
POLITICAL MONITOR No. 23

OFFICIAL MEDIA

ETHNIC POLITICAL PARTIES AIM FOR GREATER REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT

A coalition of 23 ethnic political parties comprising 710 candidates is looking to ensure greater ethnic representation in the next Parliament, said Daw Chin Chin, the Director of the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF) on 3 September. The coalition has targeted three-fourths of its candidates to win seats, she said. In the 2010 general elections, the NBF was comprised of 12 political parties of ethnic minorities and won 160 seats— 94 in state parliament, 24 in Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) and 42 in Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House). “ If we gained our target seats in the 2016 parliament, the support of elected ethnic MPs could play a crucial role in electing the next president of Myanmar,” said Chin. The NBF announced on 2 September that the 381 will seek seats in local parliaments, 300 in the national parliament— 116 for the seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw and 184 in the Pyithu Hluttaw — and 29 seats for ethnic affairs ministers. Looking ahead to the 2015 general elections, the NBF Director emphasized the role of ethnic minorities in the country’s reform and democratization process. According to preliminary candidate lists announced by the Union Election Commission last month, 93 political parties will field 5,866 candidates in 330 constituencies across the country.¹

UEC SETS CAMPAIGN PERIOD, URGES CANDIDATES TO RESPECT LAWS

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has set the campaign period from 8 September to 6 November and has urged candidates to share responsibility for holding free and fair elections. The commission also called on individual candidates and political parties contesting the general election on 8 November to follow its directives, rules, regulations and code of conduct while canvassing votes. The UEC began its training programme for elections officials on 3 September. At the opening, the UEC Chairman Tin Aye urged returning officers and election staff to familiarize themselves with each step to be taken at every stage of the election process. Tin Aye said that returning officers should equip themselves with the ability to deal with arguments likely to occur inside and outside the polling stations. Speaking of the voting rights, the UEC Chair emphasized that voters can secure their rights at the production of the voter ID or other personal identities, or on the recommendation of an advocate. He stressed hands-on training for election officials new to the election processes, pointing out the need to provide voter education to the electorate.²

UEC COMMITTED TO HOLDING PEACEFUL, FAIR ELECTION IN NOVEMBER

The Union Election Commission (UEC) will make the voters’ list publicly available at UEC township offices from 14 to 27 September so that those eligible to vote in the general election have the opportunity to confirm their names and details. During the 6th meeting between the UEC and political parties in Yangon on 1 September, UEC’s Chairman Tin Aye said that persons without national ID cards can still cast their ballot on 8 November if they can provide other forms of identity that prove citizenship, such as a driving license or student ID card. He said the measure is being taken to maximise the number of people who turn out to vote and said that those whose names are not on the voters’ list can apply to regional sub-election commissions in accordance with the Election Law for clarification. Representatives from 69 of Myanmar’s 91 political parties attended the meeting.

¹ Ethnic minorities aim for greater representation in 2016 parliament –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-04-red.pdf> (GNLM) 4 September 2015 (p. 2)

² UEC sets campaign period, urges candidates to respect laws –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-04-red.pdf> (GNLM) 4 September 2015 (p. 2)/
EC urges election officials to understand electoral process –
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-04-red.pdf> (GNLM) 4 September 2015 (p. 3)

The Commission Chairman Tin Aye also called on politicians to adhere to the Code of Conduct throughout the election period. He said that the commission is committed to holding a peaceful and fair election and will not interfere in the electoral process. The UEC also clarified certain electoral processes, including campaign directives and compliance, candidate campaign financing disclosures, the provision of manuals to polling station staff polling booth processes, mediation, security and monitoring committees, electoral dispute resolution and candidate agents. A total of 6,189 candidates have been nominated and district election sub-commissions have begun the process of vetting candidates. The UEC has issued accreditation cards to local and foreign election monitoring groups and will invite election monitoring group members to observe the training of polling booth staff.³

PRIORITISE KIDS' RIGHTS. POLITICIANS PLEDGE TO PUT CHILDREN FIRST

Representatives from political parties on 28 August made commitments to put children at the centre of their policies and to further their best interests if elected. The statements were made during an event titled "Let's call for one clear winner at the 2015 elections: Children," which was jointly organized by UNICEF and the NGO Child Rights Working Group (NCRWG), in cooperation with the Union Election Commission and held in Yangon. UNICEF and the NGO Child Rights Working Group said in a joint statement that children make up a third of Myanmar's population and that investing in their futures and meeting their current needs is vital for the country's development.

During the event, children aged from 12 to 18 voiced their hopes, dreams and concerns about the future to an audience of political hopefuls. The children urged them to adopt child-focused policy platforms in the lead up to the 8 November general elections. During the roundtable discussions, participants focused on strengthening understanding and adherence to the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC), improving children's health and access to education, building a drug-free society and eliminating all forms of child labour. The issue of corporal punishment at schools was also raised, as it contravenes the principles laid out by CROC. "I would be happy if CROC was incorporated into our school curriculum because it is teachers who interact the most with students and they should do so in a positive way," said Mg Hlwan Moe Aung, a 16-year-old student from Shwepyitha Township. "Putting children at the top of the political agenda is good for political parties, good for voters, good for children, and good for the country. It is a clear winning strategy," said UNICEF Representative to Myanmar, Bertrand Bainvel. The revised Child Law was also among the topics discussed during the event, with participants calling for heightened awareness of children's legal rights. Some said that many parents know little about the legal framework surrounding children's rights, while children tend to know even less. "I want to see the rights of all children in Myanmar protected, regardless of geography, ethnicity and religious beliefs," said Ma Shwe Yee Hnin, a 13-year-old student from Shwepyitha Township. Although poverty rates have been declining since 2010, more than 4.4 million children in Myanmar between 5 and 18 years of age do not attend school, while 10 million children live in poverty.⁴

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

NLD CRITICIZES POLITICAL BROADCASTING RESTRICTIONS

National League for Democracy (NLD) spokesman Nyan Win said that although political parties are allowed to air political broadcasts on radio and television, it is not free and there are restrictions. "It is not free and fair," said Nyan Win. "But we don't have privately-owned independent broadcasters, so we can do nothing."

³ Voters' list made public on 14 Sept. UEC committed to holding peaceful, fair election in November – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-09-02-red.pdf> (GNLM) 2 September 2015 (p. 1)

⁴ Prioritise kids' rights. Politicians Pledge to put children first – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/GNLM2015-08-29-red.pdf> (GNLM) 29 August 2015 (p. 1& 3)

The Union Election Commission (UEC) issued an announcement on 27 August, which contained nine-point restrictions. The announcement stated that the broadcasts must not harm the consolidation and dignity of the Tatmadaw (the armed forces) and the state, security, or the rule of law. Moreover, the announcement says that broadcasts must not incite people to oppose the government. In addition, political parties will have to submit the scripts of their broadcast material for approval by the Election Commission at least seven days ahead of the scheduled broadcasts. The Election Commission, in cooperation with the Information Ministry, will scrutinize the scripts. Secretary of the National Democratic Force (NDF) Nay Min Kyaw said, "It is like we cannot even tell the people to cast votes for [our] party. When we meet with the commission, we will talk about these matters."

The election commission will allow each of the 90 political parties that will contest the election to air political broadcasts on radio and television twice between 9 September and 6 November. Central Executive Member of the National Unity Party (NUP) Tun Yi said, "It is convenient for our party. Facts like these are also included in the Constitution, the Political Parties Registration Law and the code of conduct. So, it is nothing special." Political parties and the Union Election Commission [UEC] will meet on 1 September. Like restrictions for political parties in airing political broadcasts, there are also other restrictions related to the upcoming election. On Election Day, each media organisation can appoint only 3 reporters per township to cover electoral news. Moreover, news media will have to abide by the existing rules enacted by the UEC, electoral laws, and instructions given by the Information Ministry. A member of the Myanmar Press Council (Interim) Myint Kyaw said, "News media cannot be restricted and that the Information Ministry's instructions are a restriction on media."⁵

NMSP URGES VOTE FOR MON PARTY THAT WILL BENEFIT MON PEOPLE

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) has urged Mon people to vote for the Mon political party that is working towards the benefit of Mon people, according to a released statement by the NMSP on 30 August. "As our slave existence has been long, different points of view exist [among Mon people]; so in the future, it seems like slave heritage is being passed on. "Today, it is necessary to think deeply and analyze between the personal gains and Mon people's unity and benefits," said Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel M Seik Chan of the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) No. (5).

The statement also stated that because Mon men are abroad working to provide for their families back home, there are less Mons voting. It is confusing for Mon people as there are multiple Mon political parties which can impact negatively on the Mon Hluttaw campaigns. In the 2015 general elections, the Mon National Party (MNA), the All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMDP) and the Mon Women's Party (Mon) will compete. Hence, this will cause Mon people's votes to split. "In our Mon society, there are 3 political parties. Because it is necessary for the election to take place, votes must be casted. Our votes should go to the representatives who carry out the benefits of Mon people," said NMSP Chair Nai Htaw Mon. He also urged that the main rights Mon people demand for these days revolve around charting their own destiny. To achieve this, Mon people should participate in politics and ultimately, to be aware of and have knowledge of politics.⁶

ONLY 18,000 CITIZENS LIVING ABROAD REGISTER TO VOTE

Most of the more than 2 million Myanmar citizens living abroad have failed to register for postal voting in the November polls, an official said on Wednesday according to a report by News24 on 2 September. Only about 18,000 of more than 2 million people registered as living abroad had sent in applications before the deadline, said Election Commission Chair Tin Aye. "Without co-operation from

⁵ NLD criticizes political broadcasting restrictions –

<http://mizzima.com/news-domestic/nld-criticizes-political-broadcasting-restrictions> (Mizzima) 31 August 2015

⁶ NMSP urges vote for Mon party that will benefit Mon people –

<http://monnews.org/2015/09/02/nmsp-urges-vote-for-mon-party-that-will-benefit-mon-people/> (IMNA) 2 September 2015

them, what else we can do for them?" he said. The commission also criticised parties for not co-operating enough to help correct inaccuracies in the voting lists. It said it will release a nationwide voter list on September 14, and urged voters to go, check and correct it.⁷

NLD ADDS NEW MEDIA BAN AHEAD OF MANIFESTO RELEASE

The National League for Democracy (NLD) will release its election manifesto in the coming days and will cover everything from education and health to the economy and agriculture, the manifesto could assuage concerns that the party is a policy lightweight. Party spokesperson Win Myint said that the manifesto is "almost complete" and will be released before the campaign period begins on 8 September. The policy will lay out the party's plan if it forms government, he said. "The manifesto will reflect the real situation of our country. We won't just say things to try and win votes," he said. "We need to state what we can do for the country if we win the election in a landslide and are able to form government." The manifesto, which will serve as the party's policy platform for the 8 November election, will cover a range of familiar themes: good governance, clean government, rule of law, peace and national reconciliation, and amendments to the constitution. But it will also feature the party's stance on other important issues, including education, health, the economy, trade, labour and agriculture. Observers will be looking for detailed policies from the party, which has been criticised for failing to elucidate clear policies on a range of issues.

Prior to the 1990 election, the NLD released a manifesto calling for parliament to be granted power to form a new government after the election, for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, and for peace and national reconciliation. In 2012, the NLD campaigned on three issues: rule of law, reconciliation and constitutional change. The manifesto will provide guidance to the party's candidates during the election campaign – although they will be restricted in what they can say to the media.

On 20 August, the party ordered candidates to refrain from speaking to the media. While a statement announcing the gag order gave no timeframe, officials later clarified that it was only until candidates had been approved by the election commission. However, on 28 August the party released another statement saying that only 6 people would be able to talk on the party's behalf to the media. Leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and patron Tin Oo will speak on party policy and manifesto, while 4 other senior NLD party officials have been assigned to respond to issues related to the Union Election Commission, election laws and by-laws, election campaign, parliament and candidatures. Ma Zin Mar Aung, who was selected as an NLD candidate for the election, said those contesting the vote would still be able to speak publicly about party policy during the campaign period. They will, of course, have to stick to what is stated in the manifesto. "As I understand it, the party is mostly just concerned about candidates violating the election laws and being disqualified," she said.⁸

ANALYSIS

Myanmar is preparing to hold national elections in early November 2015 and while there have been major improvements in election administration many uncertainties still remain. The forming of alliances and coalition are starting to emerge, but whether such alliances are able to garner votes come voting day remains to be seen. The Election Commission on its part is attempting to promote

⁷ Only 18,000 citizens living abroad register to vote – <http://mizzima.com/news-election-2015-election-news/only-18000-citizens-living-abroad-register-vote> (Mizzima) 3 September 2015

⁸ NLD adds new media ban ahead of manifesto release – <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/16330-nld-adds-new-media-ban-ahead-of-manifesto-release.html> (Myanmar Times) 4 September 2015

and hold free and fair elections and invitations to international electoral observers, as well as to domestic observers suggest that it is committed to delivering credible polls. Some areas in the country are still affected by continued fighting while others have been affected by the recent floods. The question on whether elections will take place in these areas still remain contentious and could prove to become yet another challenge for the Election Commission. Myanmar is now in transition and that the elections on 8 November will no doubt be regarded as major landmark event but more importantly should be seen as taking a positive step in the right direction.