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Myanmar Elections in 2025: Next Gambit for Regime Legitimacy?

By Sandeep Singh

SYNOPSIS

The Myanmar junta seeks to hold national elections in 2025 against the backdrop of an ongoing civil war. The elections will most certainly not conform to the principles of a free and fair poll. This commentary explores whether this is another gambit for the embattled military regime's search for legitimacy.

COMMENTARY

Success for the Myanmar regime in the national elections it proposes to hold in 2025 will be an opportunity to acquire legitimacy, which has been denied since the coup of 2021. The election – already delayed by [two years](#) – is perhaps the junta's next gambit to gain domestic and international credibility, although it is widely considered a sham exercise given that key parties are [not eligible](#) to participate.

The military-controlled Union Election Commission has proposed allowing international monitors to observe the elections. While ASEAN member states will want an inclusive poll, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) – the most electorally successful party in the past – has been dismantled. The junta's pursuit of legitimacy is likely a controlled exercise that will not be free and fair.

China and India's Interests

China and India will be closely monitoring the elections. While China has sought to support the regime, it also aims to use the election as an opportunity to create space for [de-escalation](#) between parties in the civil war. It also signals that China may be pursuing a more pro-junta orientation, which departs from its earlier balance between support for the [Three Brotherhood Alliance](#) and the junta.

As for India, its strategic posture is also shifting as the Arakan Army now controls vast areas in the Rakhine and Chin States, which includes the Kaladan project, and because over 45,000 Myanmar refugees are seeking refuge in its border states. The 1,643 km [border](#) India shares with Myanmar and its interest in developing the Kaladan port and highway also suggest why India may be prudent in not [openly criticising](#) the actions of the Myanmar junta. While civil society groups in Myanmar have been urging the Indian government to [stop military sales](#) to the junta, it is not clear whether it will take heed. India has also, as of 2024, announced that it will halt visa-free travel for border citizens [along its borders](#) to maintain the demographic structure of its northeast.

Even though India and China's stand on Myanmar seems to be converging, some analysts suggest that both are in competition to shape the [outcome](#) of the civil war.

Although China's support for the junta declined over the cyber scam operations in 2023, it is clear that in 2025, it is looking forward to supporting the junta in the "[military-dominated 'civilian'](#) government" that it thinks is likely to be the result of the elections. It is noteworthy that the proposal for elections came after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in 2024, alongside commitments from the latter to crack down on [online gambling and telecom fraud](#).

Difficulty in Implementing the Five-Point Consensus

ASEAN is looking to implement the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar. However, Malaysia's appointment of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra as an informal adviser when it becomes the ASEAN Chair in 2025 may signal that Malaysia wants to align ASEAN with the junta's interests. Implementing the consensus, including assigning a special envoy to Myanmar and providing humanitarian assistance, is set to be a difficult task.

This comes as ethnic armed groups make significant advances and as territory under junta control is thought to be [less than half](#) of Myanmar. The country risks economic collapse as prices of staples have, by some estimates, [risen 426 per cent](#). Over [two million people](#) have been displaced by the fighting, while the Rohingya continue to suffer abuses from both the junta and the [Arakan Army](#). Hence, ASEAN foreign ministers have urged the Myanmar junta to focus on ending the violence rather than holding an election.

External Support

The Myanmar junta maintains bilateral links with Russia, which continues to provide fighter jets for the prosecution of the war. Russia [has also indicated](#) that it supports the junta's efforts to hold the election and even signed a Memorandum of Understanding on "cooperation in election activities" with the regime.

Despite its air superiority, however, the Tatmadaw has not been able to stymie the advance of the rebel forces and [continues to lose](#) considerable territory. In January 2025, airstrikes killed 28 people, including civilians and children, at a detention camp in Rakhine state. This indiscriminate use of airpower showed the desperation of the regime. It followed the junta's adoption of drone tactics used successfully by rebel forces, with evidence pointing to China as the [origin of the drones](#).

Questions of Legitimacy About the Election

Political parties have been notified to prepare for elections in November 2025, with the caveat that the situation in the country should be relatively stable at that time. However, with the dissolution of the NLD, the elections appear to be no more than a [fraught exercise](#) for the junta to garner legitimacy.

The October 2024 state-led census had caused concern among regime opponents. The State Administration Council pressed ahead with it even as ethnic armed groups and the National Unity Government (NUG) – the Myanmar government in exile – urged citizens not to cooperate with it. While the military reiterated the need for the census to provide accurate voter lists, most observers criticised the exercise as illegitimate.

The NUG is unable to perform the leadership role its [spokesman said](#) it was elected to do. This suggests that a collapse of the military regime similar to the fall of the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 would not be unwelcome. Such an end to the civil war would be an interesting parallel if it should occur.

At the United Nations, the NUG continues to represent Myanmar despite being ousted and replaced by the junta in 2021. The attitudes of the General Assembly, alongside other organs of the UN, that view the NUG's representation in a preferential light suggest that the international community does not quite support the regime's legitimacy. However, it remains to be seen who will lead the NUG movement after Aung San Suu Kyi and whether this individual will similarly impact Myanmar politics.

The International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan has requested an arrest warrant for Min Aung Hlaing for alleged crimes against humanity perpetrated against the Rohingya population. This signals a serious step, alongside the case brought to the International Court of Justice by Gambia, to [scrutinise](#) the abuses of the Tatmadaw.

While there have been some concerns over the potential radicalisation of the Rohingya population, the [veracity](#) of such concerns is in doubt, especially when some of these concerns come from pro-Arakan Army platforms, which suggest they want to overlay the issue of Islamist militancy to deny the Rohingya their rights. The situation, however, seems to be complicated by cross-border radicalisation in southeastern Bangladesh, where the perception of Muslim persecution in Arakan has "[fueled radicalisation in Bangladesh](#)" by various terror-linked groups.

While ASEAN struggles to find a united position on the proposed polls, it seeks to ensure an inclusive process so that the elections have a semblance of legitimacy. This quest remains elusive. The polls could also cause further violence, with potential [attacks](#) by regime opponents.

Conclusion

Ironically, Min Aung Hlaing recently said that the 2020 election, won by the NLD with a significant majority, was afflicted by [voter fraud](#), when his opponents have also predicted such a possibility for the proposed polls in 2025. The election is unlikely to

be free and fair and will not give the regime legitimacy even if it wins, which seems to be a foregone conclusion.

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