



Burma/Myanmar's 2015 Elections: Obstacles to Inclusive, Credible and Free and Fair Elections

Voter List Errors

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has received criticism for publishing voter lists that contain numerous errors and for being unable to adequately correct their mistakes. During the initial release of voter lists, complainants noted that the UEC had excluded a number of eligible voters, included voters who were deceased, and printed a number of incorrect information such as birth dates¹. A subsequent release of voter lists, which the UEC released in order to rectify previous errors, contained further inaccuracies including additional voter exclusions². A particularly drastic example of the incorrect voter lists is the case of Hlaing Tharyar Township, in which 200,000 voters were mysteriously excluded³. While there have been numerous cases where citizens have reported incorrect voter lists in remote and rural ethnic areas, such as in Karen State, some villagers do not report to local authorities to have them correct the information due to fear of reprisal.

Concerns Related to Advanced Voting

A number of problems have appeared during the advanced voting process, which has the potential to further disenfranchise Burma's voters. The overseas advanced voting process has been met with protests after it was reported that only a limited number of voters would be allowed to cast their ballot in Singapore⁴ and how bureaucratic errors had prevented migrant voters in places like Tokyo and Seoul from voting⁵. The domestic advance voting process in Burma has also been criticized for being disorganized, with election officials reporting different dates for the beginning of the process⁶. While the UEC announced an extended deadline to ensure that migrant voters can participate in the polls⁷, election observers are concerned that the advanced voting process will be abused to ensure a USDP victory just as it was in the 2010 elections⁸.

¹ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/news/uec-extends-voter-list-review-amid-complaints>

² <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/incomplete-11022015180534.html>

³ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/opinion/in-final-voter-list-display-uec-continues-to-miss-the-mark>

⁴ <http://www.voanews.com/content/problems-with-early-voting-raise-concern-about-myanmar-election/3013312.html>

⁵ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/news/as-complaints-mount-uec-mulls-extension-to-overseas-advance-voting>

⁶ <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17146-advanced-voting-prompts-confusion.html>

⁷ <http://globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/advance-vote-extension-government-pledges-to-resolve-complaints-from-overseas/>

⁸ <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17289-after-2010-fraud-advance-vote-concerns-remain-in-kayah-state.html>

Voter Disenfranchisement Particularly in Ethnic Areas

The UEC has cancelled the electoral process in village tracts, townships, and regions that it deems to be facing security concerns. In October, only one month away from the election, the UEC issued widespread cancellations throughout Burma with total of approximately 600 village tracts⁹, including 211 village tracts in Kachin State¹⁰, 102 villages tracts in Karen State¹¹, and seven townships and 45 village tracts in Shan State¹². Prior to these cancellations, various ethnic political parties expressed concern that cancellations would be used as a means of denying their candidates from winning representation, particularly for regions where USDP candidates were unlikely to win¹³. Meanwhile some civil society groups have raised questions over the UEC's criteria or security risk related to voter cancellations. People remain uncertain as to why many village tracts in Karen State were cancelled, particularly since the Karen ethnic armed organizations recently signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the Government.

Election Related Violence, Intimidation, Harassment, Threat and Destruction of Campaign Materials

To date at least 30 cases of election related intimidation, threat and violence and destruction of campaign materials and properties have been documented by local media: 2 cases in Pago, 5 in Sagaing, 2 in Shan, 1 in Magway, 4 in Rangoon, 7 in Mandalay, 5 in Irrawaddy, 1 in Naypyitaw, 1 in Karen, and 2 in Kachin. Sporadic incidents of violence in cities such as Rangoon and Mawlamyine, Mon State have prompted concern that the attacks are an organized attempt to spark communal tensions in the lead up to the 2015 elections. In addition, the National League for Democracy (NLD) has encountered attacks against their candidates in Kachin State. Attacks have also been reported against Pa-O candidates in Shan State and an aggressive machete attack against an NLD candidate and campaigners in Tharkayta Township, Rangoon and a campaign manager in the Irrawaddy Delta. Prominent artists and celebrities who have been campaigning for NLD faced intimidations from local police and authorities while some individuals such as well known female rock singer *She* received phone calls warning her that she was on the government's watch list. According to the Carter Center, there are total of 94 cases of election related complaints being submitted to the police by various political parties.¹⁴

Ma Ba Tha (Association to Protect Race and Religion)

A hardline, extremist organization of Buddhist monks, known as the Ma Ba Tha, has been playing a significant role in the 2015 elections, largely by campaigning against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the

⁹ <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/16991-vote-cancellations-in-conflict-areas-higher-than-in-2010.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/16991-vote-cancellations-in-conflict-areas-higher-than-in-2010.html>

¹¹ <http://www.dvb.no/dvb-video/election-2015-polls-wont-open-in-karen-states-east/57703>

¹² www.dvb.no/news/elections-cancelled-in-4-shan-townships-myanmar/58539

¹³ <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/14958-ethnic-parties-fear-voting-cancellation.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.7daydaily.com/story/49726>

NLD. The group, which carries considerable popular support in Burma, has previously declared its intention to boycott political parties who do not explicitly support the race and religion protection laws¹⁵. Ma Ba Tha's political influence cannot be overstated; earlier this year the organization successfully lobbied for the passing of the controversial "race and religion protection laws"¹⁶. This package of four laws has received widespread criticism from organizations such as Human Rights Watch, who have noted that the legislation contains clauses that are flagrantly discriminatory against women and which can be used to stoke communal tensions, largely directed towards Muslim minorities such as the Rohingya¹⁷. This legislation is particularly worrisome given Burma's previous history of intercommunal tensions, such as the infamous 2012 Arakan State riots that resulted in 200 deaths and the displacement of over 140,000 people who are mainly the Rohingya¹⁸. Ma Ba Tha's influence over the 2015 election has recently prompted a number of foreign embassies to issue a joint statement, calling on the Burma Government to ensure that religion is not used as a tool to divide voters and incite internal conflict¹⁹. Ma Ba Tha has been holding a series of mass rallies across the country in the name of celebration of the successful passing of the four laws, but in reality calling on people to vote for the ruling party in order to protect race and religion and thus not to vote for the NLD. It has also been reported that ruling party has been utilizing state properties such as UEC vehicles and religious buildings in their election campaigning.

Exclusion of Muslim Minorities

For Muslim minorities, particularly the Rohingya in Arakan State, there is no chance to participate in Burma's 2015 elections. Early in 2015, the Burma Government decided to scrap the "White Card" temporary identification system, which was the primary means by which the majority of Rohingya claimed their citizenship²⁰. As a result, holders of this form of identification - which range between 600,000 to 1 million voters²¹ - will be unable to cast a ballot in the upcoming elections. Furthermore, during the candidate vetting process, the UEC disqualified numerous candidates from being able to run in the upcoming elections. The majority of the disqualified candidates were Muslims, with the Democracy and Human Rights Party alone facing the rejection of 17 out of the total 18 of their candidates²². The exclusion of Muslims from the 2015 elections seem to follow Burma's trend of systematic persecution against Muslims, which the United States Holocaust Museum has likened to the early warning signs of a genocide²³.

Gender Imbalance

¹⁵ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/feature/ma-ba-tha-embraces-political-fray-risking-election-year-sanction>

¹⁶ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/news/ma-ba-tha-flaunts-political-clout-with-celebration-of-contentious-laws>

¹⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/23/burma-discriminatory-laws-could-stoke-communal-tensions>

¹⁸ <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/buddhist-group-comes-under-fire-from-myanmar-politicians-activists-09252015170114.html>

¹⁹ <http://mizzima.com/news-election-2015-election-news/foreign-embassies-offer-support-credible-election>

²⁰ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/govt-revokes-voting-rights-white-card-holders.html>

²¹ http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/myanmar%20-033015-en.pdf

²² <http://www.dvb.no/news/muslims-suffer-brunt-of-candidate-rejections-myanmar-burma/56753>

²³ <http://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/about/initiatives/bearing-witness-trips/burma>

Burma's longstanding lack of political representation of women is likely to play into the outcome of the 2015 elections²⁴. The UEC has already reported that of the 6,189 candidates registered for the upcoming elections, only 800, or 13%, are women²⁵. Currently, only 5% sitting in both national and regional legislatures are women, illustrating the lack of adequate female representation²⁶.

²⁴ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/02/burmas-women-are-still-fighting-for-their-rights-myanmar/>

²⁵ <http://www.dvb.no/news/2015-election-women-account-for-13-of-candidates-burma-myanmar/57024>

²⁶ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/news/fundraiser-aims-to-boost-campaigns-of-women-candidates>