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Why didn't ethnic parties do better  
in Myanmar's elections?

Adam Burke

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Cover photo: banners for Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy in Naypyitaw. Photo by Olivia Cable.

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## About the author



**Adam Burke** is an independent consultant and researcher who has worked across many parts of Myanmar. Focusing on conflict-affected areas and ethnic tensions, his PhD research addressed problems in the far south of Thailand. Before then, he was involved in the peace process in Aceh, Indonesia.

## Why didn't ethnic parties do better in Myanmar's elections?

Adam Burke

In what has been called a voting 'tsunami', Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) trounced the opposition, the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), in Myanmar's 8 November elections.<sup>i</sup>

The NLD was expected to do well but the scale of the victory came as a surprise. Many pundits and even party activists did not expect the party to gain the two-thirds of the seats needed for an overall majority under Myanmar's obscure parliamentary system that automatically awards 25 per cent of the seats to the military.<sup>ii</sup> The NLD claimed close to 80 per cent of the elected seats in the two national chambers, giving it a strong mandate to govern and pass new laws within the existing constitution.

The responses of incumbent leaders along with affiliated USDP and military officials to their electoral failure will be watched carefully within Myanmar and internationally. Senior government figures have already admitted that while they expected to lose, they have not even considered such a devastating landslide as a possible scenario.<sup>iii</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi has stated that she will lead the new government even though the current Constitution bans her from taking the position of President. National politics in Myanmar will now enter a new and unpredictable phase as the new government is formed and the military look to defend their interests. The election result has fundamentally changed the political dynamic and yet the long-term confrontation between Aung San Suu Kyi and the generals is set to continue.

### **NLD success against most ethnic parties**

Beyond this defining national confrontation, Myanmar faces ongoing tensions between the national government and ethnic minority states. Violent conflict between the military and armed groups has continued in some areas for over 60 years. The recent election was cancelled for seven seats of the national parliament in conflict-affected Shan State and in numerous other village tracts. Violent confrontation also continues in Kachin State. Only eight of some 20 ethnic armed organisations signed a long-awaited national ceasefire shortly before the election, leaving question marks over the future direction of the peace process.

i Thomas Fuller, 2015. 'Myanmar military admits shock at NLD 'tsunami'' *The New York Times*, reprinted in *The Bangkok Post*, 14 November. <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/765004/this-is-payback-for-50-years>

ii NLD activists in Yangon after the election confirmed to me that the scale of victory came as a shock. The USDP managed to win only 6.6% of the seats in the lower house and even fewer - 5.5% - in the upper house.

iii Fuller 2015, *ibid.*

The USDP was not the only victim of the NLD's landslide victory. Although minor players at the national level, some ethnic parties are a major force within their respective states and were expected to poll quite well.<sup>iv</sup> But the NLD dominated there too, winning 475 of the available 660 seats. (Voters elected representatives for local parliaments in Myanmar's majority regions and minority states at the same time as the national ballot.)

They passed the significant two-thirds majority mark in all of Myanmar's regions and in all but three of the seven ethnic minority states. Of the remaining three states, the NLD emerged as the largest party in the Kachin State parliament but with the final few seats due to be announced, looked likely to fall just short of a decisive majority.

In the remaining two states, the NLD were less successful and some ethnic parties performed well. In Shan State, Myanmar's largest and most diverse, the independent Shan National League for Development (SNLD) won national and local seats. This was the only election that it has been allowed to contest since 1990, when it also performed strongly.<sup>v</sup> Parties representing smaller ethnic groups polled well in some areas within Shan State: the Pa-O National Organisation and the Ta'ang (or Palaung) National Party consolidated gains from 2010.

Elsewhere, minority parties including the Kachin State Democracy Party, and the Zomi Congress for Democracy in Chin State, each won in several constituencies.

Yet overall, the only ethnic party to win a majority at the state level was the Arakan National Party (ANP) in Rakhine State.<sup>vi</sup> Associated with Rakhine nationalism, the party also won 22 out of the State's 29 elected seats in the national parliament.

These successes are the exception, however, and ethnic parties generally disappointed. In Kayah State, they only returned one successful candidate from 33 constituencies at the state and national levels. Mon state was only slightly better, giving ethnic parties three candidates out of a possible 42.

Seven possible reasons why ethnic parties underperformed are proposed below.

### **1. Fragmented ethnic parties**

Ethnic parties commonly competed against each other. In Kayah State, for example, efforts to form an electoral agreement between minority leaders collapsed in the run-up to the election. This left five local parties competing against each other in many constituencies. The result was not only a split ethnic vote, leaving space for the NLD to prosper, but also limited public enthusiasm over local parties that appeared small and weak.

iv See for example TNI (2015) *Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar*. Myanmar Policy Briefing 16, September [https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb16\\_web\\_16092015.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb16_web_16092015.pdf)

v The SNLD is an independent Shan party that leans towards the values of the NLD rather than the USDP. Following its success in 1990, key leaders were imprisoned and it was only able to stand for elections from 2012.

vi For full election results, see <http://www.mmimes.com/index.php/election-2015/live-blog.html>. Or [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar\\_general\\_election,\\_2015#Results](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar_general_election,_2015#Results)

In addition, the population of many constituencies within Myanmar's ethnic minority states is mixed, reducing the electoral impact of promoting narrow ethnic affiliation. For instance, there are large Shan and Burmese populations in parts of Kachin State. Many townships of Shan State are a complex ethnic mosaic. Linguistic and other divisions within what is formally designated as one ethnic group also undermined support for specific leaders or parties.

In Chin State, a proliferation of local parties and a failure to collaborate was linked to wider intra-Chin divisions.<sup>vii</sup>

## **2. Limited time and resources**

Many ethnic parties are new. Some had been banned until 2012 or later, often as a result of past affiliations with armed groups. For instance, the experienced Kachin leader Dr Manam Tu Ja only gained approval to run from the national Election Commission in 2013. He stood under a new party label, the Kachin State Democracy Party.<sup>viii</sup>

As such, ethnic leaders repeatedly failed to build a big public profile. Discussions with a range of local residents in Kachin, Shan, and Kayah States in 2014 and 2015 revealed very limited public awareness of ethnic minority parties and ethnic leaders, even among educated professionals. In addition, ethnic leaders in many areas were not able to build relationships with other prominent local bodies including civil society groups, religious leaders, business leaders, government offices, and ethnic armed organisations. Ethnic leaders complained about a lack of financial resources for building networks and campaigning.<sup>ix</sup>

## **3. Weak local politics**

Myanmar remains very centralised, giving little scope so far to build local political networks. Elected state parliaments have only been in operation for one term and they have limited control over policies or budgets. The Chief Minister of each state and region is selected by the President. Civil servants at the state level and below are centrally appointed and report to national ministries. The most senior local township official is selected by the General Administration Department and usually comes from a military background. Major business opportunities often depend on high-level contacts in the military or occasionally the civilian national administration.

Candidates, who were typically selected late and do not enjoy prominent local profiles, have little experience and limited time or funds to develop the local patronage systems that build bonds with the electorate. This contrasts with lively, messy local politics in neighbouring countries across South and Southeast Asia that have a longer democratic tradition.

vii Nyan Lynn Aung, 2015. 'Spoiled for choice, Chin voters seek unity and hope in NLD'. *The Myanmar Times*, 17 November. <http://www.mmimes.com/index.php/national-news/17650-spoiled-for-choice-chin-voters-see-unity-and-hope-in-nld.html>

viii Lawi Weng, 2013. 'Kachin Leader Gets Long-Sought Approval for Political Party'. *The Irrawaddy*, 31 October. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/news/kachin-leader-gets-long-sought-approval-for-political-party>

ix Yen Snaing and Sean Gleeson, 2015. 'Analysis: Ministers' Election in Karenni State All But Certain'. *The Irrawaddy*, 9 September. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/news/analysis-ministers-election-in-karenni-state-all-but-certain>

Many voters in Myanmar selected national parties rather than weak and relatively unknown local leaders. With power concentrated in the centre, national parties hold a major advantage. Media coverage is also highly centralised and focuses on national rather than local leaders.

The few ethnic parties that were successful in the election tended to have stronger local networks. Most obviously, the ANP in Rakhine State linked effectively with civil society groups including extreme Rakhine nationalists, religious leaders, and local businesses such as hoteliers in Kyauk Phyu and fish processors in Sittwe.<sup>x</sup> In southern Shan State, the Pa-O National Organisation is affiliated with the largest local business conglomerate, the leadership of the Pa-O Special Administrative Zone, and armed militia.

## **4. Greater expression of ethnic identity did not translate into votes**

Support for ethnic leaders and criticism of continued 'internal colonialism' by ethnic majority Bamar across government and businesses are accepted norms of conversation in many ethnic minority areas. Local non-governmental organisations, for example, commonly express their goals in terms of achieving rights for their ethnic group rather than common or universal objectives.

However, strong ethnic affinity does not seem to have translated into votes for minority parties. Just as pundits overestimated the extent of support for the USDP, so they may have misjudged the appeal of ethnic parties.

## **5. The immense attraction of Aung San Suu Kyi**

The Lady's status is so strong that it may overcome ethnic division. Her projected image of benevolent power, and her opposition to the military, raises her above all others. This image was carefully managed in the run-up to the election. For instance, Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to speak out against anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence may have upset international audiences but was in tune with the dominant view across most of the country.

## **6. Deep dislike of the military**

Decades of abuse by military leaders were felt most strongly in minority areas. Causes of resentment included the impact of violent conflict on civilians, land grabs, human rights abuses, and repeated instances of discrimination along ethnic or religious lines.

This legacy has been hard to overcome, even if the army is more restrained these days. Aspirational politicians in many of Myanmar's ethnic minority areas faced a challenging environment defined largely by ongoing conflict and a difficult, protracted peace process. They needed to tread a fine line in order to gain permission to stand from the government's Election Commission while also avoiding unpopular pro-military associations.

x Information from interviews in Sittwe and Kyauk Phyu, October 2013 and June 2014.

Some ethnic parties, most obviously the Shan Nationalities Development Party (SNDP or 'White Tiger'), may have lost votes given close ties to the military government. By contrast, the Shan Nationalities League For Democracy (SNLD) that kept its distance from the military was relatively successful.

### **7. National parties going local**

These parties' appeal was boosted by fielding local candidates in many constituencies, reducing the ethnic divide. Aung San Suu Kyi's late campaigning in several minority states may also have boosted her local appeal.

#### **Local success in Rakhine State**

Formed out of a merger between the larger Rakhine National Development Party and the smaller Arakan League for Democracy in 2013, the ANP coalition dominated local ethnic politics and saw off competition from the large national parties in all but a few seats. Their success was enough to make them the third-largest party at the national level.

More importantly given their primary focus at the state level, the ANP coalition won a slim majority in the Rakhine State Parliament by gaining 24 out of 47 seats.<sup>xi</sup> This was significant progress as it had only won 18 state level seats in the 2010 election.<sup>xii</sup>

Several factors worked in its favour.<sup>xiii</sup>

The ANP coalition monopolised the ethnic vote, with no other significant Rakhine party standing. Their leaders managed to retain an impression of relative unity, despite some internal tensions.

ANP networks extended across many fields, enabling a consolidation of power. An example is the Rakhine National Conference in 2014, an event that strengthened nationalist ties and helped to define a specific agenda for gaining greater control over the state's economic and political affairs.<sup>xiv</sup> The ANP selected candidates through twenty-five member local nomination committees, normally selecting local residents. Local businesses provided support.

This fairly effective party machine is also associated with extreme Rakhine chauvinism targeting the State's Muslim population. Numerous accounts identify connections between some RNDP activists and violence that ejected Muslims from their communities and confined them to isolated camps in 2012 and 2013.

<sup>xi</sup> The ANP can also call on the support of a successful independent candidate who has long been affiliated with the ANP, Kyaw Zaw Oo. Kayleigh Long, 2015. 'In Sittwe, an independent candidate in name only tells of a split within his party'. *The Myanmar Times*, 3 November. <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17332-in-sittwe-an-independent-candidate-in-name-only-tells-of-a-split-within-his-party.html>

<sup>xii</sup> These seats were won by the RNDP before they joined the ANP coalition.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mratt Kyaw Thu, 2015. 'Rakhine National Party in 'chaos''. *The Myanmar Times*, 26 June. <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/15221-rakhine-national-party-in-chaos.html>

<sup>xiv</sup> Nyein Nyein, 2014. 'Arakan National Conference Gets Underway in Kyaukphyu'. *The Irrawaddy*, April 28. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/arakan-national-conference-gets-underway-kyaukphyu.html>

ANP politicians backed national campaigns to stop voting rights being granted to some 700,000 citizens with temporary status, most of them being Muslims in Rakhine State.<sup>xv</sup> The most prominent Rakhine politician, Dr Aye Maung, was also associated with the four national laws on race and religion that were passed shortly before the 2015 election. These laws are widely seen as a continuation of the outgoing military government's longstanding efforts to shore up support through promoting an exclusive form of religious nationalism.<sup>xvi</sup>

So, in addition to a strong party machine and a coalition that joined forces across ethnic Rakhine parties, the strong ANP showing benefitted from steps to drum up anti-Muslim sentiment. The denial of voting rights to most Muslims in Rakhine State enabled the ANP to win in several constituencies that would otherwise have had a large Muslim electorate. This policy cemented their success, giving them control of the state parliament.

#### **Summary**

The 2015 general election results look similar to the results of the 1990 election, the last time that the NLD was allowed to stand. On both occasions, the incumbent military-affiliated party was thrashed and the NLD won just short of 80 per cent of the seats.

This time round, despite open elections for local parliaments and the spread of more freely expressed minority identity, ethnic parties' performance was patchy at best. The only exceptions to NLD domination were in Shan State, where various ethnic parties performed quite well, and in Rakhine State.

The reasons for this overall pattern relate to the strength of the NLD and the weakness of most ethnic parties. Many ethnic parties were unable to compete. If they are to prosper in future, they may need to form stronger alliances and build up their local networks.

Unpredictable future factors include the possibility that ethnic armed organisations will seek to enter the local political arena if peace talks make headway. The striking success of the NLD and the failure of many ethnic parties may make them wary of agreements to replace armed struggle with peaceful democratic processes.

Positively, perhaps, the election results suggest that the broad goals represented by Aung San Suu Kyi were more attractive than the parochial interests of specific local groups. Minorities are not necessarily any more inward-looking than others in Myanmar. Most people in ethnic states do not live in isolated upland villages. Mass media, increased literacy in the Burmese language, and high levels of migration mean that many minority communities are engaged in the national and even international spheres.

More complex, and darker, lessons emerge from Rakhine State.

<sup>xv</sup> Lawi Weng, 2015. 'Winners and Losers of the White Card's Demise'. *The Irrawaddy*, 9 March 2015. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/opinion/winners-and-losers-of-the-white-cards-demise>

<sup>xvi</sup> Thusitha Perera, 2015. 'Ma Ba Tha and the vote'. *New Mandala*, 4 November. <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/11/04/ma-ba-tha-and-the-vote/>

The ANP's success is partly based on solid campaigning, solidarity, and an affinity with local people. However, it also builds support – and direct electoral advantage – by promoting anti-Muslim chauvinism and encouraging an ethnically exclusive nationalism based around fear and insecurity.

It remains to be seen what path minority parties will follow in future.

**“This time round, despite open elections for local parliaments and the spread of more freely expressed minority identity, ethnic parties’ performance was patchy at best.**

*Adam Burke*



Photo opposite: Aung San Suu Kyi t-shirts by Barbara Walton / EPA



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