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Issue Brief

Elections amid Civil War in Myanmar

Om Prakash Das

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Summary

Myanmar's elections are less a democratic reset than a carefully orchestrated exercise in regime survival. The vote rests on the 2008 Constitution that guarantees military veto power, excludes vast territories, and sidelines genuine opposition. The process risks institutionalising political fragmentation, entrenching authoritarian rule and locking Myanmar into a future of managed conflict rather than meaningful reconciliation.

Introduction

The military-controlled authorities of Myanmar are conducting nation-wide elections. The military junta presents these polls as a step towards re-establishing democracy following the February 2021 coup. There is no doubt that, at least, the junta in Myanmar is trying to restore the political architecture of governance based on the 2008 Constitution. However, it is very evident to most observers that this process would pave the way for the legitimization of the military in the political structure.

The fundamental cause of apprehension lies with the 2008 Constitution. This constitution empowers the military through provisions such as the reservation of 25 per cent of parliamentary seats and key ministries for military appointees, which confer a de facto veto over any substantive legislative or institutional change.¹ This brief explores the motivations and timing of these polls, particularly in the context of the broader civil war, the likely outcome and political consequences of the vote, and the posture of neighbouring countries. Current conditions indicate that the election is more likely to deepen political fragmentation and consolidate authoritarian rule than foster an inclusive, democratic transition.

Election Format and Legal Framework

Last July 2025, the military junta announced the end of the almost four-year-long State of Emergency (SoE).² The legal mechanism of the 2008 Constitution affords the junta a veneer of constitutional legitimacy, allowing it to claim that it is merely abiding by the letter of the law, as an election is mandatory within six months of the Emergency's end. The scheduled election, therefore, begins on 28 December 2025 (Phase 1), with Phase 2 following on 11 January 2026.³

The State Advisory Council (SAC) conducted a census in 2024. The rationale was to support credible voter registration and to enable transparent electoral administration. The census data reported by the SAC indicated that it targeted approximately 56 million people across 13 million households.⁴ The census also

¹ W. Elliot Bulmer, “[A New Constitution for Myanmar: Towards Consensus on an Inclusive Federal Democracy](#)”, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2022, p. 27.

² “[Confirmed: Multiparty General Election Set for December](#)”, *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 31 July 2025; “[Myanmar Ends State of Emergency and Military Leader Switches Roles to Prepare for Polls](#)”, International Center for Transitional Justice, 31 July 2025.

³ “[Republic of the Union of Myanmar Union Election Commission](#)”, *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 29 October 2025.

⁴ “[Myanmar Starts Census for 2025 Election as Civil War Rages On](#)”, *Nikkei Asia*, 2 October 2024.

showed that data were recorded in only 145 of 330 townships, representing 44 per cent coverage. In other words, approximately 19 million more people were excluded from the count.⁵ The junta attributed this shortfall primarily to “security constraints”. This security-related argument concerns the ongoing ‘Civil War’, which results in the occupation of approximately 45–50 per cent of the geographical area.

In this context, the junta effectively acknowledged its limited territorial control and, accordingly, geographically stratified the election. In the first two phases of the election, polling will take place in approximately 202 townships, which are primarily concentrated in the central Bamar-majority heartland and key urban centres. These are the areas where the junta exercises dominance. One fact must be considered: the number of townships where the poll will be conducted exceeds the 145 townships successfully censused by 57.⁶ Evidently, the decision on which areas to include was driven more by political expediency than by objective security or administrative capacity.

In addition, the Union Election Commission (UEC) has formally excluded 56 townships from the election entirely and cancelled polls in 161 wards and 2,770 village tracts located in regions identified as strongholds of resistance groups.⁷ This division of Myanmar along political access lines facilitates the effective institutionalisation of its fragmentation. It also means that elections will only be held where the junta retains control. In contrast, vast swathes of the country, which are controlled by the insurgents, including the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), or are contested, would be deliberately excluded. These arrangements suggest that this would be a segmented election rather than a nation-wide ballot.

After the coup, the junta administration made several significant alterations to the legal environment governing political parties, the most prominent of which were those introduced by the 2023 Political Parties Registration Law.⁸ These changes imposed a new set of rules for the registration of political parties, including requirements that any contesting party recruit 100,000 members within 90 days, maintain 100 million kyat in funds, maintain offices in half of all 330 townships,

⁵ “[145 Townships Covered, 58 Uncounted in 2024 Myanmar Population Census](#)”, *The Nation*, 3 January 2025.

⁶ Maung Kavi, “[Myanmar Junta Rules Out Voting in 121 Constituencies in First Phase of Election](#)”, *The Irrawaddy*, 16 September 2025.

⁷ Htin Lin, “[UEC Cancels Elections in 161 Wards and 2,770 Village Tracts](#)”, *Myanmar Transparency News*, 6 December 2025.

⁸ “[Political Parties Registration Law](#)”, Ministry of Information, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 27 January 2023.

and be prepared to contest at least half of all constituencies.⁹ The results of this electoral revision dramatically reduced the number of registered parties, from 92 under the law to 52 now.¹⁰

It also eliminated the most popular parties, such as the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. It engineered a de facto system dominated by parties like the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and a handful of puppet or satellite parties. Laws criminalising almost any disruption of the electoral process under the ‘Law on the Prevention of Obstruction of State Activities and Strikes’ serve as a deterrent to dissent, political mobilisation, or voter abstention, thereby stifling civic engagement, free expression, and genuine political competition.¹¹

Another arresting provision enforced by the junta to protect the electoral process is a new law, titled the ‘Election Protection’ law, passed in July 2025, which authorises the military to punish anyone perceived as obstructing the electoral process. Just a few days before the first phase of the election on 28 December 2025, the junta has sought to prosecute 229 people under this law, including 201 men and 28 women, who are accused of “sabotaging” and “disrupting” the upcoming election process.¹² However, what is striking is that the list also includes “fugitive” activists and rebels who are currently beyond the junta’s reach.¹³

Why This Election—Why Now?

Since seizing power in the 2021 coup, the military regime has faced severe isolation and punitive sanctions. The military junta hopes that conducting an election might reduce diplomatic pressure, particularly from states that emphasise stability and normalcy. Another decisive factor has been the emergence of new voices against the establishment; in this context, the opposition comprises a diverse set of actors. The National Unity Government, various ethnic armed organisations, numerous People’s Defence Force militias, and ordinary civil-society actors often differ sharply in ideology, strategic aims, ethnic identity and visions for Myanmar’s future.¹⁴

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “[A Road to Nowhere: The Myanmar Regime’s Stage-managed Elections](#)”, International Crisis Group, 28 March 2023.

¹¹ Htin Lin, “[New Law Introduced: Death Penalty for Disrupting Multi-Party Elections](#)”, *Myanmar Transparency News*, 30 July 2025.

¹² Sebastian Strangio, “[Myanmar Military Prosecuting More Than 200 Under Harsh Election Disruption Law](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 18 December 2025.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “[Myanmar’s Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts](#)”, International Crisis Group, 12 January 2022.

It appears likely that the current establishment can engineer conditions more conducive to cooperation or negotiation for contestation, even after the 2026 election results. There are sufficient signals that the opposition may further fragment or become apathetic towards the struggle to achieve the goal of completely ousting the military from the political structure. It may encourage realignment along ethnic, local, or material interests rather than ideological lines.¹⁵

Moreover, the constitutional architecture on which this election is based has created deep flaws in the democratic political structure for pro-democratic parties and groups. The current regime maintains the 2008 Constitution, which ensures that the military retains a quarter of the parliament and key ministries, including Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs.¹⁶ This constitutional framework continues to block any serious move towards demilitarisation or federalism.

Conflict Dynamics on the Ground

On the battleground, 2025 brought a few gains for the military. Some of the territory it had lost earlier in the conflict was regained. Since late 2023, resistance forces have captured dozens of towns, cut major supply routes, and even encircled key cities, but since mid-2025, the course of armed conflict has unravelled under renewed pressure from junta forces. For example, key towns such as Nawngkhio in Shan state were retaken, and rebel forces such as the TNLA were pressured to withdraw near Mandalay.¹⁷ There have even been instances in which some ethnic groups negotiated ceasefire agreements and handed over control of strategic urban centres, such as the MNDAA's relinquishment of Lashio in April 2025.¹⁸ These developments significantly altered the balance of territorial control.

Based on media reports, an analysis suggests that the junta is proceeding with elections despite controlling only about 21 per cent of Myanmar's territory, with 42 per cent held by rebel groups.¹⁹ Though major cities remain under the military's dominance, vast border regions are not. This civil war has been devastating, displacing over 3.5 million people and collapsing infrastructure.²⁰

¹⁵ Andrew Nachemson, “[Myanmar’s National Unity Government Isn’t a Unity Government](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 11 June 2025.

¹⁶ “[Myanmar 2008 Constitution](#)”, *Constitute*.

¹⁷ Grant Peck, “[Myanmar Military Recaptures Strategic Town from Rebels After a Year, Government Says](#)”, AP, 18 July 2025.

¹⁸ Htet Shein Lynn, “[2025/64 ‘Military Success Heightens Tensions Between Myanmar’s Ethnic Armed Organisations’](#)”, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 1 September 2025.

¹⁹ “[Civil War in Myanmar](#)”, Center for Preventive Action, Global Conflict Tracker, 1 October 2025.

²⁰ “[UN Teams Ramp Up Response to Deadly Quake in Myanmar and Thailand](#)”, UN Information

Historically, the military has used ceasefires to consolidate control and gain access to resources, such as jade and timber, through insurgent elites. Recent China-mediated truces have allowed the junta to consolidate power in key urban centres and transportation corridors.²¹ From this perspective, the election allows the regime to portray itself as conducting civilian governance, thereby encouraging recalibration of regional and global relationships on terms favourable to the military.

By structuring the election in accordance with the 2008 Constitution and controlling both the voter registration process and the party registration framework, the junta ensures the continuity of military influence irrespective of electoral outcomes. The design makes constitutional change virtually impossible without military acquiescence. The main political party likely to dominate, the USDP, is effectively an army proxy. The criminalisation of dissent, harassment of critics, and exclusion of key opposition stakeholders render real competition improbable. Hence, the election is less about a real transfer of authority and more about institutionalising current power structures under a civilian cloak. The timing reflects the regime’s confidence that it has regained enough control to make this transition appear credible.

Likely Outcomes

The first phase of Myanmar’s general election took place on 28 December 2025, with voting conducted in 102 townships using electronic voting machines.²² While international teams observed the process, security concerns reportedly forced authorities to cancel voting in 65 other townships. The Union Solidarity and Development Party claimed an early victory in more than 80 per cent of the contested seats, including every township in the capital city.²³ At this juncture, given the structure of the electoral process in the context of the current territorial and conflict dynamics in Myanmar, and the legal architecture, including new laws on the registration of political parties and voter inclusion, the likely outcomes of the 2025–26 election become comparatively predictable. The most likely outcome of the election under the constraints described is the dominance of junta-aligned parties, notably the USDP, along with minor satellite parties. In addition, there is

Centre, Washington, DC.

²¹ “[Myanmar’s Junta Tightens Its Grip](#)”, *Civicus Lens*, 12 December 2025.

²² “[Phase I of 2025 General Election Conducted Across 102 Townships Successfully](#)”, *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 29 December 2025.

²³ Caolán Magee, “[Myanmar Pro-military Party Claims Huge Lead in Contentious Elections](#)”, *AlJazeera*, 29 December 2025.

a high probability that many of the ballots will feature candidates who are former generals or retired officers, who will be represented in key governmental positions, including the presidency and central ministries.

In other words, control is expected to remain effectively with serving officers or junta loyalists. This is essentially structured by the 2008 Constitution, where the military already holds one-quarter of parliamentary seats by appointment and retains veto power over constitutional amendments. This outcome would reinforce the existing power structure rather than effect meaningful change. It is true even when a nominal civilian president is elected, as absolute authority would remain with the military hierarchy, as seen during the NLD government between 2015 and 2020.

Civil war and areas captured by ethnic armed groups and the PDF across large geographic zones would disenfranchise millions in this election, particularly internally displaced people, ethnic minorities and dissenters. It means the post-election political map is likely to reflect formalised fragmentation: areas under junta control will have representation, while zones still under insurgent control will remain outside the electoral framework, and even contested or transitional zones may yield no representation at all. This state of affairs signals an evident fragmentation, which could deepen cracks within the country's political and territorial unity.

A Veneer of Legitimacy for International Re-engagement

If the restoration of a civilian government fosters stability, then the way ahead could include renewed regional engagement and trade and connectivity agreements. At the same time, many democratic states and human rights actors are likely to raise renewed concerns about the election's lack of inclusivity, fairness and representativeness, thereby undermining claims of legitimacy. At present, several countries, including the United States, have softened their stance towards Myanmar. India has called for an “inclusive” election.²⁴ However, ASEAN has refused to observe the election as a collective body, while leaving the option open for individual member states to support or observe the election if they choose to do so at the request of the Myanmar authorities.

Since the 2021 coup, a few countries, such as China and Russia, have supported efforts to resist and counter anti-junta armed forces and international pressure. A

²⁴ [“Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson”](#), Media Center, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 9 April 2025.

new government is likely to deepen ties with states that are supportive of, or indifferent to, military regimes, potentially reinforcing alignments with China, Russia, or other countries willing to provide diplomatic cover, military hardware, or infrastructure investment.²⁵ The visible presence of election observers from such states could serve to underwrite the junta’s international legitimacy.

This enforced realignment would mark a new phase of integration with supportive actors like China and its Belt and Road Initiative, as well as expanded defence and security cooperation with non-Western partners. At the same time, ties with democratic states are likely to remain strained, although some elements of renewed engagement with Myanmar are possible. A few countries, including India, view these developments as a potential new beginning towards re-establishing democratic processes.

The junta has also signalled that political issues should be resolved through political means and that, after the election, some ethnic groups may participate in a new reconciliation process, particularly those that remain undecided or are experiencing fatigue after five years of resistance.²⁶ Nevertheless, the election is unlikely to provide a foundation for long-term democratic reform, as the results will further institutionalise a bifurcated political geography in which multiple parallel insurgent administrations co-exist with formal state structures.

Role of India and Other Neighbouring Countries

Myanmar is one of the critical actors in the pursuit of the ‘Act East’ policy by India, and Myanmar’s geostrategic importance and porous borders give India a substantial stake in how the elections unfold, as regional responses will shape both their legitimacy and external consequences. New Delhi has adopted a calibrated and pragmatic approach that condemns the overthrow of civilian rule while maintaining engagement with the junta to safeguard border security, manage spillover effects, and advance its Act East and Neighbourhood First priorities.²⁷ India’s diplomatic manoeuvring must be understood through the prism of efforts to prevent Myanmar’s deeper alignment with China and to protect Indian strategic interests. In addition, there is now a more overt approach that involves

²⁵ “[Myanmar’s Dangerous Drift: Conflict, Elections and Looming Regional Détente](#)”, International Crisis Group, 18 July 2025.

²⁶ Richard Horsey, “[Myanmar’s Military Seeks Vote of Approval in One-sided Polls](#)”, International Crisis Group, 9 Dec. 2025.

²⁷ “[President Hosts President of Myanmar; Says Myanmar Stands at the Confluence of India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ and ‘Act East Policy’](#)”, Press Information Bureau, President’s Secretariat, Government of India, 27 February 2020.

deliberations with resistance and pro-democratic forces through Track 1.5 and Track 2.0 diplomatic initiatives, and these processes are likely to continue.²⁸

There is little doubt that, for democratic countries, elections present a dilemma between upholding democratic principles and pursuing realpolitik, as engagement risks legitimising authoritarian rule. At the same time, rejection may further deepen Myanmar's isolation from the West. Even among ASEAN member states, there has been visible fragmentation in approaches to Myanmar. Countries such as the Philippines and Singapore have adopted a stricter stance in advocating for the implementation of the Five Point Consensus. In contrast, Thailand and Malaysia have pursued comparatively softer approaches based on dialogue and deliberation.²⁹

One of the most critical actors in this context is China, which has been instrumental in facilitating the election process. The junta's ability to recapture or regain control of several strategically important territories and military installations has primarily been achieved through Chinese mediation. China seeks to maintain a civilian democratic façade, particularly to enable legislative mechanisms and a political ecosystem that can safeguard its investments and advance its economic and strategic interests, including the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea port,³⁰ the protection of financial infrastructure, and the monitoring of India's strategic moves.

Conclusion

The proposed election in Myanmar is presented as an exercise in democratic restoration, yet it represents a calculated effort to institutionalise military dominance under a civilian façade. The overarching concern is the risk of deepening structural fragmentation by excluding large segments of the population, legitimising parallel authorities, and reinforcing a bifurcated polity. There is little doubt that the elections may enable limited international re-engagement and recalibration by regional actors, driven by stability and strategic interests. However, they offer minimal grounds for inclusive governance, national reconciliation, or substantive democratic reform.

²⁸ Wa Lone and Devjyot Ghoshal, “[Exclusive: India Extends Unprecedented Invite to Myanmar's Anti-junta Forces, Sources Say](#)”, Reuters, 23 September 2024.

²⁹ Paul Chambers, “[Creating Balance: The Evolution of Thailand's Defense Diplomacy and Defense Relations](#)”, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 11 December 2023.

³⁰ Atom Sunil Singh, “[Kyaukphyu: China's Bay of Bengal Gateway in a War Zone – Analysis](#)”, *Eurasia Review*, 12 December 2025.

About the Author



Dr. Om Prakash Das is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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