
POLITICAL MONITOR NO.1

OFFICIAL MEDIA

ELECTION COMMISSION ANNOUNCEMENT FOR 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Myanmar's Union Election Commission has tentatively set a time-frame for the 2015 general elections, announcing that it would be held in the last week of October or the first week of November. The announcement was made public in the state-run media though no specific date has yet been set for the elections.¹

1. The general elections will be held in late October/early November 2015.
2. A correct and accurate voter list needs to successfully hold the elections.
3. The Union Election Commission compiles the basic voter list for the 2015 general elections.
4. Every citizen has rights to cast vote for elections. Not to lose the rights, they have to be included in the voter list. Citizens should check voter lists for casting votes.
5. Citizens may request the respective sub-commission to insert their names into the voter list through form No 3 if their names are not included in the voter list. They may request to correct the wrong facts through form No 4-C. They may object participation of those who do not have rights to cast votes, through form No 4.
6. When you settled from one township to another, if you do not change household form 66/6, your name will include in voter list of previous township.

PRESIDENT URGES ETHNIC ARMED ORGANISATIONS TO SIGN CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT ON UNION DAY

President Thein Sein called on the leaders of 12 ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) who attended the 67th Independence Day Ceremony and Grand Military Review Parade to make concerted efforts to sign the nationwide ceasefire agreement on Union Day which falls on 12 February.

At the meeting held in Naypyitaw on 5 January, the President stated that the military parade was a tradition of the democratic system adopted after independence was regained in 1948 and that it has been revived to revive it on a grand scale during the term of the present government. He also pointed out that internal peace plays a major role in democratic transition and the only means to restore peace is through political dialogue. He also urged ethnic leaders to form monitoring teams to end and prevent armed conflicts. President Thein Sein also said it was necessary to lay a firm foundation for the peace process introduced by the incumbent government to allow future governments to continue in implementing it and urged ethnic leaders to the successful holding of free and fair elections in 2015.

Chairman of the Karen National Union (KNU) General Mutu Sae Po said he was proud the ethnic leaders were invited to the ceremony and the parade, adding that the ceasefire agreement is essential for peace and an end to armed conflicts while it is necessary to solve political issues through dialogue. Only when political solutions have been sought, will the federal system based on democratic rule be built, the KNU chairman said. Leaders of other ethnic armed organisations also took part in the discussions on the nationwide ceasefire.

The Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing also held separate meetings with leaders of ethnic armed organisations and honorary officers from border guard forces and people's militia forces who attended the 67th Independence Day Ceremony and Grand Military

¹ Union Election Commission Announcement for 2015 general Elections – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-01-red.pdf> (GNLM) 1 January 2015 (p. 1)

Review Parade. In his meeting with EAO leaders, Senior General Min Hlaing stated that those who do not move forward with the democratic system will be left behind and legal action will be taken against those who do not accept the system, saying that as they have known the objectives and aims of way forward, they should adopt the right mentality.²

ETHNIC GROUPS STAGE PEACEFUL PROTESTS IN SHAN STATE

Peaceful protests were held by ethnic Shans, Pa-O, Palaung, Wa, Kokang groups demanding the government to carry on internal peace-making process till achieving success, to rapidly undertake development of the nation and reform process, to emphasize ethnic affairs, to create opportunities for all national races to participate in constitutional amendment without a six-party talks and to soonest implement their demands. The protests were held in Hsipaw, Taunggyi and Namhsam Townships on 24 December and in the Wa and Kokang Self-Administered Regions on 26 and 27 December respectively. A similar protest was also held in Nyaungshwe Township, southern Shan State on 1 January.³

UNOFFICIAL MEDIA

SPEAKER THURA SHWE MANN ACCUSED OF ‘UNTIMELY’ ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

Political party leaders have accused House Speaker Thura Shwe Mann of launching his party's election campaign during meetings with farmers across Myanmar. Thura Shwe Mann, who is the Chair of the USDP party and speaker of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and the Pyithu Hluttaw, met the farmers recently during tours to Magwe, Sagaing, Ayeyarwaddy, Taninthayi, Yangon, Bago and Mandalay. Some political party leaders are critical of politicians taking unfair advantage in the lead up to the national elections planned for near the end of this year.

Chairman of the National Democratic Force (NDF) party, Khin Maung Swe, said: “[Thura Shwe Mann’s] meetings with local farmers across the country were a form of intentional party campaigning. Similarly, the National League for Democracy (NLD) is also using photos of Bogyoke Aung San as their trademark icon in their campaign.” Khin Maung Swe also criticized the Union Election Commission for “turning a blind eye” to these moves.

Spokesperson of the National Unity Party (NUP) Tun Yi, said, “Even though other political parties do not officially complain about such campaigns, they should consider the nature of their unlawful activities. The rules and disciplines should be laid out clearly in order to take action against such activities.”

NLD Central Executive Committee member Tun Tun Hein said: “It can be assumed that Thura Shwe Mann is meeting with farmers for a political campaign and that such campaigning can be conducted by those in authority.”

A senior member of the ruling USDP party said that the costs for these meetings were covered by the use of funds from the USDP's regional and state offices, insisting that such meetings will be held in other areas and that these public meetings were also broadcasted on the state-owned media.

² President urges leaders of armed ethnic groups to sign ceasefire agreement on Union Day – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-06-red.pdf> (GNLM) 6 January 2015 (p. 1 & 3)/ Senior General Min Aung Hlaing meets armed ethnic groups, border guard forces and people militia – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-06-red.pdf> (GNLM) 6 January 2015 (p. 3)/ Armed ethnic groups, KIA/KIO, TNLA leaders invited to attend Independence Day ceremony in Nay Pyi Taw – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-02-red.pdf> (GNLM) 2 January 2015 (p. 3)

³ Ethnic in Shan State peacefully stage protests – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-03-red.pdf> (GNLM) 3 January 2015 (p. 3)/ Inntha peacefully stage protests, including five demands in Nyaungshwe Tsp – <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs20/GNLM2015-01-02-red.pdf> (GNLM) 2 January 2015 (p. 3)/

Union Election Commission (UEC) Chairman Tin Aye told political parties on 14 December that if any political party breaches a law, a complaint can be made to the commission. During the meeting with the Election Commission Chairman in December, political party representatives urged the UEC chairman to monitor and scrutinize state funds and property to make sure they are not used in party campaigns. It appears however that Tin Aye has so far been unable to deliver on his promises.⁴

IOM TO SUPPORT UNDOCUMENTED MYANMAR NATIONALS IN BANGLADESH

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Bangladeshi government on 8 January signed an agreement worth US \$ 18 million aimed at building infrastructure for Myanmar refugees in Bangladesh.

In a press release from its headquarters in Geneva, the IOM said that the project will provide health, water, sanitation and hygiene services as well as related information materials in two districts of the City Cox's Bazaar.

The Bangladeshi government's endorsement of the 3-year project allows IOM to provide much needed humanitarian assistance to Undocumented Myanmar Nationals and vulnerable host communities in the coastal city located at the south-eastern tip of Bangladesh bordering Myanmar, the IOM noted.

The project will improve access and better health care services, water and sanitation infrastructure for over 100,000 vulnerable people. It will also support Bangladesh in coordinating the overall provision of humanitarian services for Undocumented Myanmar Nationals living in the area, it pointed out. The 3-year project is currently supported by the American, British and Swedish Governments, it said.

"This intervention has been carefully planned and supports the Government of Bangladesh's National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals and the local population," said Sarat Dash, IOM's Chief of Mission in Bangladesh.⁵

NGOS CONCERNED GOVT NOT SERIOUS ABOUT FREEING POLITICAL PRISONERS

The hands are back. That is the message from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) and Former Political Prisoners Society who are joining hands to use photos of people with prisoner names on outstretched palms as a reminder that well over 150 prisoners of conscience remain in jail in Myanmar. The groups said in a statement on 4 January that 164 political prisoners are held in Myanmar jails and an extra 203 activists await trial.

According to the 2 NGOs, President Thein Sein announced that he would release all political prisoners by the end of 2013 and as we enter 2015, the remaining – and new – political prisoners have still not been released.

The AAPP, as it is known, has expressed its concern that the government's efforts to revamp the existing committee for political prisoners is being used as a smokescreen for inaction. AAPP Joint-Secretary Bo Kyi complained that most of the members of the newly-reconstituted committee have not done much for the affairs of political prisoners in the past, so they lack experience and the committee will not be effective in working for the benefit of political prisoners.

⁴ House speaker accused of 'untimely' election campaigning – <http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/politics/item/16546-house-speaker-accused-of-untimely-election-campaigning> (Mizzima) 5 January 2015

⁵ IOM to support Undocumented Myanmar Nationals in Bangladesh – <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2417979&language=en> (Kuwait News Agency) 8 January 2015

He said AAPP members, former political prisoner Zarganar and Nyo Tun from the League of Former Political Prisoners are not included in the new committee, although they were included in the former committee.

The new committee comprises of 16 people from political parties, eight officials from the government, Hla Maung Shwe from Myanmar Egress, Sit Myaing of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, Ko Ko Gyi from the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, and Ye Aung from the Former Political Prisoners Society.

Nyo Tun, co-founder of the League of Former Political Prisoners, said the government has reduced the number of people in the committee who will really work to free political prisoners. “The committee includes just a few of those people, so I think it may not be effective for political prisoners. They don’t know which prisons have how many political prisoners, so meetings will be just talk and no action,” he said.

Lower House MP Thein Nyunt, a member of the newly-reconstituted committee, is less downbeat. He said the new committee will carry out their tasks at the grassroots level, and if necessary will be allowed to go into prisons to carry out its work.⁶

WA REBELS DEFY GOVT ORDER, REOPEN DRUG-LINKED TRADE HUB IN SHAN STATE

The United Wa State Army (UWSA), Burma’s biggest ethnic armed organisation, has recently reopened Popakyen trading hub in Mong Hsat Township, located in south-eastern Shan State close to the Burma-Thai border, local sources have said. The government ordered the shutdown of the trade station in October after a large drug haul was seized nearby, but the heavily-armed EAO now appears to be defying the order and have deployed troops in the area since late December to assert control, according to residents.

“They [the UWSA] sort of challenged the Burmese authorities. They ignored the order and reopened the base. They deployed their troops for security. They want to show that no one can influence the businesses that belong to them,” said a Shan businessman based in Tachilek, a border town located across from Mae Sai, a border crossing in northern Thailand. “They [Wa soldiers] seem they are ready to fight if the Burmese army start it. It is like they want to test the Burmese army,” said the man, who requested anonymity due to sensitivity of discussing the UWSA’s dealings. The businessman said the Wa were aggressively asserting their control over the area in Mong Hsat Township, adding that they also grabbed land for the trade area from local residents and killed a man in December who claimed to own land that the rebels had seized.

“They shot dead the man in a restaurant in the centre of Tachilek in public, but nobody dared to say a word,” he said. “All incidents such as the death ... and land confiscation by the UWSA troops were reported to respective local authorities. But no actions are taken. We can’t rely on them [authorities].” Local residents confirmed they reported the incidents to the police and local lawmakers, including those belonging to the opposition parties of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Shan Nationalities Development Party (SNDP).

Thar Gyi, a SNDP lawmaker in the Shan State legislature who is based in Tachilek, declined to confirm the incidents had been reported to lawmakers. Another lawmaker, who declined to be named or have his party identified, said he recently visited the Popakyen trading post area and saw the UWSA preparing for a resumption of trade. “There are no big trading activities there yet, but I saw some Wa soldiers repairing and rebuilding their shops and buildings,” he said.

⁶ NGOs concerned govt not serious about freeing political prisoners – <http://mizzima.com/mizzima-news/politics/item/16610-ngos-concerned-govt-not-serious-about-freeing-political-prisoners> (Mizzima) 7 January 2015

The UWSA were allowed to operate the Popakye trading area after renewing a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government in December 2011. Much of Mong Hsat Township is controlled by the Burma Army and the UWSA opened a liaison office in Mong Hsat town following the ceasefire. Following the seizure in Mong Hsat of a large drug haul hidden in a 10-wheel truck in October, authorities and the Burma Army enforced a crackdown on the rebels' activities and Popakye was shut down.

The UWSA is the largest ethnic rebel army in Burma with an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 fighters. The group has acquired heavy Chinese weaponry and is believed to be in the possession of surface-to-air missiles, armed personnel carriers and possibly helicopters. The group controls a large zone called Special Region 2 along the border with China and gains funding from operating casinos, rubber plantations, cross-border trade and, most importantly, large-scale illicit drug trafficking.⁷

ANALYSIS

The announcement by the Union Election Commission (UEC) that the elections would take place in either October or November later this year will be closely monitored by the international community and be used as a yard-stick to measure the on-going democratic transition in Myanmar. It therefore is crucial that the upcoming elections are free, fair, transparent and all-inclusive and pave the way to achieve genuine peace. President Thein Sein since taking office has implemented political, social and economic reforms and also focussed on ending the long-standing issue of ethnic conflicts in the country. His recent call made during a meeting with ethnic leaders urging them to sign the peace agreement on Union Day which falls on 12 February once again highlights the importance of peace and its impact in shaping the country's political future beyond 2015. And to that end, the convening of a national dialogue is very important for the country – not only for the ethnic armed organisations and the military, but for all stakeholders in Myanmar. Similarly, other crucial issues including constitutional amendment, land confiscation, communal violence, political prisoners, the plight of people displaced by armed conflict and press freedom remain unresolved. The government therefore is confronted with a myriad of challenges and issues in 2015 and no doubt its efforts to resolve these sensitive issues in the run-up to the elections will indeed remain pivotal and major political risks for the country's future. While progress has been made towards democratisation, the "understanding" between the present government, the military and political parties including ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) remains fragile. At such a juncture in time it is important to think carefully when dealing with the military since it remains to be one of the strongest and largest institutions in the country and that any attempts to remove its role in the running of the country could prove to be counter-productive. The country is now entering testing times and uncharted territory and if the current reforms are to succeed all stakeholders including the government, the military, ethnic armed organisations and political parties will need to set aside their differences and work together to confront the challenges which lie ahead.

⁷ Wa Rebels Defy Govt Order, Reopen Drug-Linked Trade Hub in Shan State – <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/wa-rebels-defy-govt-order-reopen-drug-linked-trade-hub-shan-state.html> (Irrawaddy) 6 January 2015