



**Karen Human Rights Group**  
Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

**Elections Commentary**  
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**The 2015 Elections and Beyond: Perspectives from villagers in rural southeast Burma/Myanmar**



This photo was taken by a community member on November 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, in Dooplaya District. The photo shows election commission members counting ballots at a polling station. [Photo: KHRG]

*This commentary highlights the experiences of villagers in southeast Burma/Myanmar during the 2015 general elections, as well as their perspectives on the electoral process as a whole and expectations from the incoming Government of the Union of Myanmar. Based on 21 interviews conducted with villagers shortly following the elections, KHRG considers the extent to which the 2015 poll can be deemed “free and fair,” by evaluating the transparency, inclusivity, and credibility of the electoral process as it unfolded in KHRG’s research areas in southeast Burma/Myanmar. KHRG notes that while the election was deemed as fairly transparent at the polls, questionable campaign practices in the lead-up to the election marred villagers’ experiences of this landmark in the country’s reform.*

*In addition, serious concerns regarding the inclusivity of this election emerge from villager testimonies, including many instances of disenfranchisement of eligible voters due to negligence on the part of electoral staff, misinformation and lack of voter education, as well as ethnic discrimination against Muslim and Gurkha residents. Additional large-scale exclusion from the polls took place in Karen National Union (KNU) and mixed-control areas of southeast Burma/Myanmar,<sup>1</sup> where many polling stations were removed by the Union Election Commission shortly prior to Election Day due to perceived security concerns, which villagers said did not correspond to the conditions on the ground. These experiences have left some villagers disillusioned, not only with the election itself, but with the democratic transition as a whole. Villagers call on the incoming government to engage with them and address their specific concerns, including transitioning into a fully civilian government, working towards justice and lasting peace in Karen ethnic regions, and developing their communities in terms of education, healthcare and infrastructure.*

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## **Introduction**

The November 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 general elections in Burma/Myanmar were heralded worldwide as a significant landmark in the country’s reform, constituting the “freest general elections for 25 years.”<sup>2</sup> During the build-up to the elections, both the national and the international focus was primarily on the rivalry between the popular National League for Democracy (NLD) and the incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), particularly as it unfolded in the urban centres and Burman-majority areas of the country. With the NLD’s landslide victory and

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<sup>1</sup> Certain areas in southeast Burma/Myanmar continue to be under the political and military control of the KNU. These areas are also referred to by the Tatmadaw as “black areas,” meaning an area controlled by a non-state armed group where the Tatmadaw operates or is not able to operate at all. Mixed-control areas, such as those in Hpa-an and Dooplaya districts, feature both KNU and Tatmadaw heavy presence and competing administrative structures. These areas continue to be militarised, while many villagers struggle to meet taxation demands from the multiple authorities and armed actors in their area and are often unable to receive redress for any offences committed against them, as the two administrations often fail to collaborate and coordinate. As there is no widely accepted assessment of which areas in southeast Burma/Myanmar are controlled by which governing authority, KHRG relies on the determinations of our community members, who live in local communities and consult with those communities and their neighbours to determine who controls a particular area. For a detailed analysis of human rights violations in mixed-control areas as well as other KHRG research areas in southeast Myanmar, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Such quotes can be seen in articles such as, [“7 Things to Know About Burma’s Upcoming Elections,”](#) *TIME*, October 2015.

the commencement of their term in parliament, it is easy for external observers to dismiss any flaws that have been noted in the electoral process, given the overall outcome of the polls. However, for those in rural southeast Burma/Myanmar who were personally excluded from the elections, either through bureaucratic negligence or as a matter of premeditated policy of the Burma/Myanmar Union Election Commission, this negative experience can serve to foster disillusionment with the Burma/Myanmar government and its promises of a democratic transition, especially when compounded by the years of civil war, ethnic discrimination and political and economic marginalisation faced by villagers. In order to gain the trust of civilians in southeast Burma/Myanmar, the incoming Burma/Myanmar government must prioritise the concerns of those most marginalised in the region, and take concrete steps to demonstrate its commitment to proceeding with the peace process and democratic transition in good faith and reorienting it into a truly all-inclusive process. Below is a compilation of some villagers' accounts of their experiences during and prior to the 2015 elections, specifically as they pertain to the overall transparency, inclusivity and credibility of the process. These accounts are followed by villagers' and KHRG community members' expectations from the incoming government.

### **Transparency**

Based on interviews conducted by KHRG community members with villagers in Thaton, Toungoo, Nyaunglebin, Mergui-Tavoy, Hpapun, and Dooplaya districts, the electoral process on the day of the elections was perceived by local voters to be fairly transparent. Villagers reported that there was no use of force or coercion by any actors present at the polling stations and that they were able to vote in secret, without being followed into the booths. Most villagers who were interviewed showed an understanding of the process of casting a ballot, although a villager from Dooplaya District stated: *“To [be given the] explanation about the voting process, we had to go step by step, but villagers didn't want to wait. They rushed to vote.”* Despite these minor irregularities, all villagers who were interviewed stated that they felt comfortable enough to vote for the parties or representatives that they wanted.

Although none of the villagers interviewed expressed feeling pressured to vote for a particular party, KHRG did receive several reports of attempted vote-buying and misleading statements by party representatives during the campaigning period. The USDP in particular was reported to use its influence and wealth accrued through the years in power to provide incentives to villagers. As one KHRG community member in Thaton District reported:

*“The USDP are doing things like giving out solar panels and a paddy threshing machine to each village tract in Bilin Township, as well as constructing roads. They persuade villagers to vote for them this way. The USDP said to the villagers that if they vote for them, they will give them more things. Therefore, villagers think that even if they vote for the NLD, the USDP will likely win the election.”*

A report from a KHRG community member in Toungoo District points to another instance in which the USDP used their political sway, rather than financial resources, to recruit villagers as members. The USDP was observed to be colluding with a Burma/Myanmar township administrator to gather villagers for a meeting under the pretext of helping them obtain jobs. At the meeting, they took the villagers' photographs, and a month later, the township administrator

provided each of those villagers with a USDP membership card. Although KHRG is uncertain of the motivation behind these actions, villagers in Toungoo believed this was a tactic of the USDP to skew pre-election perceptions of their popularity.

Other parties, lacking the resources of the USDP, resorted to other approaches to securing votes, including making lucrative promises and appealing to notions of shared ethnicity and culture. The Myanmar Farmers' Development Party (MFDP) was reported to promise villagers in Toungoo District 2,000,000 kyat (US \$1,612.38)<sup>3</sup> for each acre of land that had been confiscated from them. In Thaton District, villagers reported, *"Some small parties came and said, 'If you vote for us it means you're voting NLD,' but villagers didn't know what they meant by that."* Such misinformation served to confuse villagers, rather than secure their vote. A more effective strategy seemed to be that of the Karen People's Party (KPP) and the Phlone-Sqaw Democratic Party (PSDP), who gave out small gifts, such as t-shirts and lemons, while asking the people to trust them based on their shared Karen ethnicity. According to a woman from Dooplaya District, this tactic successfully persuaded villagers in her village:

*"The challenge was the whole village already decided and agreed to vote for one party, but the night before Election Day, Thara<sup>4</sup> Thoo Mwe from Karen People's Party in Kya In [Town in Kyainseikgyi Township] came to the village at 5 pm on November 7<sup>th</sup> [2015] and talked to villagers. After he came to the village, the villagers had split up into two groups. [...] He said, 'We are Karen and we have to vote for the drum and horn [Karen symbols] for this election.' He continued, 'If you vote for us, and if we win, you can ask what you need from us. We will give it to you. Come and ask us for what you need.' [...] I felt a little sad when the villagers split up into two groups because we had already agreed and decided to vote for one party."*

Although in this case, the party campaigning strategies seemed to work, other villagers reported to maintain their resolve in the face of such tactics. *"Political parties came before [the] election. They came and talked about themselves. [...] Whatever they said, I didn't change my mind [regarding] who to vote for,"* said a female villager from Dooplaya District. This sentiment of having voted for their preferred party was overwhelmingly repeated by all voters who were interviewed by KHRG. Thus, it appears that despite some questionable campaigning strategies prior to the election, villagers perceived the poll itself to be fairly transparent.

## **Inclusivity**

KHRG believes that a free and fair election must adhere to the principle of universal suffrage, as well as ensure inclusivity on the ground through voter education prior to the election, and ensure eligible voters' names are on the voter list, regardless of their location of residence. In this regard, KHRG deems that the 2015 election fell short of satisfaction. Testimonies from villagers in southeast Burma/Myanmar reveal a lack of accurate information regarding the election process and voter registration prior to the election, large-scale arbitrary exclusion of entire

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<sup>3</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the February 10<sup>th</sup> 2016 official market rate of 1,240.40 kyat to the US \$1.

<sup>4</sup> *Thara* (male) or *theramu* (female) is a Karen term used for any teacher, pastor, or any person to whom one wishes to show respect.

villages and village tracts justified through security concerns that do not reflect the conditions on the ground, disenfranchisement of the Gurkha minority,<sup>5</sup> as well as many Muslim residents.<sup>6</sup> In addition, it was reported that negligence on the part of election officials resulted in eligible voters not being included on the voter list, or names being spelled incorrectly – ultimately rendering these people unable to cast their ballots.

The majority of villagers interviewed by KHRG noted that they were aware of entire villages and village tracts, as well as individuals living in KNU-controlled areas, who were denied their right to vote by the Burma/Myanmar Union Election Commission. Representatives of the Union Election Commission justified this exclusion in terms of their security concerns, claiming that they would be unable to guarantee voters' security on Election Day in those areas,<sup>7</sup> despite many of these same areas being allowed to vote in the 2010 elections when the security situation was much more unstable, and despite the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) by both the Burma/Myanmar government and the KNU a month prior to the elections, on October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015.<sup>8</sup> The decision to remove many of the polling stations in Karen-majority areas could have been a tactic by the then-ruling party, the USDP, to manipulate the results of the polls. This possibility was illustrated by a KHRG community member from Toungoo District:

*“Almost all the people in that area were interested [in the election] and would have liked to vote KPP. When USDP heard about that, they worried that they might not win. Thus, USDP members submitted a letter to the [Burma/Myanmar government] township administration office in order to remove 13 polling stations for the reason of security concerns. On October 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, the township leaders came and met with the village heads and let them know USDP had submitted the letter to them. The village heads replied that*

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<sup>5</sup> Gurkha people are a group of people of Nepalese ethnic origin living in Burma/Myanmar. Many Gurkha practice Hinduism and Buddhism. While the Gurkhas have lived in Burma for many centuries, it was during the British rule in Burma/Myanmar that the majority of the Gurkha migrated into the country. The Gurkha population is approximately 500,000 and primarily reside in Yangon, Mandalay, Pyin U Lwin, Mogok, Tamu, Kalaymyo, Mandalay Division, Kachin State, Chin State and Shan State. The Gurkha served in the Burma Army in the 1950s and were considered key assets in the campaigns against ethnic insurgents and the Kuomintang invasions. For further information, see [“Gurkha Ethnic People's History in Burma \(Myanmar\),”](#) *VeerGhorkha*, November 2013. Some Gurkha are also pushing to be recognised as a separate ethnic group from Nepali migrants, see [“Ethnic Gurkha Uses Right to Self-identify in Myanmar Census,”](#) *UNFPA Myanmar*, April 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Similar tactics were also noted by other commentators prior to Election Day, see, [“The Bag of Tricks,”](#) *Frontier Myanmar*, October 2015.

<sup>7</sup> These decisions to remove polling stations were covered by the media at the time, see, [“Over 100,000 people missing from voter lists in Kayin State,”](#) *Myanmar Times*, September 2015.

<sup>8</sup> On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see [“Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups,”](#) Reuters, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015. Despite the signing of the NCA prompting a positive response from the international community, see [“Myanmar: UN chief welcomes ‘milestone’ signing of ceasefire agreement,”](#) UN News Centre, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, KNU Chairman General Saw Mutu Say Poe's decision to sign has been met with strong opposition from other members of the Karen armed resistance and civil society groups alike, who believe the decision to be undemocratic and the NCA itself to be a superficial agreement that risks undermining a genuine peace process, see [“Without Real Political Roadmap, Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Leads Nowhere...,”](#) Karen News, September 1<sup>st</sup> 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire,](#) KHRG, May 2014.



*they didn't need to worry about security; it was unreasonable, and they [the village heads] could take responsibility for everything. So [this case] means there was no transparency [in the elections]."*

Although in the above case from Toungoo District, it appears the request to remove polling stations was denied, a villager from Dooplaya District reported that polling stations were indeed removed from entire village tracts in her area, *"There are 20 village tracts but only seven village tracts can vote in Kyainseikgyi [Township]. The rest of the village tracts are not on the voter list. I heard they said it is for security reasons. [...] I think everyone [should] have the right to vote in this election."*

Another villager, from Hpapun District, said, *"In KNU-controlled areas, I saw some villagers from Hpway Yah Bah [village] who came and were able to vote on the day of the election, but still, some villagers were not able to vote. If they got the chance, they would know the value of a vote and the meaning of self-determination."*

Although these techniques for excluding ethnic voters from the polls ultimately failed to secure a victory for the USDP, the party did win the race in Hpapun Township, which corresponds to Hpapun District in the KNU demarcation. Their victory in this highly militarised region can likely be attributed not only to the wide-scale disenfranchisement of ethnic Karen villagers but also to the large numbers of Tatmadaw soldiers who voted in advance polls and, according to KHRG community members, were likely pressured to vote for the USDP. A Hpapun District villager shared this sentiment, stating, *"In this region USDP won because I saw that Tatmadaw soldiers number more than civilians."* Nonetheless, it is evident that meaningful inclusion of all civilians in democratic processes such as the general election is critical for building trust with villagers, particularly those in KNU-controlled areas of Burma/Myanmar.

The next most frequently cited reasons for exclusion from the elections were lack of knowledge of the process of voter registration and negligence on the part of the officials entrusted with the administration of the process. In Toungoo District, some eligible villagers were turned back at the polling station:

*"Some villagers who are in section four did not get a chance to cast their votes even though they have [Burma/Myanmar government] ID cards and were willing to vote. Three days before the election, two officials from the polling station came and took their [section four villagers'] information. The villagers thought their names would be included in the voter list; however, they were rejected when they went to the polling station to vote. Some [of those] villagers felt angry and said, 'We lost our chance and right to vote.'"*

Another Toungoo District villager reported:

*"The section leader came and recorded my family members' names and numbers but I don't know why my name was not on the voter list. I feel like they don't value us and ignore our rights. [...] I had experienced voting before [in previous elections], so why not this time? Our name was reported by our section leader. I think it is the negligence of the person who wrote the name list or one of their tricks. We are suspicious of their work. We*

*have all the [required] documents. Not only my whole family, but other villagers did not get a chance to vote, either. I asked the candidates from the NLD and USDP parties about our names not being included on the list, but they said lots of other people's names were not included. I told them I was not satisfied with this. I came from very far away for this [election], I was tired but willing to cast my vote. The officer who sat near the entrance said that he didn't even know how to help me with this [situation], then I went back to my home."*

In Nyaunglebin District, rather than being excluded from the voter list, villagers reported a lack of information regarding the process of voting on Election Day, *"No responsible person from the government came to talk about the election. I was not given any information about where the polling station is. I just found out last night that it is at the school."*

In addition to the incidents above, two reports from Toungoo District point to discrimination against the Muslim and Gurkha minorities. Maung A---, a Muslim resident of Thandaung Myo Thit Town in Thandaunggyi Township, reported being asked to resubmit his household documents by the immigration department, yet not being given the necessary forms. He and the other Muslim residents in the town have faced discrimination and harassment in recent years by USDP members and immigration officers who have engaged in sustained efforts to drive them out of the town.<sup>9</sup> Later, on the day of the election, Maung A--- recounted:

*"I did not get a chance to cast my vote. I went to the polling station on two [different] days to find my name but still my name was not mentioned on the voter list. It was not easy to find. They piled up all the voter lists together on the ground. On the day of the election, I went to the section 19 administrator and I said I wanted to vote, then he gave me a [voter] card but it had another person's name on it. I thought this did not make sense so I gave it back to him. I have seven members in my family, but only my parents could cast their votes."*

Similar discrimination against Muslims was observed by a villager in Mergui-Tavoy District, *"It [the election] had discrimination. It wasn't all-inclusive, for example only three or four people out of every 10 Muslims got the chance to cast their votes."*

Maung A--- also reported, *"Villagers in KNU-controlled areas were not able to vote because they didn't have ID cards, and some were [disenfranchised] for reasons of religion like Gurkha people in Than Daung [Thandaunggyi] Township. Mostly, all of them lost their right to vote."* The exclusion of Gurkha people was reported by another villager from Toungoo District, as well:

*"On the day of the election, Gurkha people from some sections did not get the right to vote. I don't know exactly whether they were not allowed or prevented from giving their votes, and what the arrangement with their section leader was. They have been living here for two or three years. Although the [other] people who do not have ID cards, if she or he has already been living here for six months, they have a chance to cast their vote as a rule."*

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<sup>9</sup> KHRG has previously published an interview with Maung A--- in which he details the discrimination he has suffered at the hands of USDP member. See, ["Toungoo Interview: Maung A---, April 2015,"](#) KHRG, January 2016. Another report from Toungoo District also mentions discrimination against Muslims, see, ["Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi Township, January to February 2015,"](#) KHRG, October 2015.

*Those people have to get a recommendation from the village tract leader or from a township officer to be able to cast their votes.”*

It appears the Gurkha people were not given the same opportunity as other residents without IDs to be included on the voter list, although KHRG does not have further information on the case at the time of publication.

As can be seen through these testimonies, all the above incidents of negligence and bureaucratic barriers to voting, whether accidental or not, have created dissatisfaction among villagers with the electoral process. The incoming government will need to address this dissatisfaction, if it wishes to engage with all civilians and prove its commitment to peace-building and democratisation.

### **Credibility**

To establish how credible the 2015 election was in the eyes of villagers in southeast Burma/Myanmar, KHRG asked villagers what their perceptions of the election as a whole were, and based on those, whether or not they would trust the results. Villagers' opinions varied significantly, ranging from optimism regarding an NLD victory, to disillusionment with the electoral process and its ability to bring about peace in the country, especially given the skirmishes that took place in Shan State and other ethnic regions throughout the election period.

An optimistic villager from Toungoo District stated:

*“My expectation for the outcome of these elections is that NLD will win this election and will do what they have told the people. The situation is [already] better than before, so I think the elections will bring about peace in Burma and I expect that the new government will do something for community development and concerning self-determination for the Karen people.”*

The view of a woman from Dooplaya District was in stark opposition:

*“I think this election will not be able to bring peace and the current government will not hand over their power easily to the new government. It will not be easy for Karen people to get self-determination, either. [The Burma/Myanmar] government declared the Karen people as insurgents, still now they declare this area as a ‘black area’,<sup>10</sup> that way we could not vote [...]. I feel sad because we lost the right to vote for the people who would speak for this community’s needs.”*

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<sup>10</sup> Tatmadaw expert Maung Aung Myoe explains that the three-phased Tatmadaw counter-insurgency plan, developed in the 1960s, designates a territory as black, brown or white according to the extent of non-state armed group (NSAG) activity. Phase one transforms a ‘black area’ into a ‘brown area,’ meaning it transforms from an area controlled by NSAGs where the Tatmadaw operates, to a Tatmadaw-controlled area where NSAGs operate. The second phase is to transform the area from a ‘brown area’ into a ‘white area,’ where the area is cleared of insurgent activities. The final phase is to transform a white area into a ‘hard-core area,’ during which more organisational works are necessary and the government forms pro-government military units for overall national defence. See Maung Aung Myo, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forced Since 1948*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, p. 31-32; see also *Neither Friend Nor Foe: Myanmar's Relations with Thailand Since 1988*, Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Nanyang Technological University, 2002, p.71.



A KHRG community member from Nyaunglebin District echoed some of these concerns:

*“They [villagers in Nyaunglebin District] don’t have any expectations for after the election. Even if a good party wins the election, they can try [to create] peace for the ethnic people, but they will not create equality for them. Most of the political parties just prioritise their party being the winner in order to be in parliament. Finally they [villagers] want to suggest to the parties that they should create equality, fair laws, and change the constitution [with regards to] the ethnic people.”*

While some villagers emphasised the need for freedom and equality under the law as a prerequisite for the Burma/Myanmar government to gain their trust, other villagers prioritised the development of their local communities, in particular education and health infrastructure. A villager from Hpapun District stated:

*“For the outcome of this election I want a good government that can really understand the issues on the ground and is willing to solve our problems. Because we don’t know when our land will be confiscated, [and then there’s] nothing left for us to own. I expect that if the NLD gets power, the conflict will be solved and this will bring peace to Burma. We want the party to focus on community needs such as water, electricity, better roads, etc., and I believe that our community will change in positive way.”*

Naw A---, a villager from Dooplaya, stated:

*“I voted because I want peace in the future and for our people to be able to work freely. Children should have the opportunity to access education, because I don’t want the situation to be like in the past. In the past, we couldn’t go to school. We had to flee because of the armed conflict. We can’t help our country because we are not educated. I voted because I have expectations from this election. I want for people to be able to do their work freely and less corruption. I want leaders who will stand up and look after the people. The leaders must be honest and keep their word; [they must] be leaders that accept their mistakes and take responsibility for what they do. If the leaders can lead in a correct way, people will follow them. Why are we poor? Why are we uneducated? Because there is too much corruption, and for this reason, our country has become a poor country. I think if the leaders we choose win the election, we will get peace. There is no chance that the situation will get better if the previous leaders are still in power.”*

## Conclusions

In light of the exclusion experienced by many villagers who were unable to vote, either due to technical negligence, geographical location, or ethnic affiliation, it is important for the incoming government to take material measures for gaining these populations' trust and preventing their disillusionment with the democratic transition in Burma/Myanmar. Through a bottom-up, participatory process, the incoming government representatives need to take notice of the particular struggles experienced by villagers in southeast Burma/Myanmar and ensure that their voices are heeded and their concerns are addressed. Based on the sample of interviews conducted by KHRG in connection with the 2015 elections, villagers expect the incoming government to:

- 1) Curb militarisation in southeast Burma/Myanmar and work towards an all-inclusive nationwide ceasefire while demonstrating a tangible commitment to peace.
- 2) Conduct itself in an honest and transparent manner, fulfilling its campaign promises to work towards human development in the border and ethnic regions, while mitigating negative impacts of large-scale development projects, such as confiscation of villagers' lands.
- 3) Ensure universal access to education and healthcare.
- 4) Reform the electoral process prior to the next election to correspond with the principles of universal suffrage and transparency.

Finally, it is important for the incoming government to remember that they have not gained the full trust of the civilian population simply by being voted in. As a Mergui-Tavoy District villager explains, the people will be watching and assessing the new government:

*“They heard some parties come and say, ‘it’s time for change,’ again and again, and they also saw that on the posters, but they are not sure what this ‘change’ will be for their community after the election. They expect a good and clean government to come in, which can create real peace for them [...]. They are not sure if anything will be different, because they need to wait and see after the election.”*

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