

Suu Kyi no shoo-in at Myanmar's 2020 polls

2020 elections will show how much damage has been done to leader's reputation as a democratic reformer

By **BERTIL LINTNER** > DECEMBER 29, 2019



Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi looks on before the UN's International Court of Justice on December 11, 2019 in the Peace Palace of The Hague. Photo: AFP/Netherlands Out/ Koen Van Weel

A new huge billboard recently erected at a major intersection in Myanmar's commercial capital of Yangon portrays the nation's nominal leader with a message of support: "We stand with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi."

Such billboards are not unique in Myanmar and appeared well before Suu Kyi headed to The Hague's International Court of Justice in December to defend her nation against charges of genocide, a stand that was widely panned by foreign media but cheered by nationalist groups at home.

But the new signboard's existence and message are noteworthy all the same. "Five years ago, it would not have been necessary," says a local community worker who requested anonymity. "Then everybody in Yangon supported her and no-one had to be reminded of that."

Although difficult to predict in any nation, new political undercurrents suggest Myanmar's November 2020 general election could be the first genuinely competitive democratic contest held since 1960, the last before the military seized power in a 1962 coup.

When Myanmar went to the polls in 1990 and 2015, the elections were de facto referendums on the old military-dominated system rather than democratic contests among diverse political parties and electoral choices.

On both occasions, Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) represented change and hope for a better future.



woman wears stickers with the image of Myanmar's State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi on her cheeks in Yangon on September 19, 2017. Photo: Facebook

A repeat of the fraudulent 2010 election – a one-sided contest portrayed by the then-ruling junta as a democratic restoration which delivered the pre-ordained result of a military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) victory – would be impossible today after nearly four years of NLD-led elected governance.

The NLD won a landslide at the 2015 election, securing 255 of the 330 seats in the 440-member lower house. (One hundred and ten seats in the lower house are reserved by law for military-appointed delegates.)

In the upper house, the NLD won 135 of 168 contested seats, with 56 of the total 224 going to the military. Similar pro-NLD results were seen in 14 regional and state assemblies with the sole exception of Rakhine state, where the local Arakan National Party won the most contested seats.

But popular support for the NLD has apparently waned in ethnic areas since its 2015 landslide win, witnessed in by-elections held in November 2018 where the party won only six of 13 contested seats in state, regional and national parliaments.

The USDP failed to win over disenfranchised voters, but disappointment with the NLD's policies has resulted in regional parties making recent significant gains that could hinder the NLD's ability to form a government after the 2020 polls.

In Yangon, an NLD bastion rooted partly in Suu Kyi's popularity and birth as a democratic icon during the military's lethal 1988 crackdown, criticism of her party is now commonplace, especially of the regional government it leads.

While the NLD remains immensely popular in rural areas in central Myanmar, where Suu Kyi still enjoys an almost goddess-like status, many in urban and ethnic areas feel that the party has failed to deliver on its promises of democratic reform and economic development.

How much damage the NLD has done to its past reputation as a standard bearer of democracy and reform is not yet clear.



An ethnic woman takes a selfie with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi at the 21st Century Panglong Conference, Naypyitaw, May 24, 2017. Photo: Facebook

While few expect Suu Kyi's party to lose at the 2020 polls, the result in ethnic areas, which command more than a quarter of all seats in the lower house, will be pivotal.

At the same time, previous election results could provide foresight into where Myanmar is headed after the 2020 elections.

In May 1990, a time when the former one-party system had been abolished and dozens of new political parties were allowed to emerge, the then-ruling junta agreed to hold elections, probably believing that no single party would win outright.

Although Suu Kyi was under house arrest at the time, the NLD won 392 of 492 contested seats. The National Unity Party (NUP), the then-favorite party of the military, won a meager ten seats; the rest went to regional ethnic parties.

In the minds of the electorate, the NUP stood for the old order while the NLD symbolized a widely-held desire for political change. All other parties, except those in close alliance with the NLD, were rendered irrelevant at the ballot box.

That resounding electoral result prompted the junta to move the goalposts, effectively annulling the election result and requiring a new constitution be drafted before any government could be formed. That a new charter was necessary was not in dispute, but the NLD and impartial observers believed it should be the duty of the newly elected and NLD-dominated legislature, which was never allowed by the military to convene.



Myanmar's soldiers march in a formation during a parade to mark the country's 74th Armed Forces Day in Naypyidaw on March 27, 2019. Photo: AFP/Thet Aung

Instead, three years later, the junta formed a constitution-drafting assembly comprised of 100 elected MPs and 600 military appointees. That set in motion a drawn-out charter-drafting process which culminated 15 years later in what was widely viewed as a rigged 2008 referendum.

That, in turn, enabled the military-aligned USDP to form a government in 2010 after an equally crooked poll which the NLD boycotted and hence was not on the pseudo-democratic ballot.

Both parties will feature and go head-to-head on the 2020 ballot. But even if the NLD sweeps to another victory, it will likely not have total control over its political destiny.

That's because the composition of parliament's upper and lower houses is such that even if one party — in this case the NLD — wins all the seats from Myanmar's seven ethnic Bamar-dominated regions, it would still be short of a majority.

With the rest of the seats allotted to ethnic states and a quarter to the military, ethnic area support is crucial for the NLD to secure an absolute majority. In 2015, that was not an issue because the election, like the one in 1990, was a de facto referendum on continued military rule.

Although the NLD may win again resoundingly in rural areas in 2020, there are now real alternatives to the party in Yangon, other urban centers and ethnic areas where the NLD is apparently no longer as popular as previously.

It's highly doubtful that even a somehow revived and reconstituted USDP, based on the country's abysmal experience under decades of military rule, will be seen by voters as the best electoral choice for a better future.

It is possible, however, that some ex-NLD MPs who remain popular in their constituencies may run as independents, giving rise to a potentially potent new political force. Several newly formed parties could also cut into the NLD's previous electoral support.



Myanmar's State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi (R) shakes hands with an ethnic Pa-O man at opening of a new pagoda in Shan State. Photo: AFP/Thet Aung

The NLD is acutely aware of this and its uncertain post-election future, hence the new cheerleading Suu Kyi billboards in Yangon.

Myanmar's 2020 election will clearly not be another referendum-style contest, meaning a real democratic opposition rooted in ethnic and urban areas dissatisfied with the NLD-led status quo could emerge from the polls.

While that may not be the electoral result the NLD envisages, it could ultimately be good for the country's development into a more diverse and responsive democracy.

[Asia Times Financial](#) is now live. Linking accurate news, insightful analysis and local knowledge with the ATF China Bond 50 Index, the world's first benchmark cross sector Chinese Bond Indices. [Read ATF now.](#)

TAGGED: 2020 Elections, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar, National League for Democracy, Outlook 2020, Union Solidarity and Development Party.

Source: <https://asiatimes.com/2019/12/suu-kyi-no-shoo-in-at-myanmars-2020-polls/>