

Myanmar/Burma: Political parties

After decades of direct and indirect military rule, Myanmar/Burma's political future now hangs in the balance, with elections on 8 November 2015 offering its best chance of a transition to democracy for many years. The two main parties contesting the election are the incumbent, military-backed USDP, and the opposition party, NLD, led by the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi.

Background

Formerly under British rule, Myanmar/Burma became independent in 1948. Against a backdrop of long-running insurgency, it has been under direct or indirect military rule for most of the time since then. Elections in 1990 were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San (one of the founders of independent Burma, assassinated in 1947). However, the military refused to give up power, instead forming a junta; Suu Kyi spent 15 of the ensuing years under house arrest.

Recent [reforms](#) have been encouraging. The NLD boycotted the 2010 elections, the first to be held since 1990 and widely [denounced](#) as fraudulent, but participated in the 2012 by-elections, winning nearly all of the contested seats and a substantial minority in parliament. The next general elections are scheduled for 8 November 2015.

Political system

Under the 2008 [constitution](#), Myanmar/Burma has three centres of power. First, there is a [bicameral parliament](#), the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Assembly of the Union). The Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives, the lower house, 440 seats) and the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities, upper house, 224 seats) have similar competences, with neither house being able to overrule the other; in the event of a disagreement, a combined vote of the two houses is taken. Second, there is a president, currently Thein Sein, who leads and appoints the government. He also nominates the Chief Justice and judges of the Supreme Court. Third, there is the military, which retains considerable influence – directly, in that it appoints three government ministers as well as 25% of all parliamentarians, giving it a crucial veto over constitutional change (which must be adopted by over 75% of members of parliament); and indirectly in that many members of the government, including President Thein Sein, are former junta members.

Electoral system

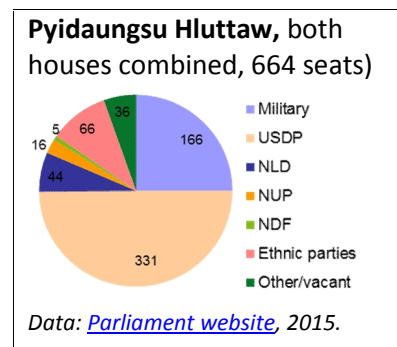
Three quarters of seats in the two houses of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, as well as the 14 regional parliaments, are elected simultaneously by direct universal suffrage, once every five years, with the remaining 25% being appointed by the military. Elections use a 'first past the post' system with one seat per constituency, won by the candidate with the largest number of votes. The newly constituted parliament elects the country's president, who in turn appoints a government.

Political parties represented in Parliament

Party politics in Myanmar/Burma is more about personalities and their relationship with the military than political agendas, with little discernible difference between the platforms of the main parties – all declare themselves committed to continued reforms and democracy.

Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – the ruling party, backed by the military

The USDP was created by the former junta in 2010 and maintains close ties with the military. In cooperation with military parliamentarians, it holds an overwhelming majority in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. Its track record since it



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won power in the 2010 elections has been mostly positive: major political reforms, [progress](#) towards a lasting peace settlement with ethnic rebels, and an [improving](#) economic situation.

On the other hand, critics point to continuing widespread [human rights abuses](#) and, despite encouraging initial progress, a [stalled reform process](#). The party is tainted by its past and present ties with the military. It is true that the party's more progressive wing led by ex-party chairman Shwe Mann has shown itself open to change, cooperating with the NLD to back constitutional amendments that would have ended the military's veto and allowed Suu Kyi to run for president; however, recently Shwe Mann and his allies were [purged](#) from the party's leadership after a night-time raid by security forces (although he retains his party membership and influential position as speaker of the lower house), recalling junta-era repression.

National League for Democracy (NLD) – main opposition party and possible election winner

The [NLD's](#) main asset is its leader Suu Kyi, an icon of resistance to the former junta. However, since her 2012 entry into parliamentary politics, enthusiasm has been less universal than when she was a political prisoner. There was [disappointment](#) with her decision as chair of a parliamentary committee to side against local protestors over the controversial Letpadaung copper mine, and again with her failure to defend the persecuted [Rohingya](#) Muslim minority, or oppose the '[Race and Religion Protection Laws](#)' discriminating against non-Buddhists. Kachin (largely Christian) rebels in the north of the country accuse her of [abandoning](#) them. Admittedly, siding with religious and ethnic minorities could hurt the party's electoral chances in a country where [89%](#) of the population are Buddhist and 68% belong to the Burman (Bamar) ethnic majority.

The NLD is accused of top-down decision-making, [ignoring](#) suggestions by local branch offices in its choice of candidates for the forthcoming elections. Its election list is also seen as [insufficiently inclusive](#), excluding many prominent activists from the popular 88 Generation movement. The party lacks [younger leaders](#), nor is there a credible alternative to Suu Kyi as presidential candidate (she herself is not eligible as the constitution bars anyone with children who have foreign citizenship from becoming president). Moreover, it has no experience of government and is less well-financed than the USDP.

Nevertheless, Suu Kyi remains popular, and the NLD's previous electoral successes in 1990 and 2012 suggest that the party will probably do well in the forthcoming elections.

Ethnic parties

With nearly [one third](#) of the population belonging to ethnic minorities such as the Shan, Karen and Rakhine and a widespread [perception](#) that the NLD and USDP are dominated by the interests of the Bamar majority (despite claims by both parties to represent all citizens of the country), ethnic parties enjoy potentially strong support. One of their main demands is for [greater regional autonomy](#).

Eight such parties are currently represented in the national parliament, the largest being the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party ([SNDP](#)) with 22 seats. A weakness is the potential splitting of the vote between multiple parties representing the same ethnic group (for example, [11 registered Shan parties](#)).

Smaller non-ethnic parties

These include the National Unity Party ([NUP](#)), created by the military junta in 1989, and the National Democratic Front ([NDF](#)), which split from the NLD in order to stand in the 2010 elections boycotted by the latter party. Neither party enjoys wide support, the NUP being tainted by its past links with the military junta and the NDF lacking a *raison d'être* now that the NLD has returned to parliamentary politics.

Outlook

The country's political future will be decided by the November 2015 elections. Given that 25% of parliamentarians are appointed by the military, the NLD needs to win 67% of elected seats to command a parliamentary majority. As the first-past-the-post system amplifies electoral shifts (in 1990 the NLD won 80% of seats with just 53% of the vote), this is an achievable goal, if elections are free and fair. Providing the military honours its recent [pledge](#) to respect the results, a parliamentary majority would enable the NLD to choose the next president and government – a major step towards democracy after decades of direct and indirect military rule.

EP-Myanmar/Burma political dialogue. The EP is an observer at the [ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly](#), in which Myanmar/Burma is represented. The country's three most prominent politicians, President Thein Sein, Speaker of the lower house, Shwe Mann, and opposition leader Suu Kyi have all visited the European Parliament, in Suu Kyi's case to collect the [Sakharov Prize](#) awarded to her in 1990 during her house arrest.