.

Generally, however, it was clear that voters approached the election as a referendum on authoritarian rule. The NLD's campaign focusing on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the repudiation of military rule and the promise of change, resonated across constituencies — including ethnic minorities.

Ethnic parties' lack of success was linked to the extreme fragmentation — often at state encouragement — which has occurred around local ethnicity and identity. Some participants suggested that the 'ethnic vote' may have been split by multiple parties running in the same township. Others questioned the viability of building a party on the sole basis of ethnicity alone, and whether the entire political project of ethnic parties will be able to survive given the appeal of the NLD as a national party in ethnic minority areas.



Ethnic minority voters, particularly in Hpa-an and Thandaun Gyi in Kayin State, saw the elections as an opportunity for national transformation. A theme which minority voters in these areas frequently referred to was that they needed to “vote for national change, not just their own kind/ethnicity” — highlighting a sense of national membership and aspiration that may have been underestimated by many observers.

Where ethnic parties bucked the trend of fragmentation and instead merged — namely in Rakhine State — these parties proved to be more successful. Meanwhile, in Shan State it appears rural Shan voted for the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) — which won many seats in the north where it was formed. In contrast, it appears that the urban middle class merchants who supported the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party and led to its success at the 2010 elections after the SNLD boycott, ended up defecting and voting for the NLD in 2015.

A similar conflict of ethnic and national aspiration was noted in Mon state, where voters wanted to give their vote for ‘change’ while also supporting their Mon ethnic nationality. By running local Mon candidates — a strategy that the NLD adopted across ethnic minority areas — the NLD was able to make a vote for them carry both of these aspirations. More research is needed to explain why the NLD was so successful in ethnic minority areas. Was it lack of knowledge about ethnic parties? Did their messages simply not resonate with voters?

The cancellation of voting in some areas was a source of considerable tension, especially in Shan State where the ethnic parties suggested that voting was called off in areas where they were likely to perform well. In reality, there were a variety of reasons for cancellation depending on when the voting was cancelled, with the primary variables being timing and the kind of government presence in those areas. In a few townships where there is very little government presence, voting was cancelled prior to the posting of voter lists as the GAD was not willing or able to form a committee of local people to manage the process. In other areas, voter lists had been posted, but clashes with armed groups in the period preceding the election led to the GAD cancelling the vote. As such, despite the fact that voters in cancelled areas could not cast a ballot, cancellations do not necessarily mean non-participation or total lack of interest in the process as there was certainly engagement in some areas.

Another dynamic that could have affected election results in ethnic minority states was lower turnout in many of these areas. This may be related to conflict, but in many contexts these are also areas affected by high migration to bordering countries, particularly Thailand and China. There may also have been lack of interest from voters in the electoral process. This is an area needing more research.



Image: Taunggyi, Gerard McCarthy, 2015

## Implications of elections for Myanmar's transition

The institutional implications of the election results imply a super majority in the *Pyithu* (Lower), *Amyotha* (Upper) and thus *Pyidaungsu* (Union) Parliaments for the NLD. This means the NLD will be able to pass legislation without the need for second-party support, and will also be able to nominate two of the three presidential candidates.

Despite the comprehensive nature of this victory, constitutional reform will not be easy, as 75 per cent of parliament must support a referendum. As voting was cancelled in a number of townships in conflict zones, the NLD will need to convince “not just one brave soldier but quite a few” in order to progress constitutional reform.

In terms of parties, the election seemed to hark the slow and quiet death of a number of parties, with 91 contesting parties collapsing into less than 10 that returned seats. Despite having a network of offices and running candidates in townships across the country, Ne Win's National Unity Party only managed to win a single seat — sounding its death knell as a major national party.

Myanmar looks to be developing a two party system with the USDP and NLD as dominant nation-wide parties, though ethnic parties do maintain strength in some areas. While the NDP did run candidates across the country, it is unclear if it could be a viable third party in 2020 without winning a single seat in these elections. Importantly, many ethnic voters supported the NLD — suggesting a more complex notion of ethnic and national allegiances than has been long assumed in Myanmar politics.

At a local level it was noted that the USDP did manage to attract a core of voters — often 20 to 25 per cent of returns in individual townships in central Myanmar. This suggests that there is some electoral base that the party may be able to build on in the future. However, winning seats will be difficult for the USDP in 2020 without a shift from the first past the post electoral system to proportional representation — a change that is unlikely in this incoming parliament given that the present system benefits the NLD.

### Future of Buddhist nationalism

The battlelines of conflict around Buddhist nationalism appear to have been redrawn by the elections, with Ma Ba Tha likely to be chastened by the results. The Ma Ba Tha announcement made the evening prior to the election — promoting a smooth election process and transition of power — struck a considerably more conciliatory tone than rhetoric earlier in the campaign. Initial discussions with some members of Ma Ba Tha suggested that behaviour like distributing leaflets attacking the NLD at party

rallies was perceived as having strayed too far into the political domain.

Many people see Ma Ba Tha very differently from the image projected by hard-line monk U Wirathu and reported in English-language press. Indeed, many members say that U Wirathu does not represent them, and insist that Ma Ba Tha is simply a conservative nationalist movement — not a regime-aligned organisation. This repositioning may have been in evidence in areas such as Rakhine State and in Meiktila, where Ma Ba Tha seemed to be careful in stepping back their interaction with parties. Elsewhere, including in ethnic minority areas such as Hpa-an, the NDP appeared to be receiving substantial support from Ma Ba Tha networks.

Despite the profile of the organisation, it is unclear whether Ma Ba Tha has any more than a few thousand lay members around the country. The monastic membership may be quite loose, with many monks joining out of obligation to older monks (*sayadaws*) who invited them to participate. Meanwhile, some of the attention Ma Ba Tha has received has actually dissipated with little result. For example, it was announced at a conference at the beginning of 2015 that Ma Ba Tha was opening a radio station with support from a Thai businessman. However, Minister of Information, Ye Htut, soon after refused them a licence to broadcast.

A key question is what Ma Ba Tha's next steps will be. Will they push to declare Buddhism the national religion? How will they react to citizenship verification processes for people who identify as Rohingya? U Wirathu has already said that he is worried about the status of the Religious Protection Laws under the NLD.

However, it's unclear what pressure he and other Ma Ba Tha-aligned monks will have in the next parliament. This is especially the case with the legislation seeking to ban polygamy now being criticised by members of Ma Ba Tha and others as flawed on the grounds that it is increasingly being used by Buddhist women seeking redress against their adulterous Buddhist husbands. The organisation is clearly undergoing evolution, and may look very different in 2020. It would be unsurprising if Ma Ba Tha now focus on the 2020 elections, as the NLD will be weaker and voters could be more easily influenced by religious nationalism if the stakes of the election are different.

### Hard choices for the NLD

For the NLD there are now complex questions as to how they will engage both with Ma Ba Tha and with the state-run monastic hierarchy (*Sangha*) that is administered by the Minister of Religion. Many in the NLD, including Aung San Suu Kyi, seem to support a more secular notion separating religion and the state. However, they may also try to use the levers of state power over the Ministry of Religion to influence the *Sangha* according to their own socio-political vision.

Similar complexity surrounds how the NLD addresses the conflict in Rakhine State, especially with regard to the appointment of a new Chief Minister. Despite strong rhetoric opposing the NLD during the campaign, the Arakan National Party has committed to working with the NLD and expressed the hope that someone



from the ANP will be appointed to the position of Chief Minister. Given there is very little appetite for violence in Rakhine State, there is also the possibility that the NLD will appoint a military general to enforce law and order.

The NLD will also need to take choices about the future of Naypyitaw, both as a political capital and as a major market for Myanmar's gems and jade trade. Hundreds of gem showrooms currently sit empty around the capital, as do massive government housing developments. Naypyitaw is an exception to everywhere else in the country as there is no regional assembly and they have an appointed City Development Committee that is responsible for the city's eight townships.

It is unclear whether the NLD will engage with the peace process commenced by President Thein Sein. Meanwhile, China has said they are enthusiastic to support the next stage of the peace process, but likely without Japanese involvement.

## The development of the Union Election Commission

A lot has changed and major advances have been made in the UEC's evolution as a semi-government institution. One attendee shared her experience trying to meet with the UEC in 2012. She found that few people knew how to contact them, and that at that time the UEC had only met with the European Union once.

Within six months, they had become one of the first agencies in the entire Myanmar government to allow foreigners to work inside the ministry. While initially civil society activists were reluctant to work with the UEC, it was noted that this changed overtime as the Union Election Commission held meetings with civil society groups for over 18 months prior to the elections through every phase of the process.

At the beginning of the process there appeared to be limited trust and the stakeholders were very far apart. However, after a year these groups agreed on Code of Conduct and on the basics of the electoral process including the role of observer, both domestic and international.

This trust building exercise, supported by the international community, was essential to the process that culminated in the elections on 8 November. The results have also institutionalised the UEC as a credible Myanmar public agency. In this regard, it's important to view the elections as a mechanism of state-building, and a key process in developing legitimacy and trust in the government. However, this process was also contentious and divisive, given the questions about the status of Muslims in Myanmar and disenfranchisement of communities in Rakhine State in particular.

## Civil society and a culture of transparency

In terms of the emergence of politics, a culture of transparency also seems to have developed around the elections. The impact of this on the legitimacy and perception of the Union Election Commission is significant. One key factor in the perceived integrity of the entire process was the presence of party candidates and agents in stations.

In 2010 the primary practice prior to the arrival of Facebook was simply calling personal contacts seeking information about local election results and the integrity of the process. In 2015, however, there was much greater trust in the counting and results, potentially as a result of the transparency lent by the presence of observers within polling stations.

It is now unclear what happens to the civil society groups and capacity building processes which have developed around these elections. In the 2012 by-elections follow-up from donors around civil society activities was weak. The civil society engagement that occurred around the 2015 elections was likely transformative in helping to develop a critical and engaged citizenry and will hopefully be sustained.

However, the degree of engagement with the electoral process from these groups varied significantly depending on cash flows and donor funding. These donations will dry up as the elections are finished, which raises the question as to where these people will be in six months time. With the right support, the groups may now be able to help sustain popular interest in monitoring and observation over the term of the next government, a key element of democratic consolidation.



Image: Taungoo, Gerard McCarthy, 2015







**Images:**

Front cover	Naypyitaw, Olivia Cable, 2015
Inside front cover	Hpa-an, Justine Chambers, 2015
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