

The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?

KEY POINTS

- The victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 2015 elections was a resounding mandate for democratic change after decades of military-dominated government.
- The scale of the victory in ethnic nationality communities across the country highlighted the hopes of all Myanmar's peoples for the NLD to help achieve a new era of peace and democracy. Both domestic and international expectations are now high, and the incoming government will enjoy initial goodwill.
- Formidable challenges remain in key aspects of social and political life. These include transition from military-backed government, political reform and the agreement of a nationwide ceasefire that includes all groups and regions of the country.
- Despite the NLD's success, concerns remain among different nationalities that, unless the NLD pioneers a political breakthrough, conflict and the marginalisation of minority peoples will continue. The perception is widespread that the present structures of national politics and Myanmar's "first-past-the-post" electoral system do not guarantee the equitable representation of all nationality groups.
- In the coming months, the successful transition to a new era of democratic governance and the agreement of an inclusive nationwide ceasefire could provide the best opportunity for ethnic peace and deep-rooted reform in many decades. It is vital that the different sides work cooperatively together rather than seek self-advantage.

Introduction

Despite huge challenges, election day in Myanmar passed almost entirely peacefully. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy triumphed in polls that were regarded by domestic and international observers as remarkably free from irregularities. The scale of the victory, and the apparent willingness of the current government and military authorities to ensure an orderly transfer of power in the coming months, opens up the potential for an optimistic new chapter in Myanmar's post-independence history.

The hopes and expectations on the new government are extraordinarily high. Yet all of the challenges facing the country remain as difficult to address as ever. One of the most integral to the country's future will be dealing with the legacy of decades of political divisions, ethnic exclusions and armed conflict that have continued since Myanmar's independence in 1948. Although the elections themselves were peaceful, significant conflict continued in parts of the Shan and Kachin states, with attacks by the national armed forces (Tatmadaw) unusually intense both before and after the polls. Adding to this uncertainty, while the poll results reflected the nationwide popularity of the NLD, the scale of the NLD landslide under the country's "first-past-the-post" electoral system has left most ethnic-based political parties with few seats, or none at all.

As in other periods of transitional change in 1948, 1962 and 1988, these political imbalances and instabilities mean that the incoming government will be inheriting an unsettled political landscape as it seeks to move ahead on its promises to build peace and democracy within the country. For the moment, the dialogue processes for constitutional reform through parliamentary politics in Nay Pyi Taw and nationwide ceasefire talks with ethnic armed organisations are on different tracks. Both processes were initiated by the outgoing government of President Thein Sein under a ruling nexus between the Tatmadaw and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that has controlled the country since 2011. However, although the Tatmadaw will continue to enjoy a reserved role in national politics, the USDP was resoundingly defeated in the polls.

After over half a century of military-dominated government, the peoples of Myanmar are entering uncharted waters. In its efforts to bring peace and reform, the future government will benefit from an enormous amount of goodwill, both domestically and internationally. In ethnic affairs, however, any honeymoon period could be brief.

In the coming months, citizens will be watching closely how the NLD fares in establishing a new administration while continuing with both the peace and reform processes in its negotiations with the Tatmadaw. The inclusivity of the NLD government and changes to national politics in the wake of the party's landslide will come under particular scrutiny. At the same time, expectations will be high for a future NLD government to move forward with a countrywide peace process, expanding it to involve groups that have so far been excluded by the Tatmadaw or have refused to sign a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) because of a lack of inclusiveness.

In accomplishing both these tasks, the NLD will face two long-standing challenges. First, NLD politicians will have to convince Tatmadaw officers, over whom they have limited influence, to exercise maximum restraint and play their part in de-escalating tensions. And second, it should not be assumed that the NLD will automatically have the trust and support of all ethnic nationality communities. Past experiences have left a legacy of political suspicion among many minority peoples. Even after the NLD's landslide victory, doubts persist about whether the NLD – which is widely regarded as a party of the Burman (Bamar) majority – really understands ethnic grievances or is ready to make the political reforms and concessions needed to secure a negotiated end to decades of internal conflict.

A critical time is approaching. On a positive note, the 2015 elections and efforts towards a nationwide ceasefire both have the potential to support a more inclusive, peaceful and democratic future for the country. However Myanmar is only at the beginning of its transition, and a great deal more trust-building and negotiation will be required to ensure a successful outcome. For the moment, whether in parliament or ceasefire

meetings, talks between the different sides still focus more on process rather than substance, and real political dialogue and reform implementation are yet to begin.

Campaign period

For a country riven by deep political divisions and ethnic conflict, the campaign period was remarkably almost free from election-related violence. Campaigning ran for eight weeks, from 8 September to 6 November.¹ Only the larger and better-funded parties, including the NLD and the USDP, had the institutional capacity and financial resources to run substantial campaigns throughout this period. Most ethnic-based parties faced significant organisational and funding constraints, limiting their activities. Poor infrastructure in their areas also tended to make campaigning more difficult, time-consuming and expensive.² In consequence, most of the smaller parties focussed their campaigns on the final days or weeks before election day, with the main exceptions of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), Shan Nationalities Development Party (SNDP) and Arakan National Party (ANP).³

Only a few incidents of violence or intimidation were reported in the ethnic borderlands. These included threats and restrictions on campaigning against non-favoured parties in some areas controlled by militias (Pyi Thu Sit), including parts of the Pao and Ta'ang (Palaung) "Self-Administered Zones" (SAZs) in the Shan state and areas controlled by Border Guard Force (BGF) units in north-eastern Kachin state.⁴ In the previous 2010 general election, over 30 seats were won by representatives connected to militia or BGF groups considered sympathetic to the government.⁵ There was also reportedly a shooting incident in Namhsan township in the Ta'ang SAZ on the eve of the election, causing party agents to leave the area, although polling went ahead the next day.⁶ In addition, clashes between government troops and the ceasefire

Restoration Council of Shan State / Shan State Army-South (SSA-South) in September led the latter to issue a statement warning political parties to temporarily suspend campaigning in its areas.⁷

Yet while the elections may have appeared largely peaceful, the context in the ethnic borderlands as a whole was not. In addition to sporadic clashes and unexpected engagements between troops from different armed actors that are a regular feature of daily life in these areas, major Tatmadaw operations also occurred during this period. From 6 October, serious fighting erupted in and around Monghsu township in central Shan state between government forces and the ceasefire Shan State Progress Party / Shan State Army-North (SSA-North). Attacks by the Myanmar military were unusually intense, reportedly involving fixed-wing aircraft, helicopter gunships and long-range artillery that can only have been ordered from a high level within the command.⁸

Up to 10,000 civilians were displaced from their homes, prompting a wave of human rights protests.⁹

According to a spokesperson for the SSA-North, which has had ceasefires with the central government since 1989, the timing of the Tatmadaw offensive was linked to the general election and pressures for the signing of a nationwide ceasefire before the polls.¹⁰ To the frustration of the government of President Thein Sein, only a partial Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was signed by eight ethnic armed organisations on 15 October. The SSA-North, did not sign the agreement:

"I think the attacks are because we did not sign the NCA. The main reason we did not sign is because the NCA is not inclusive. We want all groups, including the Palaung and Kokang to be part of it. We need a ceasefire in all of Shan State; only then Myanmar will be peaceful. In addition, we also think the attacks are linked to the election. The government is accusing us of destroying the elections."¹¹

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Ethnic leaders also believed that the attacks on the SSA-North headquarters area were part of a Tatmadaw strategy to cut the links between the SSA-North and its powerful ally, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), which controls much of the adjoining territory to the east. Many forces have had peace talks and/or ceasefires with the central government since 1989. But given the failure to achieve political breakthroughs, a concern has grown that the Tatmadaw has used such moments as a diversion for territorial expansion. During 2015, the scale of Tatmadaw operations also threatened relations with the SSA-South, which was one of the key ethnic armed supporters promoting the NCA. According to an SSA-South representative, the Tatmadaw also launched attacks on SSA-South positions during September, including with helicopter gunships, an indication that this was not a local issue but was ordered by the Tatmadaw central command.¹² The SSA-South therefore hesitated before deciding to go ahead with the NCA.

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Eventually, following the polls, on 20 November the Myanmar military announced a unilateral halt to attacks, as a delegation from the SSA-North travelled to Yangon for talks with government peace negotiators from 23-24 November. A six-point agreement was reached, including a provision for separation of forces. In essence, this requires SSA-North troops to withdraw from strategic locations along a main road connecting townships in central Shan state. There has since been a lull in fighting, but tensions in the area remain high.¹³ The SSA-North has a bilateral ceasefire with the government,¹⁴ although this has appeared essentially defunct on the Tatmadaw side since clashes in February 2013.

The unusual ferocity of the military attacks, and their timing during the election period, has led to strong perceptions that Tatmadaw commanders have been intending to impose security solutions in conflict areas of Shan state during the general election and run-up to a new government taking office next year. In the Kokang SAZ, which was the scene of heavy fighting earlier this year, elections went ahead despite a state of emergency and

martial law being in force. Election day itself passed peacefully, and President Thein lifted the emergency on 17 November, nine months after it was first declared.¹⁵ Subsequently, however, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) carried out a hit-and-run attack on government troops in the main Kokang town of Laukkai on 27 November, and many districts in the northern and central Shan state presently appear far from a settled peace.¹⁶

Similar instability has also continued in Kachin state, where there were serious clashes between government forces and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) during the election period. The KIO had a ceasefire with the central government between 1994 and 2011 and, although taking part in the NCA negotiations, also rejected signing the NCA in October. In Kachin state's Mansi township, clashes erupted in mid-September, and further escalated on 26 September, resulting in some 300 civilians being displaced.¹⁷ Then,

from 14 November there was heavy fighting in Mohnyin township, in the KIO's 8th Brigade area.

As with the fighting in central Shan state, in Mohnyin the Tatmadaw attacks were of an unusual intensity, involving combined air and ground assaults.¹⁸ According to a KIO spokesperson:

"Right after the signing of the NCA, the government troops attacked the SSA-North and the KIO. The scale of these attacks indicates they are ordered from the high level, and are a clear indication of what we can expect from the present government. The fighting in northern Myanmar is different from that in southeast of the country. And it is no longer a local problem, but has become a geo-political issue."¹⁹

The question, then, is whether, and how far, the conflict landscape will be changed by the result of the 2015 general election and the transition from a USDP-Tatmadaw government to one where the NLD has a large mandate and political authority.

Conflict and Disenfranchisement

The context of ongoing conflict had a major impact on the general election through the cancellation of polling in some areas. This affected seven whole townships in Shan state, corresponding to 21 constituencies: seven in the lower house and 14 in the Shan State assembly.²⁰ It also affected many parts of townships, although not whole constituencies, in the Kachin, Shan and Kayin (Karen) states and Bago region, as well as one village-tract in the Mon state.²¹ As in the 2010 election, the most extensively-affected state in terms of the proportion of areas where voting was cancelled was Kayin state. In total, therefore, up to half a million voters in nearly 600 village tracts may have been disenfranchised for security and access reasons across the different border areas.²²

In accordance with the election law, the cancellations of the polls were for one of two reasons: lack of access for the election authorities to compile voter lists (which was the case for areas controlled by the UWSA and its ally, the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), mostly along the China border), or because of inadequate security for polling to take place. The areas affected were generally similar in extent to 2010, except for increased disruption in Kachin state following the 2011 ceasefire breakdown with the KIO, and new parts of the north and central Shan State due to Tatmadaw operations against the SSA-North and other ethnic armed organisations.

This backdrop of cancellations and conflict continues to cause disquiet in local communities. Strong concerns were expressed in 2010, and again during the 2012 by-elections, that the process for determining where polling would be cancelled was not transparent. This gave rise to suspicions that security was an excuse for the politically-motivated cancelling of the polls by the authorities in certain nationality areas.²³

These concerns arose again in 2015. “We have asked the government to hold elections in all constituencies in Kachin State because some constituencies could not open polling stations in 2010,” said Manam Tu Ja of the Kachin State

Democracy Party.²⁴ Subsequently, the decision on 27 October to cancel voting in Kyethi and Monghsu townships in central Shan State due to fighting between government forces and the SSA-North was criticized by the SNLD. It claimed that the election commission was misled by “a rival party” (by assumption, the SNDP) that was seeking to deny the SNLD seats, and that there was no need to cancel polling in the entire township.²⁵ Unlike the incumbent SNDP in these constituencies, the SNLD had joined with the NLD in boycotting the 2010 general election and was considered likely to stand a good chance in 2015 of winning the cancelled seats.

As polling day approached, there were also controversies in other parts of the country, including claims that local election commission officials in the Kayin State’s Kyainseikkyi township had failed to establish voter rolls in some villages, not because of security reasons but to deliberately disenfranchise ethnic Mon voters.²⁶ Such a lack of transparency and consultation in the process for determining insecure areas contributed to a general lack of trust and fears of bias.

Undoubtedly, however, the most sensitive issue was that of the participation by Muslim communities in the polls. In addition to ethnic nationality voters who were disenfranchised, a similar number of around 500,000 Muslims were also unable to vote, most of whom self-identity as Rohingya in the northern Rakhine state. This mass disenfranchisement followed a government decision in March 2015 to cancel the form of Temporary Registration Certificates that many held (commonly known as ‘White Cards’), and a constitutional tribunal ruling that restricted voting rights to only full citizens under the 1982 citizenship law. The communal and ethno-political context is complex.²⁷ But against a backdrop of violence and lobbying by pro-Buddhist nationalists, over 80 Muslim candidates were banned from standing in the November election,²⁸ and neither the NLD nor USDP fielded Muslim candidates.

In the event, Muslim voters polled in large numbers for the NLD on election day, and the small number of Muslims who stood as

independents or ran for smaller parties all lost at the ballot-box. There are guarded hopes that the NLD will seek to improve the socio-political rights of Muslims in the future.²⁹ But while the 2015 general election is generally perceived to have been free and fair at the polling stations, in many communities the cancellation of voting and disenfranchisement of so many inhabitants in different parts of the ethnic borderlands – whether due to conflict or communal tensions – has cast a shadow over the credibility and local legitimacy of the results.

A Poor Showing for Ethnic Nationality Parties

Given widespread expectations of manipulation, the landslide victory of the NLD, which won 79

per cent of the elected seats in the national legislature, was surprising to many observers. Equally unexpected was the crushing defeat of the USDP, which is closely identified with the Tatmadaw and secured only 8 per cent. Another party dating from earlier years of military government, the National Unity Party (NUP), also fared poorly. But perhaps most surprising was the limited success of ethnic-based parties, many of whom failed to secure a single seat.

Where nationality parties did win more votes, support appeared to go to those, like the SNLD or Zomi Congress for Democracy, that had joined with the NLD in boycotting the 2010 polls or were connected to ethnic armed groups, such as the Pao National Organisation. In contrast, a number of parties that had done well in the 2010 election received few votes and almost no seats, such as

Box 1: Division of Elected Seats in the National Legislature

Party	Lower House	Upper House	TOTAL	%
National League for Democracy (NLD)	255	135	390	79.4%
Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)	30	11	41	8.4%
Arakan National Party (ANP)	12	10	22	4.5%
Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)	12	3	15	3.1%
Ta'ang (Palaung) National Party (TNP)	3	2	5	1.0%
Pao National Organisation (PNO)	3	1	4	0.8%
Zomi Congress for Democracy (ZCD)	2	2	4	0.8%
Lisu National Development Party (Lisu NDP)	2	0	2	0.4%
Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDP)	1	0	1	0.2%
Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP)	1	0	1	0.2%
Mon National Party (MNP)	0	1	1	0.2%
National Unity Party (NUP)	0	1	1	0.2%
Wa Democratic Party (WDP)	1	0	1	0.2%
<i>Independent candidates</i>	1	2	3	0.6%
	323	168	491	

(In addition to these, military appointees make up one-quarter of the total number of representatives in each chamber: i.e., 110 in the lower house and 56 in the upper house.)

Box 2

	1990	2010	2015
Ethnic parties who contested	45	24	55
Ethnic parties who won seats	19 (42%)	13 (54%)	10 (18%)
% available seats won	14%	15%	11%

the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP), Chin Progressive Party, Chin National Party (now Chin National Democratic Party, CNDP), Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP) and Shan Nationalities Democratic Party. Box 1 provides an overview of seats won in the two houses of the national legislature.

As a result of the polls, nationality parties will have a total of 56 seats in the national legislature from next year, or 11 per cent of those available. This is a weaker showing than in the 2010 or 1990 general elections. In fact, there was a greater proliferation of ethnic parties in 2015 with 55 eventually standing, but a smaller than ever proportion – just 18 per cent – actually won national seats this time around (see Box 2).

The results were similarly discouraging for ethnic-based parties in the seven state assemblies. The NLD has now taken full, or virtual, control of five of these. The only nationality party to have significant success is the Arakan National Party, which is one seat short of a majority in the Rakhine state legislature, although party chairman Dr. Aye Maung failed to win his seat, ending his hopes that he could be appointed chief minister.³⁰ The SNLD also fared reasonably well in the Shan state, but it has considerably less seats than the USDP and only slightly more than the NLD. The full results are in Box 3.

Other ethnic parties that did well in their respective areas were those representing smaller nationality groups that are concentrated in particular geographic areas, including the self-administered territories (Box 4).

In addition to the ethnic states and self-administered areas, the third type of representative structure for nationality communities, including the Burman majority, is the “national race” or ethnic affairs ministers. These additional non-geographic state/region constituencies are designated in accordance with section 161 of the constitution, according to which minority populations of more than 51,500³¹ in each region or state each have the right to elect a representative to their regional legislature, provided that they are not the main group in that region or state and do not already have a self-administered area in that region or state (these seats are included in the data provided in Box 3). It should also be noted that, while only voters from the nationality group in question are included in the voter roll for these seats, the candidates who stand for them do not need to be from that particular ethnic group, the rationale being that voters have the right to elect anyone that they wish to represent them.³²

In addition to their legislative responsibilities, these nationality representatives are automatically appointed as ex officio ministers in the state or region government for matters relating to their respective communities. There were 29 such seats designated in the 2010 general election and, in the absence of any updated information on nationality population numbers, the election commission designated the same 29 seats in 2015, despite the intervening conduct of the 2014 Population and Housing Census and claims by additional groups that they meet the criteria for a seat of their own.³³ The results of these 29 seats are provided in Box 5.

Box 3: The Seven State Assemblies

The balance of power (expressed in seats and percentages) in the ethnic state legislatures is as follows:³⁴

Chin State Legislature

NLD	12	50%	
Military	6	25%	
Other	6	25%	[USDP 4; ZCD 2]

Kachin State Legislature

NLD	26	49.1%	
Military	13	24.5%	
Other	14	26.4%	[USDP 7; KSDP 3; Lisu NDP 2; SNLD 1; Unity and Democracy Party Kachin State 1]

Kayah State Legislature

NLD	11	55%	
Military	5	25%	
USDP	4	20%	

Kayin State Legislature

NLD	13	56.5%	
Military	6	26.1%	
Other	4	17.4%	[USDP 3; Kayin People's Party (KPP) 1]

Mon State Legislature

NLD	19	61.3%	
Military	8	25.8%	
Other	4	12.9%	[MNP 2; USDP 1; AMRDP 1]

Rakhine State Legislature

ANP	23	48.9%	
Military	12	25.5%	
NLD	9	19.1%	
USDP	3	6.4%	

Shan State Legislature

Military	39	27.5%	
USDP	33	23.2%	
SNLD	25	17.6%	
NLD	23	16.2%	
Other	22	15.5%	[TNP 7; PNO 6; Lahu NDP 2; WDP 2; Akha NDP 1; Lisu NDP 1; SNDP 1; Wa National United Party (WNUP) 1; Independent 1]

Box 4 : Results in the Self-Administered Areas³⁵

Danu:	NLD 2, USDP 2
Kokang:	USDP 4
Pao:	PNO 6
Ta'ang:	TNP 4
Wa:	WDP 2, Lahu NDP 1, WNUP 1 (8 cancelled)
Naga:	NLD 5, USDP 1

Box 5: Ethnic Affairs Minister Seats

Ayeyarwady Region			Mon State		
1	Kayin	NLD	14	Burman	NLD
2	Rakhine	NLD	15	Kayin	NLD
Bago Region			16	Pao	NLD
3	Kayin	NLD	Rakhine State		
Kachin State			17	Chin	NLD
4	Burman	NLD	Sagaing Region		
5	Shan	NLD	18	Shan	TaiLai NDP
6	Lisu	NLD	19	Chin	NLD
7	Rawang	NLD	Shan State		
Kayah State			20	Burman	USDP
8	Burman	USDP	21	Kachin	Independent
Kayin State			22	Lisu	Lisu NDP
9	Burman	NLD	23	Lahu	Lahu NDP
10	Mon	NLD	24	Intha	NLD
11	Pao	NLD	25	Akha	Akha NDP
Magway Region			26	Kayan (Padaung)	NLD
12	Chin	NLD	Tanintharyi Region		
Mandalay Region			27	Kayin	NLD
13	Shan	NLD	Yangon Region		
			28	Kayin	NLD
			29	Rakhine	ANP

Explanations and Soul-Searching

The poor result achieved by most ethnic-based parties has set off a process of reflection and soul-searching. Some observers and protagonists have pointed to the failure of rival “1990-era” and “2010-era” parties representing the same nationality group as a key factor, as it led to vote-splitting. As apparent evidence of this, the only successful merger of different era parties before the election was that of the two main Rakhine nationality parties³⁶ to form the Arakan National Party which went on to do well in the polls. Other analysts and political rivals have stated that ethnic-based parties could not hope

to compete against the NLD, which is a nationally-organised party that was well-funded, led by such a well-known figure as Aung San Suu Kyi and campaigned very effectively.

Analysis of the detailed voting figures released by the election commission on 2 December can shed some light on these questions. In particular, it is possible to assess the impact of vote-splitting by determining whether the combined votes of competing parties representing the same nationality group in each constituency is greater than the number of votes taken by the winning party in that constituency. For example, in the lower house constituency of Nansang in the southern Shan state, the vote breakdown was as follows:

Party	Votes
USDP	14,211
SNLD	12,388
NLD	8,529
SNDP	2,013
NUP	1,030

It can be seen that, if the number of votes for the two Shan parties (SNLD and SNDP) are combined, the total is greater than the USDP's winning total. Assuming that all voters for the two Shan parties would also have voted for a combined Shan party, then were it not for the split vote, this seat would have been won by the Shan party.

The actual number of seats affected by vote-splitting in this way is very small, however. Across all three legislative levels – upper house, lower house and state/region assemblies – only 17 seats would have been won if other ethnic parties had carried out pre-election mergers. This represents less than 4 per cent of all seats in the ethnic states (see box 6 for details).

Such calculations may not give a full picture of voters' intentions, of course. It is possible, for example, that the failure of most nationality parties to carry out successful mergers led to perceptions of disunity on the part of their constituents, lowering their share of the vote. It is also possible that the lack of a merger reduced these parties perceived chance of success, prompting tactical voting to block a disfavoured party. For instance, in many constituencies a vote for the NLD might have been intended to keep a USDP candidate from winning. Unified parties may thus have fared better than the constituent parties combined, although the impact of any such effect is hard to gauge. With armed conflict continuing and peaceful reform yet to be achieved, it is also difficult to assess how ethnic politics might look in any post-nationwide ceasefire era.

In many ethnic states, however, it appears that the scale of the NLD's popularity was such that it would have been very difficult for nationality parties, however credible and well-organised, to

challenge its candidates. In many constituencies of the Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon and Chin states, the NLD won with more than 50 per cent of the popular vote. Clearly, Aung San Suu Kyi's message of change and a better future, and her long opposition to military rule, appear to have resonated strongly with voters in nationality areas where the NLD's campaign was often highly personalised. This was also facilitated by the fact that, based upon initial impressions, the party seems to have done a good job in choosing respected local candidates in a number of areas.

The two exceptions to this general picture of NLD success at the expense of nationality parties are in the Rakhine and Shan states. In Rakhine state, there were a number of factors at play. These include strong Rakhine nationalist sentiment; a large majority of ethnic Rakhine in much of the state; the almost complete disenfranchisement of the largest non-Rakhine group, the Muslim Rohingya; the 2012 violence and tensions that have made identity politics particularly strong; the successful merger of the two largest Rakhine parties to form the ANP, one of which, the 1990-era Arakan League for Democracy, had boycotted the 2010 polls; and perceptions, promoted by Buddhist nationalists, of the NLD as being more sympathetic to Muslims and the Rohingya cause. As result, the NLD still did well in the southern-most townships, but across much of the state the ANP won by huge margins. Here, for example, are the results for the lower house constituency of Sittwe, the state capital:

Party	Votes	%
ANP	44,027	67.0
USDP	16,816	25.6
NLD	2,140	3.3
RPP ³⁷	1,877	2.9
NUP	832	1.3

The other exception to the picture of NLD supremacy was in Shan state. This is the only state or region legislature where no party came even close to holding a majority. Surprisingly, the USDP won the largest bloc in the state, with almost one-third of elected seats – although this will still be less than the number of military appointees in the

new state legislature (see Box 3). The SNLD and the NLD came in second and third, with a similar number of seats each, and the rest were taken by eight other parties and an independent.

As in other places in the country, voting patterns confirm that the electorate turned away from 2010-era parties, whether the USDP or nationality parties, seeing them as having been co-opted at that time. As a result, the geographical distribution of seats is similar to 2010, reflected in two key changes: the NLD, which boycotted the

2010 polls, has taken seats that were previously won by the USDP, as well as some from nationality parties; and the seats in ethnic Shan heartlands were won this time by the SNLD, which also boycotted in 2010, instead of the SNDP, which took only a single seat.

The main question in Shan state, then, is how the USDP managed to fare so well, unlike in the rest of the country. There are likely to be a number of factors involved. With military operations still continuing, there was greater insecurity and

Box 6: Vote splitting in the seven ethnic states

State	Constituency	Winner	Potential winner
Lower House			
Kayin	Thandaunggyi	NLD	KPP + KNP ³⁸
Chin	Madupi	NLD	CLD ³⁹ + CNDP
Mon	Ye	NLD	MNP + AMRDP
Shan	Nansang	USDP	SNLD + SNDP
Shan	Mongpan	USDP	SNLD + SNDP
Shan	Namkham	TNP	SNLD + SNDP
Upper House			
Chin	Chin-10	NLD	CLD + CNDP
Shan	Shan-5	TNP	SNLD + SNDP
State Assembly			
Kachin	Momauk-2	NLD	SNLD + SNDP
Kayin	Thandaunggyi-1	NLD	KPP + KNP or PSDP
Kayin	Kawkareik-2	NLD	MNP + AMRDP
Mon	Kyaikmaraw-2	USDP	MNP + AMRDP
Mon	Thanbyuzayat-2	NLD	MNP + AMRDP
Shan	Mongmit-2	NLD	SNLD + SNDP
Shan	Muse-2	USDP	SNLD + SNDP
Shan	Namkham-1	TNP	SNLD + SNDP
Shan	Namkham-2	TNP	SNLD + SNDP

potential for vote manipulation by the authorities, as happened in 2010. A number of areas are also under the influence of Tatmadaw-established or backed militia groups, who might be expected to deliver the vote for the USDP.⁴⁰ Certainly, conflict and insecurity limited the possibility of campaigning by the NLD and other opposition in some places, and there were limited numbers of party agents and election observers in many of the more remote or conflict-affected townships. With ethnic armed organisations the de facto opposition in many rural areas, there was also an absence of credible alternative parties to vote for in some constituencies. For example, the USDP was electorally opposed in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone, which was under martial law at the time,⁴¹ by only one other party, the Shan State Kokang Democratic Party, which won only a small proportion of the votes and none of the seats. And last but not least, in a few cases the USDP did also benefit from vote-splitting, as illustrated above (see Box 6).

In summary, some of these political and insecurity factors were present in many different parts of the borderlands during the election period. But there seems to have been a particular convergence in the conflict-affected Shan state and, taken together, they have produced an outcome that is at variance with the rest of the country. Without doubt, then, the scale of the nationwide vote for the NLD was a vote for change, and the challenge for the NLD and other stakeholder parties is how to move peace and reform forward in the light of the NLD mandate.

What Now for Ethnic Politics?

The 2015 election results will clearly have a big impact on ethnic politics as Myanmar enters a new political era. The upper house – the “chamber of nationalities” – is intended to reflect the diversity of the country by giving equal representation to the Burman-majority regions

and the minority ethnic states. But while there will continue to be a diversity of nationality representation in the chamber, most members in the new chamber will be from the NLD. Ethnic-based parties, in contrast, hold few seats, which is reminiscent of Myanmar’s post-independence democratic period, when national politics were dominated by another Burman-majority party, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL).⁴²

Clearly, as the national voting showed, large numbers of people in minority ethnic areas are hoping that Aung San Suu Kyi will be able to bring an end to internal conflict and deliver meaningful political change. But the NLD will have to move quickly to build upon such expectations and trust. Privately, many nationality leaders are already concerned that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD do not fully understand ethnic grievances and

perspectives. They see the party as a hierarchical, Burman-led organisation that will not be able to represent minority interests. The NLD has always had a strong system of party discipline, and Aung San Suu Kyi has made clear that representatives will be expected to follow party positions, warning them “do not build small tents under the shadow of my building”.⁴³

This is fuelling concerns that the diversity of NLD legislative representatives may not translate into diversity of debate in the chamber.

Such concerns are even more acute in the context of the ethnic state legislatures which, although they have very limited devolved powers, are intended to give the nationality peoples in these states greater control over their own affairs. Yet, with the NLD having a majority or near-majority in five of the seven states, and the Tatmadaw and USDP having the largest blocs in one of the others, it is questionable how representative these assemblies will be of local aspirations. In line with the election results, most Chief Ministers – who are appointed by the president – are likely to be from the NLD. And while these Chief Ministers are free to choose members of the

The challenge for the NLD and other stakeholder parties is how to move peace and reform forward in the light of the NLD mandate

state government from inside or outside of the legislature, if they follow the previous practice of appointing ministers from different parties in rough proportion to the number of seats they hold, few will be from nationality parties, except in the cases of the Rakhine and Shan states. The outcome could well be a paradox: in the new, ostensibly more democratic era, nationality parties may actually have less influence in political systems representing their areas.

It would not be surprising, then, if this disparity gives rise to discussion of Myanmar's electoral system and pressure for changes that could increase the representation of local political groups. Part of the distortion in representation is due to the "first-past-the-post" system. In fact, the "first-past-the-post" system had its biggest effect at the national level, amplifying the NLD's success at the considerable expense of the USDP. The NLD received twice the popular vote of the USDP, but ended up with nearly ten times the number of seats in the national legislature.⁴⁴

By comparison, the two largest nationality parties, the ANP and SNLD, benefitted from the geographical concentration of their voter base, gaining twice as many seats in comparison to their percentage of the popular vote.⁴⁵

At the state legislature level, the "first-past-the-post" system had more varied effects. It amplified the success of dominant parties such as the NLD and ANP, improved the result of the SNLD to a certain degree, and boosted the results of small locally-concentrated nationalities such as the Pao and Ta'ang. In contrast, much to their disquiet, "first-past-the-post" worked against nationality parties whose support base is more spread out, including Mon, Karen, Karenni and Chin parties.

To address this anomaly, different technical possibilities could be explored to boost minority party representation, such as proportional representation or reserved seats that were

tried under the parliamentary system of the colonial era.⁴⁶ But, in the 21st century, the latter is likely to be especially resisted by the larger national parties, and could have negative political consequences by further entrenching the politicization of ethnicity and limiting cooperation and coalition-building across nationality lines.⁴⁷ In essence, in a multi-ethnic and multi-party democracy, political parties want to be free to contest seats in every constituency if they so choose.

Finally, overshadowing analysis of the election in ethnic politics is the ongoing state of conflict or armed stasis in many of the nationality borderlands, a situation that has pertained through all general elections and eras of government since Myanmar's independence in 1948. Historically, all new governments have been welcomed with periods of optimism and rounds of new peace talks, notably post-1949, 1963-64 and post-1989. For the moment, however, the implications of the elections for the present peace

process initiated by President Thein Sein are not yet clear.

In the current crisis, the NLD may have some advantages over the Thein Sein administration in building trust over nationwide talks that have lately been stalling. All sides now theoretically accept federal reforms, from Aung San Suu Kyi to President Thein Sein. "After we become a real federal system, the minority ethnic groups will be free from fears and they can

independently decide their affairs," said Aung San Suu Kyi in Shan state in September.⁴⁸

Equally important, NLD supporters have won pedigree in certain nationality circles during their long years of struggle by their alliance with ethnic-based groups. Particularly longstanding were the Committee Representing the People's Parliament (formed 1998) of parties from the 1990 general election and the Thai border-based National Council Union of Burma (formed 1992)

The outcome could well be a paradox: in the new, ostensibly more democratic era, nationality parties may actually have less influence in political systems representing their areas

that brought ethnic armed organisations together with pro-democracy supporters and NLD MPs in-exile. In consequence, after decades of Tatmadaw-dominated rule, many ethnic leaders have long believed that only a pro-democracy government can form the basis for achieving real reforms and a sustainable peace. This was again affirmed by ethnic armed organisations after the polls. At the annual meeting of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) umbrella group, its chairman and KIO deputy-leader N'Ban La stressed that "the next government will be led by an organisation that has political goals familiar to us", urging all groups to prepare themselves for peace talks.⁴⁹

The problem, however, is that parliamentary politics and President Thein Sein's peace process have continued along different paths during the past three years, and, among the many challenges facing an incoming NLD government, it is likely to be very difficult to bring all the different sides together. There are no short-cuts. If Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD appear too radical, there is a risk of alienating the Tatmadaw and other powerful elite interests. But if they appear too conservative, they could lose the support of the very people who voted for the party in such large numbers in the hope of far-reaching change.

In particular, while intensifying military pressures in the Kachin and Shan states in the pre-election period, Tatmadaw officers increased their support for the signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement before the general election, especially among ethnic forces in southeast Myanmar in what many groups criticised as a poorly-disguised policy of "divide and rule".⁵⁰ In response, only eight out of 18 groups signed the NCA on 15 October in Nay

Pyi Taw.⁵¹ The NLD also declined an invitation to sign as an observer.

Supporters of the NCA argued that, even if incomplete, signing the NCA marks a better platform for future change while President Thein Sein, a former general, is still in government office. In apparent acknowledgement of this, on 8 December the outgoing parliament endorsed the NCA accord, providing the potential for the

parliamentary and peace processes to be brought together in the future. Critics, however, argued that such an incomplete step could leave the NLD with a very unhelpful legacy.

Certainly, instability remains widespread in many borderland regions. Tatmadaw attacks are continuing in some areas; many communities are still wracked by conflict, with over 800,000 civilians displaced from their homes;⁵² long-standing groups such as the KIO, UWSA and SSA-North are yet to become signatories to the NCA; controversial economic and natural resource projects, from jade mining to the suspended Myitsone dam, remain real sources of local and international contention;⁵³ and a new government, with a popular mandate, is soon to take office in potentially the most important pro-democracy development in the country in many decades.⁵⁴

With so many needs and imperatives, navigating successful ways forward becomes a very difficult task. If Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD take forward the present NCA process and invite all parties to become involved, then

this is likely to be a popular starting point. No party or nationality group in the country wants to be left behind during this time of change, and there is widespread support for the NLD to mark

No party or nationality group in the country wants to be left behind during this time of change, and there is widespread support for the NLD to mark a new beginning

There are concerns that a dominant Burman-majority party in parliament, together with the powerful military in the field, could represent a formidable "united Burman front" in any future peace negotiations over political reform

a new beginning.⁵⁵ But despite recent meetings between Aung San Suu Kyi, the commander-in-chief and outgoing government leaders, there remain questions over how far the NLD will want to follow the present NCA process and whether NLD promises in the peace process will be implemented on the ground, where Tatmadaw officers have often held sway. “If NLD gets real political power, there can be hope,” said David Tharckabaw, alliance affairs head of the Karen National Union, an NCA signatory, but he cautioned that the military’s response was still “unpredictable”.⁵⁶

At the same time, it is not only Tatmadaw officers who have concerns about an NLD-led peace process. Among ethnic-based parties, there are worries that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD do not really understand the sufferings of non-Burman peoples nor the detailed negotiations in the peace process to date.⁵⁷ “I don’t think they can rule the country smoothly,” said Nai Ngwe Thein, the MNP’s veteran 94-year-old chairman, highlighting impediments in the 2008 constitution that underpin the Tatmadaw’s political and security roles.⁵⁸

Related to this, there are concerns that a dominant Burman-majority party in parliament, together with the powerful military in the field, could represent a formidable “united Burman front” in any future peace negotiations over political reform. Somewhat remarkably, if the NLD, Tatmadaw and outgoing USDP do agree political cooperation, this will mark the first time since Myanmar’s independence in 1948 that all the key Burman-majority power-holders in the country have agreed to work together. All other political eras have been marked by conflict and division that has spread out into the ethnic borderlands, making it very difficult for nationality parties to know which side to work with in the achievement of peace and political reform.⁵⁹

Thus, in theory, the forthcoming parliament could provide a long overdue opportunity to bring all parties and peoples together, fulfilling Aung San Suu Kyi’s 1988 rallying call for the country’s “second struggle for independence”. The promise of a “Second Panglong”, repeated by Aung San Suu Kyi on the campaign trail, is also a popular call, echoing the 1947 conference at which the principles of ethnic equality and unity were agreed for the new Union.⁶⁰ In Myanmar

politics, Panglong still has historical resonance, even if it rings hollow for some nationality communities who were not part of that agreement, or felt poorly-served by its arrangements.

Unless, however, the NLD is able to really reform the structures of national politics, there are already concerns that the party could go the way of AFPFL governments in the parliamentary era of the 1950s, concentrating on party

politics in the national capital, failing to end conflict, and continuing the marginalisation of minority peoples. Ultimately, this ended with the Tatmadaw assuming power, first in 1958, and then again in 1962. Indeed, if peace is not achieved, some ethnic analysts are warning of the potential for a return to two “parallel societies” or a new diarchic system of administration in the country, separated between a relatively democratic environment for the Burman-majority in central Myanmar and continued conflict and Tatmadaw dominance in the ethnic borderlands.⁶¹

For the moment, of course, these are only expressions of concern for the future. The greatest hopes are on a consensus between NLD, Tatmadaw, USDP and other party leaders in establishing a new era of democratically-mandated government to achieve peace and reform in the country. In the meantime, little-noticed outside NCA circles, attempts to implement the provisions of the NCA signed in October are still moving ahead, even during the current period of political vacuum before the next

If peace is not achieved, some ethnic analysts are warning of the potential for a return to two “parallel societies” or a new diarchic system of administration in the country

government assumes office in late March. A peace dialogue conference is proposed for mid-January, but how this will be perceived by the incoming NLD administration or other stakeholder parties remains to be seen. The NLD's general election victory was very striking. But nothing about Myanmar's political future can be considered certain and fixed.

Conclusion

The 2015 elections and the decisive victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD is a remarkable moment in the history of Myanmar. The incoming government has a powerful mandate, as well as huge expectations to meet. Yet it will inherit all of the problems that have bedevilled the country and successive governments in the decades since independence in 1948. Foremost among these is the legacy of deep ethnic divisions and conflict.

Many conclusions can be drawn about the 2015 popularity of the NLD. However, given the history of conflict and state failure in Myanmar, it would be a mistake to think that just because most of the country voted for the NLD, including in minority ethnic areas, that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD can successfully represent all nationality perspectives and grievances. The 2015 vote was one for hope and change, but for many people, particularly in the borderlands, it was likely even more a vote against the military-elite clique that has dominated national government for decades. With the NLD victory, identity politics and the politicization of ethnicity have not gone away; they have merely been transcended by a broader concern to change national politics.

If there is to be genuine national reconciliation, therefore, it will require that Aung San Suu Kyi extends a hand not only to her former adversaries in the military-elite, but that she also engages closely with the diversity of ethnic political actors, including parties that may not have had electoral success. This will also mean coming to grips with the challenges of conflict resolution and concluding a nationwide peace agreement that,

for the first time in Myanmar's post-independence history, truly includes all armed groups. And to do this, it will mean reform of the 2008 constitution to ensure that political representation of Myanmar's diverse peoples can be guaranteed in the future.

This is a formidable challenge. But there is also an unprecedented opportunity for democratic transition and nationwide peace to be achieved, if the different sides choose to work cooperatively together rather than pursuing self-interest, as has happened so often in the past. It is an opportunity that should not be lost.

Endnotes

1. No campaigning was allowed on 7 November or on election day, 8 November.
2. See Marie Lall et al., "Myanmar ethnic parties and the 2015 elections", International Management Group, Yangon, 2015.
3. See, European Union Election Observation Mission, "Preliminary Statement", Yangon, 10 November 2015.
4. That is, the former New Democratic Army-Kachin BGF units 1001-1003. See, Carter Center Election Observation Mission, "Preliminary Statement", Yangon, 10 November 2015. See also, "Parties silent on Pao militia election threats", Myanmar Times, 3 December 2015.
5. See, Transnational Institute, "Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar", TNI Myanmar Policy Briefing Nr 16, September 2015, pp.8-9.
6. TNI interview with election observer having knowledge of the incident.
7. "Rebels warn political parties to halt election campaigns amid clashes in Myanmar's Shan State", Radio Free Asia, 17 September 2015.
8. "Shan conflict shows no signs of abating", Democratic Voice of Burma, 19 November 2015; "Burma army launch airstrikes against Shan State Army-North", Shan Herald Agency for News, 11 November 2015. TNI interview with SSA-North representative, 6 November 2015.
9. See UNOCHA map, "Myanmar: Central Shan State Displacement (3 Nov 2015)", available at <https://shar.es/15vMbW>; Statement by Shan Community Based Organisations, "Naypyidaw must immediately stop its attacks in central Shan State and let communities return home", 6 November 2015; "Little aid, no contact: Shan State's IDP crisis", Shan Herald Agency for News, 18 November 2015.
10. TNI interview with SSA-North representative, 6 November 2015.
11. Ibid.
12. TNI interview with SSA-South representative, 29 September 2015.
13. Lawi Weng, "As conflict abates, Shan State rebels weigh Naypyidaw dialogue", The Irrawaddy, 3 December 2015.
14. Like the UWSA, the SSA-North also had a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the previous military government since 1989.
15. For details on the Kokang conflict, see, TNI, "Military Confrontation or Political Dialogue: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis for Peace and Democracy in Myanmar", TNI Myanmar Policy Briefing Nr 15, July 2015.
16. "Rebel group launches attacks at Laukkai", Global New Light of Myanmar, 29 November 2015.
17. "Villagers stranded in conflict zone as fighting flares once more in Kachin State", Myanmar Times, 28 September 2015.
18. Nyein Nyein & Nang Lwin Hnin Pwint, "Burma Army Offensive Continues in Kachin State", The Irrawaddy, 19 November 2015.
19. TNI interview with KIO representative, 2 December 2015.
20. There are three constituencies per township: one for the lower house, and two for the state or region assembly. Cancellations were the four townships in the Wa Self-Administered Division, which is completely controlled by the UWSA (Panghsang, Mongmao, Namphan, and Pangwaun); Mongla township which is controlled by the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA); and two townships in central Shan state that had been the locus for recent fighting with the SSA-North (Kyethi, Monghsu).
21. Full details of the cancellations are in Union Election Commission Notifications 61-65 and 67/2015, 12 and 27 October 2015.
22. Rough TNI estimate based on census data for the affected areas.
23. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's electoral landscape", 28 April 2015.
24. Shwe Yee Saw Myint, "Ethnic parties fear voting cancellation", Myanmar Times, 10 June 2015.
25. Thomas Kean, "SNLD claims commission was misled on security", Myanmar Times, 29 October 2015.
26. "Burma 2015: Ballot denied; Disenfranchised voters in Kyar Inn Seik Gyi township, Karen State", Human Rights Foundation of Monland, 1 December 2015; Wa Lone, "Ethnic Mon left off electoral rolls", Myanmar Times, 21 September 2015.
27. See e.g., See e.g., ICG, "The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar", Asia Report No.251, 1 October 2013; ICG, "Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State", Asia Report No.261, 22 October 2014; TNI, "Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context: The 2014 Census, Identity and Citizenship in Burma/Myanmar", Transnational Institute (TNI)-Burma Centrum Nederland (BCN), Burma Policy Briefing Nr 13, February 2014.
28. TNI, "Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar".
29. Austin Ramzy, "After Myanmar Election, Few Signs of a Better Life for Muslims", New York Times, 18 November 2015.
30. The NLD candidate won the seat of Munaung-2 with 40 per cent of the popular vote, with the USDP candidate in second place with 33 per cent, and Dr. Aye Maung in third place with 23 per cent
31. That is, 0.1 per cent of the 51.5 million population of Myanmar in the 2014 Population and Housing Census.
32. This interpretation was confirmed by the election commission in the course of several successful appeals from candidates who were initially rejected on the grounds that they were not of the right ethnicity. TNI interview, election observer present in the appeals hearings, Yangon, October 2015.
33. For details, see TNI, "Ethnic politics and the 2015 elections". The 2014 census collected data on ethnicity, but due to the political sensitivities these statistics are yet to be released, and a consultation process on the "135" official

ethnic divisions is ongoing. These data were also collected in an inconsistent way that is unlikely to be usable for “national race” seat designation.

34. In some cases, the number of elected seats is not evenly divisible by three, so the proportion of military seats does not exactly equal 25 per cent. The divergence is particularly large in Shan state because polling was cancelled in 14 seats, whereas the number of military seats is calculated on the basis of the number of constituencies designated, including those where elections did not take place. In 2010, no constituencies were designated in the four townships in the Wa Self-Administered Division under the control of the UWSA; in 2015 they were designated, but no elections took place.

35. According to section 276(d) of the constitution, devolved legislative and executive functions in these areas are carried out by Leading Bodies, made up of the elected representatives, military appointees and other appointed persons selected by these two groups, for a total of at least 10 members (one quarter of the total being Tatmadaw appointees).

36. 1990-era Arakan League for Democracy and 2010-era Rakhine Nationalities Development Party.

37. Rakhine Patriotic Party, a small Sittwe-based party that was one of the last in the country to register, in July 2015.

38. Karen National Party.

39. Chin League for Democracy.

40. TNI, “Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar”, p.9; for more detailed discussion, see, Kim Jolliffe, “Ethnic armed conflict and territorial administration in Myanmar”, The Asia Foundation, July 2015.

41. TNI, “Military Confrontation or Political Dialogue: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis”.

42. See e.g., Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 2nd edition, 1999), pp.77-87.

43. Lun Min Mang & Shwe Yee Saw Myint, “NLD leader lays down the law to incoming reps”, Myanmar Times, 30 November 2015.

44. The NLD’s share of the popular vote was 57.3 per cent, compared with the USDP’s 28.3 per cent; TNI analysis of election commission voting data. A similar impact occurred in the 1990 election when the NLD won 392 of the 425 seats it contested with 59.87 per cent of the vote, whereas the pro-Tatmadaw NUP won just 10 seats with 25 per cent of the vote.

45. The ANP gained 2.2 per cent of the national popular vote and secured 4.5 per cent of the elected seats. For the SNLD, the figures were 1.6 per cent of the vote and 3.1 per cent of the seats; TNI analysis of election commission voting data.

46. Karen, Indian, Anglo-Burman, European and various interest groups. Reserved seats for Karen representatives were continued for a short while after independence.

47. This was the experience of the Karen “communal seats” during the colonial period. See Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The Karen Revolution in Burma* (East-West Center, 2008), pp.3-6. See also Robert Taylor, “Refighting Old Battles, Compounding Misconceptions: The Politics of Ethnicity in Myanmar Today”, ISEAS Perspective No. 12, Singapore, March 2015.

48. Kyaw Phone Kyaw, “Daw Suu woos ethnic voters in Pao zone”, Myanmar Times, 7 September 2015.

49. Lun Min Mang & Ye Mon, “Ethnic armed groups risk losing public image”, Myanmar Times, 8 December 2015.

50. “Karen Leader – Want Change? Get The Military and Its ‘Cronies’ Out of Politics....”, Karen News, 27 November 2015.

51. The number of groups agreed as signatories to any NCA has proven problematical. The Tatmadaw accepts 16 groups, while UNFC and other forces have proposed up to 21. In essence, the main argument has been over three groups that have been involved in heavy fighting during 2015, the Kokang MNDAA, Ta’ang National Liberation Army and Arakan Army, which the Tatmadaw rejects. Ethnic allies are reluctant to agree to any nationwide agreement that leaves other parties outside; see e.g., TNI, “Military Confrontation or Political Dialogue: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis”, pp.13-20.

52. See e.g., UN OCHA, “Myanmar: A Call for Humanitarian Aid: January-December 2015”, 6 February 2015; The Border Consortium (TBC), “Protection and Security Concerns in South East Burma”, November 2014. UNOCHA counted 100,000 internally-displaced persons (IDPs) in the Kachin and northern Shan states and 140,000 (mostly Muslims) in the Rakhine state, while TBC has calculated 400,000 IDPs – mostly Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan – in southeast Myanmar. There are also around 120,000 refugees in camps in Thailand, while over 70,000 civilians were displaced as IDPs or refugees fleeing conflict in the Kokang region along the China border during February-March this year.

53. See e.g., Global Witness, “Jade: Myanmar’s ‘Big State Secret’”, October 2015.

54. For a snap-shot of difficulties, see e.g., Sai Wansai, “Power transfer confirmed but squabbling on political dividend might have just begun”, Shan Herald Agency for News, 9 December 2015.

55. See e.g., TNI, “The 2015 General Election: A New Beginning?”, TNI commentary, 4 December 2015.

56. “Karen Leader – Want Change? Get The Military and Its ‘Cronies’ Out of Politics....”, Karen News, 27 November 2015.

57. TNI interview with armed group leader involved in the peace process, December 2015.

58. Yen Snaing and David Hopkins, “Mon parties count their losses after NLD rout”, The Irrawaddy, 13 November 2015.

59. See e.g., Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, passim; TNI, “The 2015 General Election: A New Beginning?”.

60. Kyaw Phone Kyaw, “Daw Suu woos ethnic voters in Pao zone”.

61. Sai Wansai, “Aung San Suu Kyi, the President, Commander-in-Chief and war in ethnic states”, Shan Herald Agency for News, 1 December 2015.

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