

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

# mizzima

## WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



# NOT FREE, NOT FAIR

**USDP dominates first phase of  
'sham' election results across  
Myanmar**

## ELECTION UPDATE

# mizzima WEEKLY

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## DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Our relaunched magazine Mizzima Weekly provides readers with a more focused read on what matters in Myanmar and the wider region, with an emphasis on analysis, insight and providing key talking points.

# SYSTEM CHANGE, NOT REGIME CHANGE

As the Myanmar junta presses ahead with a tightly controlled election that few inside or outside the country consider credible, the depth of public mistrust toward the military runs far deeper than opposition to a single ruling group. For many people in Myanmar, the crisis is not about swapping one set of leaders for another, but about dismantling a system that has repeatedly betrayed them. The 2021 coup was not an isolated rupture - it was the latest expression of a political order in which the military claims the right to override popular will whenever it feels threatened.

As was discussed in a recent media collaboration with Thai PBS on 28 December election day, the Myanmar people want system change, not regime change.

The military's seizure of power shattered a fragile but meaningful experiment with civilian rule. Millions of voters had participated in elections with the expectation that their choices mattered, however imperfect the system remained. When the armed forces annulled the results in the 2021 coup without credible evidence of wrongdoing, it confirmed a long-held fear - the military sees democracy as conditional and reversible. Trust cannot survive when the institution that claims to safeguard the nation also reserves the right to cancel elections, imprison elected leaders, and rewrite rules to suit itself.

Decades of lived experience further explain why the junta's promises ring hollow. The military has governed Myanmar for much of its post-independence history, presiding over economic mismanagement, international isolation, and chronic conflict. Entire generations associate military rule with poverty, corruption, and arbitrary power. Even during periods of nominal reform, constitutional arrangements guaranteed the armed forces decisive control over key ministries and a veto over change. This entrenched dominance made clear that the military was never committed

to genuine civilian oversight, only to preserving its own privileges.

The junta's response to widespread resistance since the 2021 coup has deepened this mistrust. Rather than engaging with public demands, it has relied on repression, censorship, and mass arrests. Communities have seen schools, workplaces, and local administrations disrupted, not by popular unrest alone, but by the state's determination to rule through fear. When an authority governs primarily by coercion, it forfeits moral legitimacy. Elections conducted under such conditions are viewed not as pathways to representation, but as tools to launder continued military control.

Crucially, many in Myanmar now articulate their aspirations in terms of system change rather than regime change - seeking a federal democratic union - not generals and former generals ruling the roost. They question the role of the military in politics altogether, not just the identity of those at the top. Ethnic minorities, long subjected to broken ceasefires and unfulfilled autonomy promises, are particularly skeptical of any process overseen by the same institution that has marginalized them for decades. Young people, mobilized through civil disobedience, reject the notion that stability requires military guardianship.

In this context, the junta's election appears less like a step toward reconciliation - as the military would like to portray it - and more like an attempt to normalize an illegitimate and brutal order that holds no qualms in massacring civilians. Trust cannot be manufactured through ballots stripped of choice, competition, and freedom.

For the Myanmar people, the fundamental issue is a political system designed to concentrate unaccountable power. Until that system is transformed, any election organized by the military will be seen not as a solution, but as another reminder of why it cannot be trusted.

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WEEKLY

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Cover photo of young voter with her child checking the voting list by AFP





USDP at a campaign meeting ahead of the election.  
Photo: AFP

# NOT FREE, NOT FAIR

## USDP DOMINATES

### FIRST PHASE OF 'SHAM'

### ELECTION RESULTS

### ACROSS MYANMAR

**D**ata from the first phase of Myanmar's military-run election indicates an overwhelming lead for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which has secured victory in nearly all contested constituencies where results have been finalized in a poll that critics label a "sham".

As of 5:00 pm on 29 December, the USDP has secured victory in 41 out of 44 townships.

In Phase 1 of the election, the USDP is the current winner of all seats for the Pyithu Hluttaw, Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House), and Regional/State Hluttaw across all 12 townships in Yangon Region.

Furthermore, the USDP has also won the Pyithu Hluttaw seats in all eight townships of Naypyidaw.

Out of the eight townships in Mandalay Region included in Phase 1, the USDP has won the Pyithu Hluttaw seat for Pyin Oo Lwin, as well as the Pyithu Hluttaw, Amyotha Hluttaw, and Regional/State Hluttaw seats for Aungmyaythazan.

In Mon State, the USDP has secured a total of 13 seats, consisting of 12 seats from four other townships and one Regional/State Hluttaw seat in Chaungzon, but not for the Pyithu Hluttaw and Amyotha Hluttaw seats for Chaungzon.

Of the eight townships where elections were held in Ayeyarwady Region, only the result for the Pyithu Hluttaw seat in Myaungmya has been confirmed so far, which was also won by the USDP.

In Shan State, out of the 12 townships in Phase 1 results have been released for Tachileik and Lingkhe, with the USDP emerging victorious in both. In Tachileik, the USDP secured the Pyithu Hluttaw seat as well as the Amyotha and Regional/State Hluttaw seats.

In Chin State, the USDP has won the seats for Tedim and Hakha, but not the State Hluttaw seat for Tedim.

In Myeik Township, Tanintharyi Region, the People's Party won the Pyithu Hluttaw seat, a result which the USDP has officially contested.

In Karen State, the USDP is also seen winning the Pyithu Hluttaw seats for Thandaunggyi and Hpa-an townships.

Apart from the USDP, other parties that have won one Pyithu Hluttaw seat each include the Mon Unity Party, the People's Party, and the Arakan National Party.

Results for 24 Amyotha Hluttaw seats are known, with the USDP winning 22 of them.

Out of 23 Regional and State Hluttaw seats for which results have been released, the USDP has won 22.

Consequently, out of the 86 representative seats for which results are available, 80 have been won by USDP candidates.

In the Phase 1 results of the Myanmar junta's election, winners and losers can only be determined for the Pyithu Hluttaw First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) and Regional/State Hluttaw FPTP seats, while the results for the Amyotha Hluttaw FPTP and remaining Proportional

Representation (PR) constituencies will only be known after all three phases of the election are completed.

As the junta prepares for the second phase of voting on 11 January, the current data underscores a significant shift toward a military-dominated parliament, fulfilling predictions from international watchdogs who have consistently described the process as a staged attempt to manufacture political legitimacy for the junta.

## **USDP files official complaint after retired lieutenant general loses Myeik seat to People's Party**

The military-backed USDP has lodged a formal complaint with the Myeik Township Election Commission after its high-profile candidate, retired Lieutenant General U Lin Aung, lost the Pyithu Hluttaw seat to the People's Party (PP).

The protest letter specifically targets an incident at the Pathaung polling station, where the USDP alleges that a polling station inspector, Daw Thi Thi Khaing, improperly influenced two voters by physically gesturing for them to support the People's Party.

Despite the inclusion of advance votes, which often favour military-aligned candidates, the USDP was unable to secure the seat in the constituency, which serves nearly 200,000 eligible voters across Tanintharyi Region.

A People's Party official confirmed the victory but noted that the USDP's legal challenge was submitted immediately following the announcement of the results on 28 December.

The complaint focuses on the testimony of Pathaung polling station representative U Aung San Lwin, who claims Daw Saw Than and Daw Zin Mar Khaing were instructed to vote for the PP by the inspector. Under the strict Pyithu Hluttaw Election Law enforced by the junta, any individual found campaigning or influencing voters within a polling station faces up to one year in prison and significant fines.

The USDP chairman for Myeik Township, U Kyaw Kyaw Oo, has officially requested that the township commission take "appropriate action" regarding these allegations.

The loss is a significant blow to the USDP, as U Lin Aung is a former commander of the Coastal Region Command and a highly decorated military figure. Myeik Township, which operates 81 polling stations across its wards and village tracts, was part of the 102 townships included in the first phase of the junta-organized election. While the People's Party has declined to release the specific total of votes received, they maintain that the victory was legitimate.

This legal dispute emerges as the country prepares for the second phase of the multi-phase election scheduled for 11 January 2026, amid widespread international and domestic criticism of the electoral process.

## ANALYSIS &amp; INSIGHT



People's Party canvassers out on the street ahead of phase 2 of the election. Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR PUBLIC'S RESPONSE TO THE ELECTION

**A**head of the military junta's widely criticized election, public interest in the polling process remained extremely low in urban areas, with many residents expressing reluctance or outright refusal to participate.

In major cities such as Yangon, residents showed little interest in checking voter lists at their respective ward administration offices. Many said they were unaware of who the candidates were, despite some nominees being well-known public figures or celebrities perceived as having close ties to the junta.

A Yangon taxi driver told DVB that voter engagement in his neighborhood was virtually nonexistent. "No one in our ward is interested in voting," he said. "I don't even know whether my name is on the voter list, and I'm not interested in finding out." A woman from western Yangon echoed the sentiment, saying she had little information about the candidates contesting her township. "I don't know who is competing, and I haven't decided whether to vote or not," she said.

Despite Thailand hosting an estimated seven million Myanmar migrant workers, only a few hundred reportedly applied for advance voting. Several migrants told BBC Burmese that they would not take part in the process, citing a lack of trust in the election, security concerns, and broader political objections. A woman working at Bangkok's Pratunam Market said her preferred political party was excluded from the election. "I don't believe political change can come through this election," she said.

Opposition to the election also took visible forms through public protest campaigns. On December 26, Yebawê, a Yangon-based strike force, launched a "No Vote" campaign in Dagon Township. In a statement, the group acknowledged that voting is a fundamental right of citizens but emphasized that personal safety should take precedence under the current political climate. The group urged residents to oppose the election by refraining from checking voter lists and avoiding any visible involvement in the polling process.

Anti-election protests were also reported in ethnic and rural areas. The Karen Youth Organization (KYO) led strikes against the junta's election in KNU-

controlled territories, including Hpa-an, Thaton, and parts of Hpapun District. The group said the election would only entrench military authoritarianism and enable continued crimes against Myanmar's diverse ethnic communities.

The strikes took place shortly before the junta's first phase of voting and drew significant participation. According to organizers, one of the demonstrations attracted around 4,000 people, underscoring widespread public resistance to the military's electoral roadmap.

## Armed clashes continue

Despite the military junta's efforts to present its widely criticized election as a political exit strategy, armed clashes with resistance forces have intensified across multiple regions of Myanmar before, during, and after the first phase polling period, underscoring the regime's fragile grip on territory and security.

In Chin State, heavy fighting erupted in the Falam area between December 27 and 29, as Chin resistance



TNLA fighter. Photo: AFP

forces engaged junta troops advancing toward the town. According to resistance sources, several junta soldiers were captured during the clashes, along with weapons and ammunition. The battles followed a renewed junta offensive launched in late October aimed at retaking Falam, which has remained under resistance control. Two junta columns reportedly advanced to within about 10 miles of the town, triggering sustained and increasingly intense fighting.

Meanwhile, allied forces from PDF Zoland and the Chinland Defense Force (CDF) Ciyin recaptured the Kanedy outpost on January 4. The post had previously been retaken by junta troops in late October. During the latest battle, Chin resistance forces captured around 20 prisoners of war, including a junta major.

In Rakhine State, the Arakan Army (AA) resumed and intensified its offensive toward Kyaukphyu town in early December. Junta forces were forced to retreat from several defensive positions as AA units advanced into areas surrounding the town. The junta has responded with a combined deployment of ground troops, naval units, and air power in an effort to halt the AA's advance.

As fighting escalated near Kyaukphyu, rumors circulated that the AA had seized the town. However, local sources told the Rakhine-based media outlet Narinjara that the battles remain ongoing and that the town has not yet fallen. "The junta is unable to defend against the AA's offensive despite using ground forces, naval units, and air power," a local source said. "Gunfire can be heard from inside the town, which has fueled rumors of capture, but the fighting is still fierce."

Elsewhere, the AA reported a significant blow to the junta's military leadership. On January 4, an AA commando unit killed the commander of the junta's No. 10 Military Operations Command, Colonel (Brigadier General) Han Lin Aung, during a battle near Nyaungkyo village in Padaung Township, Ayeyarwaddy Region. The AA's spokesperson confirmed the incident to Rakhine-based media outlets. The commander's personal security officer, a lieutenant colonel, and nine other junta soldiers were also killed. Since the 2021 coup, more than 30 junta battlefield commanders at the brigadier level have reportedly been killed or captured by resistance forces.



A vendor checks his phone in Yangon.  
Photo: AFP

Clashes also continued in Bago Region, where fighting broke out in the western townships along key transportation routes. In Nattalin Township, located on the old Yangon–Mandalay highway, People's Defense Forces (PDFs) under the command of the National Unity Government (NUG) launched a major attack on junta troops on December 12. Resistance sources said the clash resulted in 11 junta casualties, including one officer, while one PDF fighter was killed. Resistance forces also seized weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment.

In Tanintharyi Region, PDFs under NUG command carried out multiple attacks in Bokpyin Township. On December 26, resistance fighters conducted a drone strike against junta troops providing security at a polling station in Pyigyimandaing town. Further attacks were reported on election day and again on December 29, resulting in at least three junta soldiers killed and two wounded. Ongoing clashes forced local residents to flee their homes.

In Magway Region, resistance forces escalated operations in Sinphyukyun Township ahead of the election. PDFs launched attacks on junta positions starting on December 23, seized a checkpoint the following day, and on December 30 ambushed a junta reinforcement column traveling from Seikphyu town. Resistance forces claimed they killed 16 junta soldiers and seized eight weapons. On January 2, the NUG announced that its forces had set fire to junta administrative offices in the area.

The continued escalation of fighting nationwide highlights the stark contrast between the junta's election narrative and the reality of expanding armed resistance across Myanmar.

## Trouble with online connectivity

Internet connectivity across Myanmar has deteriorated sharply since early November, raising concerns that the military junta is deliberately tightening digital controls under the pretext of technical failures linked to the election period.

Reports of weak internet signals began emerging nationwide on November 1. On December 5, junta authorities issued a statement attributing the disruption

to damage to the UMO undersea cable originating from Singapore, which supplies international internet connectivity to Myanmar. The regime claimed repairs would be completed by the end of December, coinciding with the conclusion of the first phase of its widely criticized election.

However, digital rights observers have questioned the credibility of the junta's explanation. Myanmar Internet Project (MIP) told Mizzima that the statement lacked transparency, as it failed to clarify whether the cable damage was caused by natural disasters, weather conditions, or other technical factors. MIP said the absence of such details makes the junta's narrative unreliable.

In the days leading up to the first phase of the election, internet and telephone services became severely unstable, even in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay. A Mandalay resident told DVB that messages frequently failed to send and voice messages on popular messaging applications did not work. "I had to switch to Viber. I believe this is because of the election. People said the connection would return to normal afterward," the resident said.

Yet connectivity has not improved since the first phase concluded. Instead, users in Yangon, Mandalay, and Ayeyarwaddy Region report that internet access has worsened, particularly during peak evening hours. Pyin Oo Lwin, home to the Defence Services Academy and previously known for relatively stable connectivity, has also experienced significant slowdowns.

According to a report by Justice For Myanmar (JFM), the junta is deploying Chinese surveillance technology to monitor online activity and enforce a system similar to China's "Great Firewall." The report states that this infrastructure is being implemented through Geedge Multi-Technics, suggesting that the ongoing internet disruption may be part of a broader strategy to control information flow rather than a temporary technical failure.



Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR JUNTA LEADER MIN AUNG HLAING VOWS POWER TRANSFER AMID CLAIMS OF USDP VICTORY IN PHASE-ONE POLLS

In a New Year's Day address on 1 January 2026, military junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing announced his intention to transfer sovereign power to the winner of the ongoing multi-phased general election, signalling the start of what he termed a "second chapter" for the country.

In his address, Min Aung Hlaing said, "We will hand over power to the government that emerges after the election and continue to work hard to ensure that the second chapter is successful."

The first phase of the election began on 28 December 2025 in 102 townships. Results have so far been announced in 83 townships, with the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) winning 68 seats.

On election day, Min Aung Hlaing, who currently serves as interim president, said it would only be appropriate for him to speak once parliament had

elected a president. He reiterated on 1 January 2026 that he would hand over responsibilities to the new government after the election process is completed.

He also claimed that agreement had been reached on 43 points during peace talks aimed at amending the 2008 constitution, adding that these issues would be raised in the next parliament. However, he did not specify which parties were involved in the discussions.

Min Aung Hlaing further said that foreign investment increased in 2025 and that the country had seen positive political developments. Observers, however, say that people continue to struggle with rising prices, electricity shortages, unemployment and ongoing security concerns.

The junta is pressing ahead with the election process and has urged the public to take part in the remaining second and third phases of voting later this month.



Photo: Supplied

## CHIN STATE TOWNSHIPS BOMBED BY MYANMAR JUNTA DURING DISRUPTION OF FIRST-PHASE ELECTIONS

The military junta launched multiple aerial bombardments across Falam, Hakha, and Kanpetlet townships in Chin State on 28 December, coinciding with the first phase of its staged general election.

Local residents and military sources reported that while some strikes occurred during active clashes, others targeted areas where no fighting was taking place.

"Bombs were dropped during active fighting in Falam Township, but two other locations with no ongoing clashes were also targeted," a local military source told Mizzima.

In Falam, a junta jet fighter dropped three bombs on Zathir village near Surbung Airport, destroying three civilian houses. Tiphir village was also struck, forcing residents to flee. Clashes intensified as junta troops advanced from Kalay toward Falam, with continued air support reported through 29 December.

In the state capital of Hakha, the military retaliated for a previous attack on its Rone Taung base by bombing the Kyaw Bote No. 2 cemetery, resulting in the destruction of 12 tombs.

Meanwhile, in Kanpetlet, an airstrike hit the Win Unity Hotel compound shortly after midnight on election day, though no casualties were reported. These attacks took place as the junta attempted to hold votes in the only two Chin townships under its relative control, Hakha and Tedim.

However, participation was reportedly limited to civil servants and military-affiliated individuals, as the majority of the population observed a "Silent Strike" in defiance of the polls.

The Union Election Commission has formally admitted it cannot conduct elections in six of Chin State's nine townships – Mindat, Matupi, Kanpetlet, Paletwa, Tonzang, and Falam – due to a total loss of administrative control. Thantlang also remains excluded as a contested frontline area.

International observers and revolutionary forces have condemned the proceedings as a "sham," noting that the ongoing violence and systematic exclusion of vast territories render the election results entirely illegitimate.



Photo: AFP

## MILITARY FAMILIES AND CIVIL SERVANTS PRESSURED TO VOTE FOR USDP IN MINGALADON AMID VOTING MACHINE FAILURES

**M**ilitary families and civil servants within the Mingaladon cantonment in Yangon were reportedly coerced by superior officers to cast their ballots for the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) during the first phase of the national election on 28 December.

Military sources revealed that rehearsal sessions held prior to the vote included mandatory instructions and implied threats of consequences for those whose actions might cause "trouble" for their families.

One voter described selecting the USDP out of fear, noting that the similar appearance of party logos on the electronic voting machines added to the pressure to avoid making any "mistakes" that could be interpreted as defiance.

The election process in Mingaladon was further marred by significant technical issues, as electronic voting machines suffered malfunctions including unresponsive buttons and printer failures, causing delays of over two hours at several polling stations.

While state media attempted to project an image of orderly participation, ground observations indicated

a tepid voter response, with many individuals only showing up late in the day after being warned by colleagues of potential repercussions for failing to vote. In residential wards, administrative officials used loudspeakers throughout the afternoon to urge a reluctant public to cast their ballots, highlighting the junta's struggle to achieve high turnout in the commercial capital.

Despite the deployment of 144 polling stations across Mingaladon's 27 wards and five village tracts, the overall atmosphere across Yangon remained tense and marked by low engagement from ordinary citizens.

This first phase of the election, which covered 12 townships in the Yangon Region, has been widely dismissed by domestic revolutionary forces and international observers as a "sham" designed to entrench military rule.

Reports of systemic coercion and technical instability underscore the challenges facing the junta as it prepares for the upcoming second and third phases of voting in January 2026.



USDP leader Khin Yi indicates he has voted in the 28 December phase of the election. Photo: AFP

## USDP CLAIMS CLEAN SWEEP IN NAYPYIDAW FOLLOWING LANDMARK EXCLUSION OF NLD

**T**he military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has claimed victory in all eight townships of Naypyidaw following the first phase of the national election held on 28 December.

Party spokesperson U Hla Thein reported that the USDP secured a majority in over 70 percent of the 102 townships contested nationwide in this initial stage, which included the capital's eight constituencies. While the Union Election Commission has stated that official results will not be formally released until all three phases are completed in late January, the USDP maintains that its lead in the administrative capital is insurmountable.

The sweep marks a significant shift from the 2015 and 2020 elections, where the now-dissolved National League for Democracy (NLD) dominated nearly all seats in the region.

"The USDP won all eight townships in Naypyidaw. Overall, the party secured more than 70 percent of the 102 townships contested in the first phase of the election," U Hla Thein said.

The first phase of the military junta-organized election, which is planned to be conducted in three phases, was held on 28 December in 102 townships nationwide, including the eight townships of Naypyidaw.

The junta's Union Election Commission (UEC) has not yet officially confirmed the results of the first phase. While the UEC has said results will only be announced after all three phases are completed, U Hla Thein insisted there was "no way" the outcome in Naypyidaw could be reversed.

The USDP is contesting eight Pyithu Hluttaw seats in Naypyidaw. Party chairman U Khin Yi is contesting in Zeyarthiri Township, U Hla Swe in Pubbathiri, Minkin U Maung Myint in Zambuthiri, U Khin Maung Htay in Pyinmana, U Myat Hein in Dakkhinathiri, U Win Htay in Lewe, and U Maung Maung Ohn in Tatkone.

Although the result has not yet been officially confirmed, some parties say the USDP could also win a seat in National Assembly Constituency No. 6, which covers the entire Union Territory and is elected under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. Regarding the two seats in Constituency No. 3, which includes all of Yamethin District and the Union Territory, U Hla Thein said, "We will have to wait."

Like the USDP, the People's Party (PP), which contested all eight townships in Naypyidaw, said it was dissatisfied with the election results, citing irregularities.

U Kyaw Kyaw Htwe, Secretary 1 of the People's Party, said, "In some cases, the ballots were invalid. For example, there was no stamp on the back of the ballot paper, no stamp from the polling station officer, or no official marking at all." However, he added that the party had not yet filed a formal objection.

The USDP previously won the 2010 general election and formed the government at a time when the

NLD did not participate. It also won all eight townships in Naypyidaw during that election.

In contrast, during the 2015 and 2020 elections, the NLD won all constituencies in Naypyidaw except Zeyarthiri Township, where the military headquarters is located. The NLD also won four Naypyidaw constituencies in the 2012 by-elections.

With the NLD excluded from the 2025 junta-organized election, the USDP has once again won all constituencies in Naypyidaw, according to party claims.

The election was held amid reports that junta civil servants and civilians were pressured to vote. The polls have not been recognized by resistance groups, domestic civil society organizations, or international bodies, including the United Nations.

The election was held amid ongoing conflict, with polls unable to take place in 65 of the country's 330 townships. The junta said nearly 4,000 wards and village tracts were also unable to hold elections even in townships where voting had been planned.

Results from the first phase of the election will only be released for Pyithu Hluttaw and Region/State Hluttaw seats contested under the first-past-the-post system. Results for Amyotha Hluttaw seats and remaining proportional representation (PR) constituencies will be announced only after all three phases are completed.



## PANEL DISCUSSION 1 - MYANMAR JUNTA'S 'SHAM' ELECTION - KEY POINTS

The following are the key points of one of four panel discussions held at Thai PBS studio in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 28 December 2026 to mark the first phase of the Myanmar junta-run election.

### 1st Panel Discussion Key Points

#### Title: Myanmar Junta's 'Sham' Election

Moderator/Facilitator: Sein Win, Managing Editor, Mizzima Media

##### Panelists:

- Khun Myint Tun: Chairman of Pa-O National Federal Council (PNFC), Anti-Illegal Sham Election Joint Working Committee
- Khaing Thinzar Aye @ Phoug Yoe: MLA-CTUM General Strike Coordination Body (GSCB) Platform on People Movement
- Aung Aung: General Strike Collaboration Committee, Anti-Illegal Sham Election Joint Working Committee
- Bhone Thit: General Strike Coordination Body (GSCB) Platform on People Movement

#### The Census at Gunpoint - Decoding the Junta's 28 December "Sham"

As Phase One of the military junta's staggered election unfolded on 28 December 2025, the reality on the ground has rendered the term "polling day" an irony. From the empty streets of Yangon to the silent strikes

in Chin State, the public's response was a resounding vote of no confidence. This isn't just an election; it is a census at gunpoint, designed not to count voices, but to map obedience.

In a landmark Mizzima panel discussion moderated by Sein Win, four key voices from the resistance and labour movements dismantled the junta's narrative, exposing the three-stage process as a desperate "exit ramp" for a failing regime.

The panel's foundational argument, led by Sein Win and Bhone Thit, is that an illegal entity cannot conduct a legal act. Since the UN, ASEAN, and the EU still recognize the 2020 mandate represented by Ambassador U Kyaw Moe Tun, the junta's Union Election Commission (UEC) is essentially a "terrorist-appointed body." Bhone Thit noted that the junta violated the very 2008 Constitution they claim to defend, making this a "state rebellion" rather than a government process.

#### Legal and Structural Deception: The "Illegal Sham" Defined

Bhone Thit, an activist and commentator, offered a two-pronged critique of the 2025 election, defining it as an "illegal sham" based on both legal and procedural failures:

- **Illegality of Origin:** He argues the election is fundamentally illegal because the 2021 coup itself violated the military-written 2008 Constitution. By

overthrowing the law, they swore to uphold, the military committed a "state rebellion," stripping them of any legal authority to organize a vote.

- **A "Sham" by Design:** The term "sham" refers to the entire setup - from the election formats to the timing. He compares it to a rigged football match where the rules are changed mid-game solely to ensure one side wins.

- **Manipulation via the PR System:** He points specifically to the introduction of a Proportional Representation (PR) system mixed with other formats. He views this not as a genuine democratic reform, but as a mathematical tool designed to dilute the power of major opposition parties and guarantee a military victory.

## **Manufacturing a Mandate: The Voter List Fraud**

Khaing Thinzar Aye (GSCB/CTUM) provided a staggering data-driven critique. The foundation of any election is a credible census, yet:

- **Partial Data:** In over 50% of the 330 townships, census collection was either partial or impossible.
- **The Overseas Ghost:** In 2020, 150,000 overseas voters participated; in 2025, only 5,000 have surfaced - a clear sign of total public rejection abroad.
- **Fingerprint Forgery:** Reports from industrial zones suggest workers are being forced to provide fingerprints that the military may later "convert" into advance votes to fill the gap of empty polling stations.

## **The "Soldier Substitute" and Double Voting**

Aung Aung exposed the ground-level mechanics of the rigging. He shared accounts of military personnel in Naypyidaw casting "batch votes" for entire family members back in provincial towns:

- **Historical Cycle of Broken Promises:** The speaker argues that the military is repeating a pattern seen in 1990 and 2010 - holding elections to secure their own interests while consistently ignoring public will and blocking the "federal dreams" of ethnic groups.
- **Electoral Fraud and "Batch Voting":** A specific example is cited where a soldier serving in Naypyidaw reportedly cast votes for his entire five-member household in a different town, effectively voting on behalf of family members who were not even on the voter list.

- **Double Voting and Systematic Rigging:** The speaker claims that military families can "double vote" - once within the military compounds and again at public polling stations - creating a fraudulent "sham" designed solely to prolong military power.

## **A "Steel Gate" Parliament**

Khun Myint Tun (PNFC) placed this sham in a historical cycle of betrayal (1990, 2010, 2015, and 2020). He warned that the 2025 result is already pre-scripted by USDP Chairman U Khin Yi: the result must be one the military likes.

- **A History of Broken Accountability:** He highlights a repetitive cycle where the military organizes elections (1990, 2010, 2025) or peace processes (2015) only to destroy them the moment the results do not favour their interests. He argues that without "responsibility and accountability," any political process in Myanmar is doomed to fail.

- **The "Steel Gate" Parliament:** Khun Myint Tun warns that the upcoming parliament will be a "sham" controlled from both sides - internally by the 25% of active military members and externally by hundreds of USDP candidates who are merely former officers who "took off their uniforms yesterday."

- **Oppression of Allies:** He points out that even groups cooperating with the junta, such as the Pa-O National Organization (PNO), are "suffering in silence." He notes that the PNO has already complained about massive voter list errors, where 13 out of 22 villages in a single area were excluded from the list.

- **Rejection of "Makeup and Flowers":** He asserts that the public, especially the new generation of youth, will no longer accept "regime change" that merely applies "makeup" to a dictatorial system. He emphasizes that the only solution the public will accept is a total "system change" toward a new era.

## **Conclusion: System Change, Not Makeup**

The panel concluded that while the junta tries to apply "makeup and flowers" to a dictatorship through this election, the "new generation of youth" and the ethnic organizations are no longer interested in regime change - they are fighting for system change.



Photo: AFP

## PANEL DISCUSSION 2 - MYANMAR'S SHAM ELECTION: WHY THE JUNTA WANTS IT—AND WHAT COMES NEXT - KEY POINTS

The following are the key points of the second of four panel discussions held at Thai PBS studio in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 28 December 2026 to mark the first phase of the Myanmar junta-run election.

### 2nd Panel Discussion Key Points

#### Title: Myanmar's Sham Election: Why the Junta Wants It—and What Comes Next

Moderator/Facilitator: Kyaw Zwa Moe, Executive Editor, The Irrawaddy

Panelist: Htin Kyaw Aye, Executive Director, Spring Sprouts

Panelist: Dr. Surachanee Sriyai (Hammerli), Visiting Fellow, ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute

Panelist: Khin Ohmar, Veteran Burmese Activist

Panelist: Htaike Htaike Aung, Director, Myanmar Internet Project

Kyaw Zwa Moe, acting as the moderator, framed the 28 December election not as a democratic exercise

but as a calculated political exit strategy for the military regime. He highlighted several critical observations based on real-time reports from within Myanmar, specifically noting a heavy security buildup as early as 2:00 am on election day despite sparse turnout at polling stations. He interpreted the empty lines as a "silent rejection" or strike by the general public, estimating that more than 90% of the population remains entirely disinterested in the process.

According to his observation, the military has already pre-planned the formation of a new government, including specific ministerial positions, which he expects to be announced by the end of March 2026. This strategy is intended to transition the junta into a so-called civilian government by April 1, 2026, where the same generals will simply operate in civilian attire.

He pointed out that the junta failed to honour landslide democratic victories in 1990 and 2020 and rigged the 2010 election, leading the populace to view today's proceedings as nothing more than a repeat performance. By framing the event as a sham, he set the stage for the panelists to discuss how this manufactured political landscape will impact digital freedom, regional geopolitics, and Myanmar's long-term democratic prospects.

Htin Kyaw Aye, Executive Director of the monitoring group "Spring Sprouts," identifies this election as a calculated effort to institutionalize military control rather than a democratic transition.

- **Massive and Intentional Disenfranchisement:** He points out that the junta has cancelled elections in 65 whole townships - one-fifth of the country - and thousands of village tracts. By redrawing constituency boundaries (gerrymandering), the military is attempting to hide the fact that they have lost control of half the country while still claiming they can fill 88% of parliamentary seats.

- **A "Mixed-Member" Tool for Manipulation:** He explains that the new electoral system is designed to favour the USDP by using a single vote for both the First-Past-The-Post and Proportional Representation systems. This ensures that even with low turnout, the military-aligned party can maximize its seat count and dominate the legislature.

- **Total Lack of Legitimacy and Participation:** He highlights the "Silent Strike" and the extremely low number of advance votes from the millions of Myanmar citizens abroad (only about 5,000) as proof of a nationwide boycott. He also warns that electronic voting machines are being used for mass surveillance and potential fraud rather than efficiency.

- **Suppression of Both Critics and Loyalists:** The analysis notes that the junta is not only disbanding popular parties like the National League for Democracy (NLD) but is also suppressing its own loyalist candidates and smaller parties if they show any independence. He concludes that this election marks a "new political front" in the military's strategy to suppress the people.

Dr. Surachanee, a Thai social and political scientist, analyzed how the international community's fractured response to the 2025 election serves the junta's interests.

- **US Policy Contradictions:** She identifies a "painful" mixed signal from the United States, where

the Senate denounced the election as a sham just days before the administration revoked Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for 4,000 Myanmar nationals. This revocation was justified by claiming "progress" in governance, a move Dr. Surachanee argues inadvertently legitimizes the junta's narrative.

- **ASEAN's Implicit Support through Silence:** While ASEAN as a bloc has not sent official observers, Dr. Surachanee notes that the individual decisions of member states like Vietnam and Cambodia to send representatives provide the junta with the minimal global legitimacy it needs to claim an "exit strategy."

- **China's Determined Stance:** She highlights China as the primary regional hegemon actively pushing for the election to succeed, contrasting Beijing's clear, self-interested determination with the fragmented or distracted responses of Western powers.

- **Thailand's Vulnerability and Miscalculation:** Regarding her own country, she warns that Thailand's traditional "swaying bamboo" diplomacy (avoiding picking sides) is a dangerous miscalculation. She predicts that if the election leads to further instability and a mass exodus, Thailand is policy-wise unprepared for the fallout.

Ma Htaike Htaike Aung, a digital rights advocate from the Myanmar Internet Project (MIP), identifies the current election period as a high-risk moment where digital repression has become more automated, coordinated, and aggressive.

- **The PSMS Surveillance System:** The military has implemented the "Person Scrutinization and Monitoring System" (PSMS), an AI-powered database that fuses biometric data, SIM registration, and social media activity. This system is actively used at checkpoints and hotels to identify and arrest dissidents in real time, with reports indicating over 1,600 arrests linked to this software in early 2025 alone.

- **Importing China's "Great Firewall":** Ma Htaike Htaike Aung points to the regime's use of "Geedge

Networks," a Chinese surveillance-for-hire system that mimics the Great Firewall. This technology allows the junta to conduct deep packet inspection to block VPNs, track individual network traffic, and pinpoint the geographic locations of mobile subscribers.

- **Information Control and Throttling:** The regime is moving away from nationwide shutdowns toward "selective connectivity," where internet speeds are throttled in specific townships to disrupt communication during key moments. This is paired with "information flooding," where pro-military networks utilize platforms like TikTok to spread propaganda, designed to exhaust and confuse the public.

Ma Khin Ohmar, a legendary figure from the 1988 uprising and founder of Progressive Voice, argues that the 2025 election is a "plan of deception" far more dangerous than the 2010 polls. She warns that unlike the previous transition; this one is designed solely to trick the world into lifting sanctions and resuming investment without making any genuine democratic concessions.

- **The Deception of Legitimacy:** She asserts the junta's primary goal is to shed its "illegal entity" status. Having been barred from UN and ASEAN summits for four years, the military views a post-election "civilian" government as a gateway to lifting international sanctions and reopening the doors for foreign investment.

- **2010 vs. 2025 — A False Parallel:** Ohmar critiques "fanciful thinkers" who compare today to the 2010 transition. She argues that while former leader Than Shwe was strategic enough to offer a power-sharing model with the NLD and open space for civil society, Min Aung Hlaing's regime has focused only on total destruction of the opposition.

- **The Revolution is Inward, Not Bordered:** A major difference she identifies is the geography of resistance. In 2010, revolutionary forces were largely confined to the borders. Today, the entire country is in a state of revolution with effective resistance control

over more territory than the military - a reality she says international actors continue to underestimate.

- **Warning Against "Business-First" Diplomacy:** Reflecting on past mistakes, she warns the international community against repeating the post-2010 error of prioritizing "economy and development" over human rights. She specifically calls out past "peace donors" who funded military-led agendas while silencing civil society's calls for justice regarding military atrocities and sexual violence.

- **Fragmentation of Resistance Forces:** A key part of the military's plan is to create friction between different factions, specifically targeting the divide between original signatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and those who have since joined the revolution. She warns that the military will attempt to sow discord between established Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) and the newer People's Defense Forces (PDFs).

The panel's conclusion is stark: Today is not a day of voting; it is a day where the military initiates a new, high-tech front in its war against the people. The "civilian" government promised for 2026 is a mirage, designed to hide a digital cage built with foreign tools and fueled by the blood of the resistance.



Photo: AFP

## PANEL DISCUSSION 3 - BNI EDITORS' INSIGHTS - THE GROUND REALITY - KEY POINTS

The following are the key points of the third of four panel discussions held at Thai PBS studio in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 28 December 2026 to mark the first phase of the Myanmar junta-run election.

### 3rd Panel Discussion Key Points

#### Title: BNI Editors' Insights - The Ground Reality

Moderator/Facilitator: Tin Tin Nyo, Managing Director, Burma News International (BNI)

Panelist: Nan Paw Gay, Editor In-Chief, Karen Information Center

Panelist: Soe Myint, Editor In-Chief, Mizzima Media

Panelist: Sai Mueng, Editor In-Chief, Shan Herald Agency for News

Panelist: Sam Naw, Editor In-Chief, Kachin News Group

The third panel shifted focus from high-level analysis to direct field reporting from ethnic states and liberated zones. The consensus among the editors-in-chief was clear: the election is a "for-show" event with almost zero public participation in conflict-affected regions.

The editors provided a stark contrast between the junta's official narrative and the reality in ethnic states:

Ko Sam Naw, representing the Kachin News Group (KNG), provides a report on the ground reality in Kachin State during the first phase of the election, highlighting the military's limited control and the public's refusal to participate.

- Strategic Urban Focus: The military is only

attempting to hold elections in six specific townships—Myitkyina, Putao, Naungmun, Khaunglanphu, Tanai, and Mohnyin—where they believe they maintain enough territorial control to secure a result, primarily within urban centers.

- Invisible Election and Public Boycott: Unlike the high engagement seen in 2020, most residents in Kachin State were either unaware that the election was happening or intentionally ignored it, viewing the outcome as a "pre-decided" victory for the USDP and its military allies.

- Deserted Polling Stations: Interviews with local residents indicate that polling stations are "extremely quiet" and largely deserted, with a vast majority of the population refusing to cast ballots despite the military's attempts to portray a functioning electoral process.

Nan Paw Gay, Editor-in-Chief of the Karen Information Center (KIC), reports that the election in Karen State is characterized by a complete lack of public awareness, military-aligned armed group involvement, and targeted violence against those who oppose the process.

- Candidates Without Public Identity: Despite 170 candidates and 9 parties being registered, residents on the ground have reported having no knowledge of who is actually competing. There is no visible campaigning; instead, pro-military candidates are restricted to posting propaganda on personal Facebook pages while neighborhoods remain "dead quiet" in person.

- Armed Group Alliances and Shifting Stances: The pro-military Border Guard Force (BGF) has officially

pledged to secure and support the polls. Meanwhile, the DKBA, an NCA signatory, initially opposed the election but quickly shifted to a supportive stance, reflecting the complex and often coerced alliances at play in the region.

- **Targeted Attacks on KNU Territory:** The Karen National Union (KNU) has rejected the election as an "illegal sham" and called for peaceful protests. In retaliation, the junta has labeled the KNU a terrorist group and launched intensified airstrikes and drone attacks on KNU headquarters and civilians in areas that had previously been stable, using the election as a pretext for renewed military offensive.

- **Low Turnout and Explosions:** The election day was marked by instability, including a bomb blast in Myawaddy the night before the polls. Reports from the ground indicate that voter turnout was extremely low, with most polling stations in Myawaddy recording fewer than 1,000 voters each, while those who did vote often did so out of fear or a lack of understanding of the political situation.

Sai Mueng, representing Shan News (SHAN), reports on the deep fragmentation of Shan State during the election, where 17 out of 55 townships have been excluded entirely due to the military's loss of "law and order" to ethnic resistance forces.

- **Exclusion and Shadow Governance:** The military has conceded that it cannot hold elections in 17 townships controlled by groups like the TNLA, MNDAA, UWSA, and KIA. Notably, while the Wa (UWSA) leadership publicly signaled support for the election in Naypyidaw, they have barred the polls from their own territory, including recently acquired areas like Hopang.

- **Extreme Restrictions in Urban Pockets:** In the few Northern Shan townships where voting is occurring, such as Muse and Lashio, security is unprecedentedly tight, with three layers of armed guards and a total ban on phones and even pens within stations. In Lashio, the military only controls 12 urban wards out of more than 100 village tracts, leaving the vast majority of the rural population outside its influence.

- **Coercion and Administrative Chaos:** Reports from the ground indicate that the military is using "door-to-door" pressure and local militias (Pithu Sita) to force residents into cars and transport them to urban polling stations. Paradoxically, even those willing to vote are facing systemic disenfranchisement; one polling station officer reported that his own family of six was missing from the voter list despite his senior role in the process.

U Soe Myint, Editor-in-Chief of Mizzima, categorizes

the 2025 proceedings not as a legitimate election but as a "for-show" event designed to institutionalize the power seized in the 2021 coup.

- **Reporting Under Repression:** He explains Mizzima's dual reporting strategy: journalists in "liberated areas" work openly, while those in military-controlled cities like Yangon and Mandalay must operate undercover due to the risk of arrest. He emphasizes that while Mizzima does not recognize the election's legitimacy, they cover it to document facts and expose coercion.

- **The Illusion of Participation:** U Soe Myint argues that the junta's claim of holding elections in "265 townships" is purely a "name on paper." In reality, over 50% of the country is in a state of humanitarian crisis, with people focused on survival from airstrikes and food shortages rather than voting. He notes that turnout is extremely low except where "door-to-door" pressure is applied.

- **Coerced Civil Servants:** He highlights that in administrative centers like Naypyidaw, the military is forcing civil servants to vote to create the appearance of success for state-controlled media. He contrasts this with "liberated areas," where there is zero interest in the polls and the public's primary concern remains daily safety from military attacks.

- **A Growing Political Alternative:** Despite the challenges, he notes that revolutionary forces are maturing. While they worry about international reactions to a post-election junta, they are actively developing a "Common Political Agreement" to build a future Federal Union, showing that a coherent political alternative to the military is emerging.

## Geopolitical and Economic Exploitation

- **The Certificate of Legitimacy:** The panel concluded the election's only purpose is to provide a "civilian" veneer to bypass sanctions and allow foreign dictators (Russia, China) to push through massive resource projects like the Myitsone and Salween Dams.

- **The "Silent Rejection":** The panel emphasized that "silence is not consent." The empty streets are a deliberate, non-violent protest by the Myanmar people against the junta's attempt to trade their biometric data for a fake ballot.

## Final Conclusion: The Verdict of the Silent Streets

The "civilian" government of 2026 is already a dead letter. The real story of Myanmar is no longer found in the empty polling stations of Yangon, but in the resilient networks of journalists and revolutionaries who are already drafting the next chapter of the nation.



## PANEL DISCUSSION 4 - FAKE ELECTIONS AND THE FIGHT FOR THE REVOLUTION'S FUTURE - KEY POINTS

The following are the key points of the last of four panel discussions held at Thai PBS studio in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 28 December 2026 to mark the first phase of the Myanmar junta-run election.

### 4th Panel Discussion Key Points

#### Title: Fake Elections and The Fight for The Revolution's Future

Moderator/Facilitator: Thet Swe Win, Executive Director, Synergy-Social Harmony Organization

Panelist: Nang Moet Moet, General Secretary, Women's League of Burma (WLB)

Panelist: Sithu Maung, Member of Parliament, PABEDAN Constituency Rangoon, and Spokesperson of CRPH

Panelist: Hnin Hnin Hmwe, Joint General Secretary-Democratic Party for A New Society (DPNS)

#### The Junta's Motives: Legitimacy and "Last Exit"

- The Recognition Trap: The panelists agree that the junta's primary goal is to gain a veneer of political and legal legitimacy. Hnin Hnin Hmwe noted that because their state of emergency terms have expired, they are using the election as a "last exit" to manifest their continued existence, likely under pressure or advice from China.

- The 2008 Constitution Facade: Lway Mownt Noon emphasized that the military wants to send a "message" to the international community that the 2008 Constitution is still functional and that the country is "returning to normalcy," despite the reality of nationwide crisis and violence.

- Reserve Positions: Sithu Maung revealed that the "election" results are pre-scripted. "Reserve positions" are already set for top generals (e.g., Mya Tun Oo, Aung Lin Dwe, and Min Aung Hlaing), ensuring the

administrative structure remains a military dictatorship in civilian clothes.

Ma Hnin Hnin Hmwe, Associate General Secretary of the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS):

- **A Strategy for Survival and Spurious Legitimacy:** She argues that the junta is using the "fake election" as a desperate "last exit" to manufacture political and legal legitimacy after their state of emergency extensions expired. She notes that despite pressure from mentors like China to hold the vote, there is a massive gap between the military's expectations and the reality of total public rejection.

- **The "Same Old Trick" with No Public Mandate:** She views the current process as a repeat of historical military tactics (like those in 1962, 1990, and 2010) designed to keep the military in power through a rigged Proportional Representation system and a biased Election Commission. She asserts that because the candidates lack qualifications and the public remains entirely disinterested - evidenced by the "silent, dry" atmosphere of the polls - the junta can never achieve a genuine public mandate.

- **Unity through "Bottom-Up Federalism":** While acknowledging that revolutionary forces may have different internal views, she emphasizes that they are united by the common goal of removing the military.

- **Unified Revolutionary Goals:** She emphasizes that while revolutionary groups are diverse, they are firmly united on three non-negotiable pillars: the total removal of the military from politics, the complete abolition of the 2008 Constitution, and the establishment of a Federal Democratic Union.

- **The Transitional Constitution:** To replace the 2008 framework, she reveals that a Transitional Constitution is roughly 80% complete. This document is being designed through deliberation between various political and ethnic stakeholders to govern liberated areas and provide a legal roadmap for the transition period until a permanent federal constitution is ratified.

- **Shift to "Bottom-Up" Federalism:** She explains

that the movement has moved past the military's "scare tactics" about national disintegration. Instead, they are practicing "Bottom-up Federalism," where local and ethnic territories exercise self-determination and join the Union by choice. She argues that any internal "differences" between revolutionary partners are secondary to their shared vision and are a natural part of a healthy democratic negotiation—unlike the irreconcilable conflict they have with the military "enemy."

Ko Sithu Maung, acting as the spokesperson for the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), provides a strategic overview of the current conflict, defining the 2025 vote as a facade for an "Electoral Authoritarian Regime."

- **The End of the "Textbook" Map:** He argues that the traditional map of Myanmar no longer exists. By holding elections in "parts," the military is publicly admitting they lack control over the sovereign territory of the State. He defines the current situation as one of "declining sovereignty," where the military only controls limited, unstable pockets.

- **"Electoral Authoritarianism" vs. Democracy:** Drawing parallels to the Ne Win (BSPP) era, he explains that just because there is a parliament does not mean there is democracy. He asserts the junta is not holding the election to govern or provide public services, but to manufacture "legitimacy" for a single group and secure "reserve positions" for specific generals like Mya Tun Oo and Aung Lin Dwe.

- **The Living Mandate of 2020:** Ko Sithu Maung maintains that the 2020 election mandate remains valid as long as representatives continue to fight for "System Change" rather than personal power. He views this mandate as a legal tool used to abolish the 2008 Constitution and transition toward a new state-building phase.

- **From Self-Rule to "Share-Rule":** He highlights that "Parallel States" already exist, with revolutionary forces providing public services in liberated areas. He challenges his fellow revolutionaries to move beyond individual "Self-Rule" and embrace "Share-Rule" - building a central authority even stronger than the

current NUG to effectively implement a Federal Union.

- "They Shall Never Rule": He concludes that nothing will fundamentally change in Myanmar's administration after the election because the results are pre-determined. However, he reaffirms the revolution's core slogan, "They shall never be allowed to rule," emphasizing that the public only accepts administration based on the people's will.

- Establish a Transitional Constitution: Move away from the abolished 2008 framework toward a shared federal foundation.

- Define the "Transitional Period": He notes that a full transitional period can only be declared once the entire country is liberated, but the process of federal transition is already happening in controlled territories.

Nang Moet Moet, woman activist and General Secretary of the Women's League of Burma (WLB), breaks down the military's election strategy into these key points:

- A Facade of Legal Continuity: She argues the junta is holding these polls to trick the international community into believing the 2008 Constitution is still active and that the country is operating "normally" despite the ongoing civil war and crisis.

- The Trap of International Recognition: She warns that any foreign recognition or diplomatic engagement with this "fake election" acts as a "license" for the military to continue committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, which have intensified nationwide since 2021.

- Widespread Public Defiance: Despite military cruelty - including reported artillery and drone strikes near polling stations in places like Hlaing Tharyar - she highlights that the public is actively boycotting through silent strikes and mass street protests led by youth.

- Vision for a New System: She clarifies that the revolution is not about restoring 2020 results but about a total system change. This involves a "Bottom-Up" approach to building a Federal Democratic Union

starting from strong, self-governing ethnic states.

- Critique of NUG "Phase 1" Reforms: She expresses deep concern over the National Unity Government's recent restructuring, specifically the dissolving of the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs into a directorate. She labels this "scary" and a rollback of women's leadership that must be corrected in "Phase 2."

- The Power of Intersectionality: She highlights that the "Spring Revolution" has successfully united generations (Gen Z to elders) and diverse ethnicities. A major strength is the newfound public acknowledgment of the Rohingya genocide, signaling a shift toward mutual understanding and the rejection of all forms of oppression.

- Need for Unified Military Command: She warns that the proliferation of independent armed groups (PDFs) without a unified command system risks turning the revolution into a cycle of "political violence," citing recent incidents of villagers being arrested and "informants" being killed without due process.

- A Non-Negotiable 30% Quota: Highlighting that women are the "backbone" of the revolution (leading the CDM and IDP aid), she asserts that a Federal Democratic Union cannot exist without meaningful inclusion. She calls for a mandatory 30% minimum participation quota for women in all decision-making leadership roles.

Dr. Bio (Vice-Chairman of the NLD - Yangon and a 2020 election winner) provides a systematic dismantling of the junta's 2026 "fake election" through the lens of five specific failures of legitimacy.

Here are the key points from his analysis:

### The Five Pillars of Legitimacy Failure

1. Legal Legitimacy: A "war criminal gang" that seized power through treason (overturning a public government) has no legal standing to hold an election. Furthermore, the 2008 Constitution itself lacked public will from its inception.

2. Popular Consent: Public approval is non-existent. Dr. Bio contrasts the "silent and dry" streets of 2026 with the 2020 elections, where voters lined up all night despite COVID-19. He notes that among the millions of workers in Thailand, less than 10% participated in embassy voting.

3. Performance Legitimacy: The military cannot provide "utility." They are unable to lift the economy, provide security, guarantee social equality, or manage basic administration. Dr. Bio suggests Myanmar is already a "Failed State" under their rule.

4. International Recognition: The global community has rejected the junta. The UN still recognizes the NLD-led government (President U Win Myint and Ambassador U Kyaw Moe Tun), and ASEAN has excluded the junta from meetings for years. Support from a few dictatorial allies does not equal international status.

5. Stability of Authority: Central power is unstable even in Naypyidaw. Internal mistrust within the military ensures they "won't sleep well," making the new government susceptible to an "implosion" at any time.

U Tun Kyi, a leading member of the Yangon Spring Platform and a former political prisoner, provides a raw, high-stakes assessment of the revolution's current standing. His points focus on the dignity of the struggle, the suffering of the domestic public, and a blunt critique of revolutionary leadership.

Here are the key points from his analysis:

- "Dignity-less" Theatre: He describes the election as the "ugliest" and most "charity-less" event in Myanmar's history. It is a "first part" designed solely to confirm and formalize military rule.

- Treason from the Start: He reminds the audience that the 2021 coup was not about "voter fraud" but about a personal desire for power. The junta committed treason from day one and has followed it with mass killings and crimes against humanity.

- Expansion of the "Military Sphere": He warns that while 57 political parties are competing for "vacancies" in parliament, they are not gaining real political space. Instead, the "military sphere" is widening while the "political sphere" for the people is narrowing.

- The Math of the Trap: He breaks down the junta's systematic path to victory: They already have 25% of seats via the constitution; the new Union Election Commission (UEC) rules are designed to give their proxy (USDP) the other 26% needed for a total majority.

- Stop the Hesitation: In politics, he argues, you cannot be hesitant for fear of being "hated." He calls out the revolutionary forces for being too cautious in their self-criticism.

- Mandate Government Responsibility: He asserts that even though the public is doing its duty, the "revolutionary government" must actually be a revolutionary government. He emphasizes that their original purpose is "Winning the War."

- Unity based on Principles: He explicitly rejects "opportunists' unity." He argues for unity built on a firm political framework and a strategic alliance that is essential to win the war.

- Territory is Not Victory: Using a military expert's insight, he warns that "Liberating a territory is not a strategy." True freedom only comes from "National Liberation" - the total dismantling of the military system across the entire country.

### Final Synthesis: The Verdict of the 4th Panel

The fourth panel bridges the gap between fighting the war and building the state. The key takeaway is that the junta's "civilian-clothed dictatorship" is a desperate rebranding that the public has already rejected. However, the revolution faces its own challenge: to move from a collection of "Strong States" to a unified "Federal Union" that values Gender Equality, Transitional Justice, and Shared-Rule.

# NEITHER FREE NOR FAIR

## A PANEL UNPACKS MYANMAR'S STAGED ELECTION

**I** don't believe there will be any change after this sham election, because the people are already the same," says Brang Min, a Kachin State civil society organizer and student activist working with the Kachin State Civil Movement, about the junta-sponsored election, speaking on the Insight Myanmar Podcast.

He is joined in the conversation by two other guests: Thinzar Shunlei Yi and Aung Moe Zaw. Thinzar Shunlei Yi (who shared her background in a previous episode) is a leading organizer and deputy director of the Anti-Sham Election Campaign Committee representing the General Strike movement, while Aung Moe Zaw is a veteran democracy activist and senior figure associated with the Democratic Party for a New Society and the anti-sham election campaign. All three speak from different generational, geographic, and organizational positions, yet converge on a shared assessment: the military's planned 2025 elections are not a pathway back to democracy but a continuation of authoritarian rule under a new façade.

Brang Min situates his perspective in Kachin State, where he was born and raised and where ongoing armed conflict has shaped everyday life. He explains that his organization, formed after the 2021 coup, focuses on democracy, federalism, and environmental justice. For him, the election question cannot be separated from lived realities on the ground. In Kachin State, communities face airstrikes, artillery attacks, displacement, and internet blackouts. Against this backdrop, elections appear abstract and irrelevant to survival. He recalls voting in the 2020 election with hope that elected representatives would improve Kachin State's future, only to see that expectation collapse after the coup. That experience informs his conviction that the current election is "fake," designed not to reflect popular will but to extend military power and manufacture legitimacy.

Thinzar Shunlei Yi frames the discussion through the organization she directs, which emerged from the General Strike movement in response to the coup. She outlines how the military dismantled and rebuilt the Union Election Commission (UEC) immediately after seizing power in February 2021, arresting previous officials and installing a military-controlled body. From her perspective, this early move revealed long-term intent: the junta never treated elections as a genuine democratic mechanism, but as a tool to reset its authority after repression. She emphasizes that although the military promised elections earlier, delays only reflected resistance on the ground, not a change in strategy. What distinguishes the current moment, she argues, is that revolutionary forces and much of the population have rejected the 2008 constitution altogether, viewing it as both illegitimate in origin and nullified by the military's own violations of it.

Aung Moe Zaw analyzes the present crisis from within a much longer political history. Drawing on decades of activism dating back to the late 1980s, he recalls repeated cycles of coups, protests, arrests, and controlled elections. From his perspective, elections in Myanmar have mainly been about power. He argues that whenever civilian political forces have threatened military dominance—most notably the National League for Democracy—the military has intervened to exclude them, manipulate the system, or overturn results. He stresses that the current legal framework governing political parties functions more like a policing mechanism than an electoral administration. Parties must seek permission for nearly every activity, from opening offices to organizing members, making genuine political competition impossible.

Across the conversation, all three describe structural barriers deliberately erected to marginalize pro-democracy actors. Aung Moe Zaw explains that many established parties refuse to register under the

junta's election laws, not because they have ceased to exist politically, but because registration itself would imply recognition of military authority. The Union Election Commission, as he describes it, monitors and restricts parties so tightly that independent organizing becomes unworkable. In this environment, elections become a closed system where participation is limited to actors already aligned with the regime.

The guests further explore how ethnic politics intersect with the sham election process. Brang Min acknowledges that some ethnic minority parties may view the upcoming elections as an opportunity to gain visibility or limited influence, particularly in regions historically excluded from national politics. Yet he argues that this dynamic is shaped by coercion rather than consent. In Kachin State, he observes tensions inflamed by the military's long-standing divide-and-rule tactics, which exploit ethnic differences to weaken resistance. With active fighting across Kachin State, the elections are overshadowed by fear, displacement, and daily violence. And while some military-aligned parties may willingly participate, ordinary Kachin citizens who vote will likely do so only because refusing to invites retribution.

Thinzar Shunlei Yi expands on this perspective by pointing to widespread disenfranchisement in ethnic communities. She notes that even in the 2020 election, many—particularly in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan States—were excluded under the pretext of security. Rohingya communities faced systematic denial of voting rights long before the coup. In her view, these patterns reveal that electoral exclusion is not an exception but a core feature of Myanmar's military-designed political system. She explains that out of the 330 total townships in Myanmar, the junta's phased election plan only incorporated 193; she implies that the rest are in areas the junta does not control, or where they face great hostility. And of those 193, elections in 56 more have already been cancelled, while still others remain uncertain. The situation remains fluid as fighting intensifies.

Repression surrounding the election further undermines any claim to legitimacy. Thinzar Shunlei Yi

describes the use of "election protection" laws to arrest dissenters, including individuals sentenced to decades in prison simply for opposing the vote or engaging online. She connects these arrests to broader patterns of airstrikes, torture, and intimidation designed to suppress resistance in contested areas. For her, the election is inseparable from escalating violence, as the military attempts to secure territory and compliance ahead of polling.

When discussing likely outcomes, Aung Moe Zaw expresses little uncertainty: besides the small number of cherry-picked districts where elections will actually be held, he believes the military has ensured victory through opaque electoral laws, and slanted proportional representation mechanisms that remain poorly explained even to participating parties. He suggests that some candidates, particularly military figures and former junta-aligned politicians, appear to have effectively been guaranteed seats based on where they campaign and how electoral districts have been structured. The confusion itself, he argues, serves the regime by preventing meaningful scrutiny.

Brang Min returns to a simple conclusion: the military's objective is continuity of power. He notes that if the junta truly sought credible elections, it would release political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi and other detained leaders. Their continued detention signals that elections are not meant to open political space, but to close it under a veneer of civilian participation. For him, the lack of information access in Kachin State, combined with widespread disinterest born of survival concerns, further demonstrates that the process lacks societal grounding.

The discussion turns somber when addressing the fate of detained political leaders. Brang Min voices deep mistrust of military statements regarding Aung San Suu Kyi's health and safety, reflecting broader fears about conditions inside detention facilities. While acknowledging the differing views of her political legacy, he emphasizes her symbolic importance to many Burmese and insists that the military's refusal to present credible evidence that she is alive and well only deepens suspicion.

All three agree that the election will not alter the trajectory of resistance. Brang Min states unequivocally that even if positions or titles change, the people's rejection of military rule will not. Thinzar Shunlei Yi reinforces this by arguing that elections do not address the root causes of conflict: militarization, impunity, and structural exclusion. Without fundamental political reform, she believes resistance will continue regardless of announced results.

The international response to the upcoming elections also emerges as a major concern. Thinzar Shunlei Yi expresses anxiety that some actors in the international community may once again accept the military's electoral narrative, as they did during earlier "transition" periods. She criticizes continued reliance on ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, which she views as ineffective and manipulated by the junta. From her perspective, Myanmar's revolutionary movement has already moved beyond the 2008 Constitution, engaging in unprecedented debates about a federal democratic future, yet international actors seem hesitant to recognize this shift. Aung Moe Zaw adds a pragmatic, if bleak, assessment of regional politics. He argues that neighboring countries—particularly China, India, and ASEAN members—prioritize stability, trade routes, and strategic interests over democratic principles. While acknowledging limited engagement from countries like Malaysia or Indonesia, he does not expect unified regional support for the resistance. He concludes that Myanmar's democratic future ultimately depends on internal strength rather than external endorsement.

When asked about ongoing resistance activities, Brang Min describes coordinated efforts by civil society groups, diaspora communities, and ethnic resistance organizations to boycott and delegitimize the election. His organization focuses on urging diaspora voters to not engage with embassies and also to advocate against any formal recognition of the vote. Closer to home, in Kachin State, resistance authorities and community leaders warn civilians against participating in junta-run elections, arguing that the process is illegitimate and that voting sites may expose communities to military violence. Although ordinary civilians will generally be understood to be acting under

coercion if they do participate, anyone who actively organizes or collaborates with the election risk being treated as assisting a military operation rather than engaging in a civic act. He also highlights intensified military offensives aimed at retaking territory in order to stage more widespread elections, and as usual, civilians bearing the brunt of violence.

Looking ahead, Thinzar Shunlei Yi emphasizes accountability. She frames elections as a distraction from urgent humanitarian realities: airstrikes during holiday seasons, ongoing violence against the Rohingya, and the daily struggle for survival for displaced communities. Her central demand is for justice—through international legal mechanisms, universal jurisdiction cases, and meaningful accountability for war crimes. Without this, she argues, cycles of violence will persist.

In their closing reflections, each speaker appeals to international solidarity. Brang Min describes the current moment as a rare opportunity to rebuild Myanmar on more just foundations and urges global allies not to forget the country's people or legitimize sham processes. Thinzar Shunlei Yi characterizes Myanmar as "a nation in the making," insisting that elections under military control cannot deliver peace and calling for support for long-term, people-led solutions. Aung Moe Zaw focuses on the younger generation inside Myanmar, emphasizing their economic hardship, displacement, and determination, and asking for sustained support to ensure their struggle can continue. He says, "I think this is the moment people stand up against the bully and say, 'We are the boss here!'"

### LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/12/27/episode-457-neither-free-nor-fair>

ချင်းညီနောင် (Chin Brotherhood) ဖွဲ့စည်းတည်ထောင်ခြင်း (၂) နှစ်ပြည့်အခမ်းအနား



## GEN. GUN MAW URGES "UNWAVERING DETERMINATION" FOR FEDERAL UNION AT CHIN BROTHERHOOD'S 2ND ANNIVERSARY

During an online speech at the Chin Brotherhood Alliance's second anniversary celebration on 30 December, Gen. Gun Maw, vice chairman of the Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA) stated that the revolution is driven by a clear objective to establish a federal democratic union and must therefore be pursued with unwavering determination until its ultimate conclusion.

"I believe we already share the same goal. We are fighting injustice, and this marks our beginning. Our objective is to build a truly federal democratic union, and I am confident we clearly understand both where we start and where we aim to end," Gen. Gun Maw said.

Gen. Gun Maw emphasized the importance of revolutionaries remaining on the right course and maintaining unity, noting that matching the enemy's weapons and resources is difficult and that true strength lies in solidarity grounded in truth.

Gen. Gun Maw cautioned against divisive notions of hierarchy, saying such ideas are often deliberately imposed, and urged revolutionaries to focus instead on unity and shared responsibility, stressing that every individual has a role to play.

He added that revolutionary forces must work together in unity while staying on the right path and fully understanding one another, describing the current Spring Revolution as a critical opportunity to organize the struggle systematically and lay the foundations for a federal democratic union.

The Chin Brotherhood Alliance's second anniversary was also attended by U Aung Kyi Nyunt, chairman of the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH); U Toe Kyaw Hlaing of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC); and U Yee Mon, Defence Minister of the National Unity Government (NUG).



Photo: Supplied

## RESISTANCE FORCES NEAR FULL CONTROL OF KATHA AS OVER 50 MYANMAR JUNTA SOLDIERS CAPTURED ALIVE

**R**evolutionary forces are close to gaining full control of Katha in Sagaing Region as of the morning of 31 December, having seized a major Myanmar junta base at the town's entrance and allowing residents previously blocked by junta troops to finally evacuate.

A revolutionary member stated that they captured a military outpost at the entrance of Katha on 31 December morning and are now close to gaining full control of the town.

"We have seized one of the entrance gates, and almost all other areas have been captured. Details will be released by Military Region No. 1," he said today at 11:00 am.

Revolutionary forces began their assault on Katha on the night of 28 December. By the night of 29 December, soldiers and police reportedly fled from the Township General Administration Office and the Township Police Station.

On 30 December, junta forces responded with heavy aerial bombardments after revolutionary forces arrived in the town and attacked the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 309 camp.

"Detailed information regarding the attack on LIB 309 is not yet available. No aircraft have been spotted this morning," a revolutionary member said at 11:20 am on 31 December.

According to a report by Khit Thit Media, more than 50 junta soldiers were captured alive during the battles in Katha.

Katha is one of the townships included in the first phase of the elections held by the Myanmar junta. Revolutionary forces launched the operation to capture the town on 28 December; the very day the polls took place.



Photo: Supplied

## CHINLAND COUNCIL CHAIRMAN URGES RESISTANCES AGAINST MYANMAR JUNTA'S "FAKE" ELECTIONS IN NEW YEAR MESSAGE

In his New Year's address on 1 January, the Chinland Council chairman called on the public to reject and unite against what he described as "fake" election results being pushed by the Myanmar junta.

"Elections cannot take place without a political environment that safeguards people's rights, an independent media, and conditions that allow full public participation, therefore, we cannot accept the Military Commission's fake political process," said Chinland Council Chairman Pu Zing Cung.

He said action would be taken in line with the Anti-Election and Public Rights Procedures adopted by the Chinland Council on 6 November 2025, to counter the junta's election plans.

Pu Zing Cung also called on the public to unite in opposing the election and to refuse any cooperation with its results.

For the reconstruction of Chinland, he said, it is the national and historical duty of all Chin people to uphold the principle that unity ensures stability, work together with mutual respect, overcome current challenges and fears, and safeguard Chinland on all fronts.

He said efforts are underway, driven by political will, to realize Chin unity, describing 2026 as a pivotal year to build a new future system grounded in unity

and the strength of the people.

He went on to say that this moment marks a critical turning point in Chin history, stressing that protecting and rebuilding Chinland is the right choice rather than abandoning it, as Chinland represents the life, history, and future of the Chin people and must be defended as a historical duty.

He urged people to defend their territory on all fronts, emphasizing that defence is not limited to armed struggle but also includes upholding the truth, supporting one another, sharing knowledge, and maintaining unity.

The Chin people must draw lessons from the challenges, hardships, and trials of 2025 and move forward with confidence, unity, and determination toward their political goal of building a Chinland that guarantees national self-determination, he said.

In his New Year's message, he said that by harnessing the people's power to shape the future, 2026 will accelerate the revolution and become a year of unity, achievement, and peace.

The Chinland Council was established on 6 December 2023, by the Chin National Front, parliament representatives elected in 2020, and local administrative bodies.



Damage from previous airstrike on a school in the district. Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKE ON TABAYIN SCHOOL INJURIES 10 DISPLACED CIVILIANS

**M**yanmar's junta carried out airstrikes on a school in Mukangyi village, a community largely inhabited by internally displaced people, in the southeastern part of Tabayin Township in Sagaing Region, injuring at least 10 civilians.

According to local residents, junta jet fighters conducted two airstrikes at around 7:30 pm on 1 January.

"The bomb fell on the eastern side of the school. A couple living next to the school were seriously injured. Some people suffered severe ear injuries, while others had their mouths torn open," a Tabayin Township resident told Mizzima.

The bombing damaged the school building and several nearby houses. Two of the injured remain in

critical condition and are receiving medical treatment, local sources said.

"There are nearly 100 displaced people sheltering at the school. Those who were hit by bomb fragments are not in life-threatening condition, but the airstrikes have made daily life extremely difficult," a monk from Tabayin Township said.

Most of the displaced people sheltering in the village are from Mandalay Region, including Mogok, Singu, and Madaya townships. They are already facing severe shortages of food and adequate shelter.

This was the second airstrike targeting Mukangyi village in Tabayin Township. Six displaced people were killed in the first attack.



Marte Nilsen

## PAVED BY GOOD INTENTIONS

*INSIGHT MYANMAR*

**"T**here is just no way around it in Yangon. She is the one!" says Marte Nilsen, a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), about the centrality of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's political imagination. Nilsen has studied political conflicts in Myanmar and Thailand for decades, worked on the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, and collaborated closely with local partners inside and outside Myanmar. In this conversation, she traces Norway's evolving engagement with Myanmar across more than thirty years of humanitarian crises, foreign policy dilemmas, corporate entanglements, and now, the dilemmas posed by the junta's promised 2025 elections.

Nilsen begins by situating Norwegian involvement with Myanmar from the 1988 uprising and subsequent repression that captured international attention. Burmese exiles in Norway helped establish a solidarity movement, and when Aung San Suu Kyi received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, Burmese affairs received

unusual prominence in Norwegian media and public life. Civil society groups, Norwegian People's Aid, and Norwegian Church Aid engaged across the Thai border to support the democracy movement. From 2004, a handful of Norwegian organizations began tentative work inside Myanmar, and when a new government in Oslo took office in 2005, Norway's engagement deepened. But the devastating Cyclone Nargis in 2008, and subsequent shameful response by the junta to block aid, shifted the focus. Local civil society stepped into the breach, showing both their capability and necessity, and recognizing this change, expanded its support in that direction.

For Norway, she stresses, foreign policy in those days rested on two "legs": solidarity with the Burmese people, and "small country diplomacy," by which Norway tried to punch above its weight by aligning with its closest ally, the United States. In meetings during the early 2000s in Washington DC, he notes how Myanmar was often one of the two items on the agenda.

In other words, Norwegian officials saw engagement in Myanmar as a way to stay relevant on the global stage.

When President Thein Sein launched reforms in 2011 and Aung San Suu Kyi implicitly endorsed them by entering the 2012 by-elections, Norway began channeling its assistance back toward state governance. Aung San Suu Kyi proved that she was the country's "indisputable leader" by winning the elections in 2015 and 2020; all roads ran through her. However, criticism began to be heard from ethnic areas that she was too Bamar-centric, and then the Rohingya crisis caused a very serious dilemma for foreign nations wanting to support Myanmar's opening. Of course, the 2021 coup destroyed everything.

The question of whether the international community should support the military's proposed 2025 elections or not is addressed through a conversation about the philosophy of engaging with despotic regimes: whether they should be courted in hopes of gradual liberalization, or isolated as pariahs. Nilsen believes there is no blanket answer, and that Myanmar's recent history is a case in point. Before the elections, even though they were the sole power in the country, she believed that the military was moving tentatively towards opening the country based on the (however flawed) 2008 Constitution, and that the regime could be worked with in some way. Today, by contrast, it is the opposite. The military violently overthrew the democratically elected government and are taking the country in the opposite direction; they are viciously at war with their own people, and widely seen as untrustworthy and illegitimate.

Nilsen notes that Norway has not necessarily followed an ideologically-rooted policy towards Myanmar. In practice, shifts in Norwegian domestic politics, such as the 2013 election that brought a

Conservative government, redirected focus from its initial civil society and peace focus to more commercial interests, a fact that segues to the topic of Telenor, the Norwegian telecom giant. Telenor entered Myanmar during Thein Sein era. Nilsen explains that it initially undertook extensive conflict analysis and consultations with experts, solidarity groups, and activists. The company won trust and quickly became Myanmar's leading provider. Yet over time, Myanmar became "just another part of the portfolio," and institutional memory eroded. When the 2021 coup came, Telenor withdrew rather than endure the political and ethical quagmire. Nilsen is sharply critical: "That was extremely irresponsible!" She maintains that telecommunications had been integral to democratization "on the ground," empowering citizens to communicate and organize.

Asked about Norway's alignment with U.S. goals, Nilsen clarifies that their engagement in Myanmar was not dictated by Washington, though clearly "it was willed by the US." Norway sought areas where its involvement overlapped with American interests, allowing it to be relevant despite its small population. Financial power also played a role: Norway's sovereign wealth fund, one of the world's largest, made the country significant beyond its size. "We do use our financial muscles also to be reckoned with," she acknowledges, even as Norway relies on alliances and votes in international fora.

After the coup, Norwegian foreign policy shifted sharply. In fact, changes had already begun because of the Rohingya genocide in 2017, when Western governments faced the dilemma of sanctioning military leaders while still wanting to support Aung San Suu Kyi's government. By 2021, options were limited. Norway condemned the coup, halted all cooperation with state institutions, and moved to redirect aid through trusted NGOs and international partners. Norwegian People's Aid continued to work for a time inside Yangon before

relocating operations to Bangkok due to security risks. Funding for Myanmar has continued, both through cross-border assistance and through organizations like Save the Children and Norwegian Church Aid. Yet details are deliberately opaque, given the sensitivity for partners on the ground and for Thailand, which hosts many groups but worries about the optics of hosting anti-junta networks. Norway also channels money through the UN, though this raises debates about effectiveness in reaching the most vulnerable.

Diplomatic relations have also become fraught. Norway opened its embassy in Yangon in 2013, while Myanmar opened one in Oslo. The ambassador appointed during Thein Sein's period continued after the coup but she later stepped down. The junta nominated a replacement, but his credentials have not been accepted by the Norwegian king. The Myanmar embassy in Norway thus remains in limbo. Nilsen notes that before stepping down, the previous ambassador gave a striking interview early after the coup, openly voicing concern for protesting relatives and hinting at disapproval of the military's actions. Whether the junta's nominee will ever be recognized is uncertain, but Nilsen doubts the generals have the capacity to pressure European governments on such issues.

A related controversy emerged when a Myanmar general was reported visiting Oslo in July 2025. Nilsen clarifies that this was not a state visit but participation in the Oslo Forum, which is hosted through Norway's MFA, and the program is organized by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. The forum regularly invites contentious figures, from Taliban representatives to generals from conflict zones, for confidential track-two talks. While the leak of the general's attendance caused outrage, Nilsen stresses the importance of context: "It would be very surprising if you invite someone in a mediation forum and there's no one from the

opposition." She adds that the logic of that organization is to create neutral spaces for dialogue, not to choose sides.

Attention then turns to the junta's long-promised election, which Nilsen strongly believes can neither be free nor fair. Nilsen expects Norway and the EU will not legitimize the results. Yet she concedes that for some ASEAN states, China, or perhaps Japan, such an election could provide cover to normalize relations with the military. In reality, she notes that many neighbors have already normalized relations with the junta in practice, particularly Thailand, whose own military-dominated politics bear resemblance to Myanmar's, and where trade and cross-border dealings continue largely as before. The Thai constitution was influenced by Myanmar's 2008 charter, and the cycles of coups and elections echo across the border. Democratic activists, however, have drawn inspiration from each other's struggles.

Looking to the future, Nilsen says that Myanmar is unlikely to rise to the top of foreign policy agendas. At best, Norway will continue stable funding and seek to coordinate with European and U.S. partners, while relying on ASEAN where possible, though Nilsen hopes Oslo is also developing its own independent avenues. But Nilsen stresses that in the end, while foreign governments can provide support, solidarity, and funding, agency ultimately lies with the Burmese people.

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<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/12/17/episode-451-paved-by-good-intentions>



## WHY IS MYANMAR DESTINED TO BE POOR AND PERSECUTED (PART I): IT'S THE MILITARY, STUPID!

**NICHOLAS KONG**

**M**yanmar, formerly Burma, was once the most prosperous country in Southeast Asia. Today, it is one of the world's least developed nations. This tragic reversal is not the result of geography, culture, or fate. It is the consequence of a single, persistent force: military domination of the state.

Since 1962, Myanmar has been trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of coups, civil war, economic mismanagement, and repression. Every attempt at democratic governance has been sabotaged by the armed forces, whose institutional survival depends on corruption, coercion, and control of the economy. Myanmar's poverty and persecution are not accidental - they are engineered.

### A Promising Beginning

On January 4, 1948, Myanmar gained independence from Britain under the Constitution of 1947. The new nation was founded on the Panglong Agreement, a broad political consensus between the Bamar majority

and ethnic nationalities - including the Shan, Chin, and Kachin - who agreed to form a federal union. Power was divided among legislative, executive, and judicial branches at both the state and union levels.

Despite early internal challenges, Myanmar entered independence with immense promise. Rich natural resources, a strategic location, and a liberal economic policy made it the most prosperous country in Southeast Asia during the 1950s - even amid civil conflict.

### The Military's First Seizure of Power

That promise was destroyed on March 2, 1962, when General Ne Win overthrew the elected government and established the Union Revolutionary Council. The military immediately dismantled democratic institutions. The historic Student Union building - symbol of anti-colonial resistance - was blown up. Political parties were banned, leaders arrested, protests crushed, and the press silenced.

Ne Win nationalized vast sectors of the economy and placed military officers in charge through the Defense Services Institute (DSI). Free enterprise collapsed. Corruption flourished. The economy imploded.

In 1964, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was founded under the ideology of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." A new constitution was approved in a sham referendum in 1973 and promulgated in 1974, entrenching a one-party socialist state. Myanmar became a country ruled by one man's whims.

Worker strikes in 1974 and student protests over the regime's disgraceful burial of former UN Secretary-General U Thant were met with brutal repression. By the 1980s, economic mismanagement, isolation, and endless conflict had reduced Myanmar to one of the world's poorest nations.

## **The 1988 Uprising and Betrayed Hope**

Currency demonetizations in 1985 and 1987 triggered nationwide unrest, culminating in the August 8, 1988 uprising. Millions demanded democracy. Ne Win resigned - but the military did not retreat.

On September 18, 1988, the army staged another coup, forming the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Though it held multiparty elections in May 1990, the junta was stunned when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory.

Rather than transfer power, General Than Shwe sidelined SLORC chairman General Saw Maung, nullified the results, and rebranded the regime as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Military

rule continued - more brutal, more corrupt, and more isolated.

## **Militarized "Reform" and Entrenched Control**

Under SPDC rule, armed conflict expanded, corruption deepened, and economic hardship intensified. The 2007 Saffron Revolution - led by Buddhist monks - was violently crushed. In response to international pressure, Than Shwe introduced a new façade.

In May 2008, amid Cyclone Nargis - which killed over 130,000 people - the junta held another fraudulent constitutional referendum. The 2008 Constitution reserved 25 percent of parliamentary seats for the military and established the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC), effectively placing civilian authority under military veto.

Six of the eleven NDSC members were directly controlled by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, appointed by Than Shwe before his retirement.

## **The Illusion of Civilian Rule**

The 2010 election, boycotted by the NLD, brought the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to power. President Thein Sein introduced limited reforms - releasing political prisoners, easing censorship, and encouraging foreign investment - but the military retained control over security, foreign policy, and the economy.

In 2015, the NLD won a historic victory. Barred from the presidency by the constitution, Suu Kyi

became State Counsellor, a de facto Head of the civilian government. Yet real power remained with the commander-in-chief.

The military also controlled vast economic empires through Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), operating without civilian oversight and financing repression.

## **Manufactured Crises and the 2021 Coup**

During NLD rule, the military engineered international crises, most notably the brutal 2016–2017 crackdown on the Rohingya following attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. At least 6,700 civilians were killed, and over 700,000 fled to Bangladesh - isolating Myanmar diplomatically and weakening the civilian government.

After the NLD's overwhelming victory in the November 2020 election, the military struck again. On February 1, 2021, Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup, arresting elected leaders to prevent constitutional reform and loss of economic control.

## **Collapse into a Failed State**

The coup sparked mass resistance, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and armed rebellion nationwide. Sanctions, boycotts, and war followed. By 2025, more than 3.5 million people were displaced. GDP contracted sharply. A devastating earthquake compounded the crisis - while the junta elite enriched themselves.

From late 2023, the military suffered unprecedented battlefield defeats, losing control of nearly 80 percent

of the country. China intervened to prevent collapse, pressuring ethnic resistance groups into ceasefires and supplying advanced weaponry. Airstrikes intensified against civilians as the junta prepared another sham election.

## **The Latest Farce**

On December 28, 2025, the regime launched the first phase of a so-called election. It was neither free nor fair. The NLD and dozens of parties were dissolved. Political leaders remained imprisoned. Millions were excluded from voting. Even the military's proxy party leadership was purged and replaced with Min Aung Hlaing loyalists.

This was not a general election. It was a general's selection - designed to manufacture legitimacy, entrench military rule, and invite foreign backing from Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi.

## **The Verdict of the People**

Myanmar's people understand the truth. Decades of recycled military dictatorship have delivered only poverty, war, and persecution. The silent strike of December 10, 2025, spoke louder than any ballot.

The root cause is clear. Until the military is removed from politics and the economy, Myanmar will remain poor - and persecuted.

*Original article published in Eurasia Review on December 29, 2025.*

# WHY MYANMAR REMAINS POOR AND PERSECUTED (PART II): POWER, PROFITS, AND PROXIES

**NICHOLAS KONG**

Myanmar's crisis, often framed as a civil war or humanitarian disaster, is fundamentally a struggle over power and profit. For decades, the military has engineered a system that converts political control into personal economic gain. Understanding this architecture is essential to explaining why repression persists despite mass resistance - and why external actors have struggled to shape outcomes.

## Power Structure: Rule by Design

Myanmar's military rule is rooted in a delusional belief in divine entitlement, akin to royalty, claiming ultimate ownership of the nation and its resources. Over time, this absolutist mindset evolved into a parallel state embedded within formal institutions.

The 2008 Constitution entrenched military dominance by reserving 25% of parliamentary seats for serving officers, granting the armed forces veto power over constitutional amendments. The National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) concentrates authority in the commander-in-chief, who controls defense, policing, internal and border security beyond civilian oversight. This structure enables the military to override elected institutions under any declared "emergency," rendering civilian rule conditional and reversible.

The 2021 coup was therefore not a rupture, but a reassertion of this design. When electoral outcomes threatened military interests, the system activated its ultimate safeguard: direct seizure of power.

## The Military Economy: War as a Business Model

Political dominance is inseparable from the military's vast economic empire. Through conglomerates such as Myanma Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), the armed forces control lucrative sectors including oil and gas, mining, timber, cement, tobacco, banking, ports, media and telecommunications.

These enterprises operate outside civilian budgets and parliamentary scrutiny. Profits fund military operations, reward loyalty among senior generals, family members, and cronies, and insulate the institution from fiscal accountability. Sanctions have had limited effect, as revenues are opaque, offshore, or routed through regional intermediaries.

This structure creates perverse incentives. Prolonged conflict justifies military budgets; territorial control secures resource extraction; instability deters civilian oversight. Peace, by contrast, threatens to expose corruption and dismantle monopolies. For Myanmar's generals, war is not a failure of governance—it is governance.

## China: Stability Over Democracy

China is the most consequential external actor in Myanmar. Beijing's overriding priority is stability along its southwestern border and protection of strategic interests, including energy pipelines, trade corridors, and access to the Indian Ocean.

For years, China pursued "strategic ambiguity," engaging both the military and ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs). However, following the junta's catastrophic battlefield losses in 2023, Beijing shifted toward overt intervention. It pressured northern resistance groups into ceasefires, facilitated the return of seized towns, and increased military and technological support to Naypyidaw.

China does not seek to legitimize Myanmar's generals ideologically. Rather, it seeks a predictable partner capable of enforcing order and safeguarding ambitious projects under the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Elections - however flawed - serve this purpose by providing a veneer of continuity. From Beijing's perspective, a weak but compliant junta is preferable to a fragmented revolutionary victory.

## The United States: Principles Without Leverage

Washington has taken a principled stance against the coup, imposing sanctions and maintaining diplomatic isolation of the junta while offering limited humanitarian assistance. Yet U.S. influence remains constrained. Myanmar was not considered a core strategic priority compared to Taiwan or Ukraine, and sanctions lack impact without regional enforcement.

The United States faces a persistent dilemma: engagement risks legitimizing the junta, while disengagement cedes influence to China and Russia. Without coordinated action involving ASEAN, Japan, India, and the European Union, American policy has been morally clear but strategically thin.

This constraint has deepened under the “America First” orientation and the National Security Strategy of flexible realism, which prioritizes direct national interests and limits intervention in authoritarian governance abroad.

## Resistance Forces: Resilient but Fragmented

Myanmar’s resistance landscape is unprecedented in scale and diversity. The Civil Disobedience Movement crippled state administration, while nationwide boycotts of military-owned enterprises eroded the generals’ financial base. People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) emerged across the country, often aligned with ethnic revolutionary organizations (ERO’s).

Since late 2023, coordinated operations by EROs and PDFs under the National Unity Government (NUG) inflicted historic losses on the military, stripping it of territory and manpower. These victories shattered the myth of the junta’s invincibility. However, following the success of Operation 1027, resistance forces failed to sustain relentless pressure. The military, allowed time to regroup, rearmed with Chinese logistical and financial support, returning better prepared.

Fragmentation remains the resistance’s greatest vulnerability. Differences in ideology, ethnicity, command structures, and external patronage complicate unity. Some groups face pressure from neighboring states to accept ceasefires, while most

resistance groups lack sustainable funding or arms.

Efforts are now underway to form a Federal Revolutionary Council, aimed at unified political leadership, a cohesive diplomatic voice, and centralized military coordination. Success will depend on setting aside historical grievances in a do-or-die moment. Delay risks enabling military recovery - or locking the country into prolonged war.

## The Strategic Impasse

Myanmar is trapped in a strategic stalemate. The military cannot decisively defeat the resistance but seeks survival through repression, aerial terror, and manufactured elections. Liberation must come from within. Only a unified resistance can function as a de facto actor capable of negotiating with China and the United States on regional stability, global security issues such as cybercrime, narcotic and human trafficking, and strategic resources like rare earth elements.

External powers prioritize stability and competition over democratic transformation. The cost is borne by Myanmar’s people.

## The Way Forward

Myanmar’s crisis will not be resolved through cosmetic elections or elite bargains. A durable solution requires dismantling the military’s political and economic monopolies, integrating resistance forces as equal partners into a federal unity framework, and aligning international pressure with regional enforcement.

The people—the lifeline of the revolution—have already spoken, most clearly through nationwide silent strikes. The responsibility now lies with resistance leadership by the NUG and ERO’s to honor that sacrifice and deliver a future defined not by fear, but by freedom, dignity, and prosperity. Until then, poverty and persecution will remain not accidents of history—but instruments of rule.

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Protestors on the street in Tehran.  
Photo: AFP

## IRAN'S KHAMENEI SAYS PROTESTERS' ECONOMIC DEMANDS FAIR, WARNS 'RIOTERS'

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Saturday acknowledged the economic demands of protesters in Iran, where demonstrations have spread to more than two dozen cities, even as he warned there would be no quarter for "rioters".

The protests began ten days ago as an expression of discontent over high prices and economic stagnation, but have since expanded to include political demands.

Iranian media have reported localised violence and vandalism in the west of the country in recent days.

"During clashes in Malekshahi, Latif Karimi, a member of the IRGC, was killed while defending the country's security," Mehr news agency said.

Malekshahi is a county of about 20,000 residents with a large Kurdish population, where "rioters attempted to enter a police station", according to separate news agency Fars, which added that "two assailants were killed".

Mehr earlier reported a member of the Basij paramilitary force was also killed during another protest in western Iran after being "stabbed and shot" by "armed rioters".

The protests have affected, to varying degrees, at least 30 different cities, mostly medium-sized, according to an AFP tally based on official announcements and media reports.

At least 12 people have been killed since Wednesday in clashes, including members of the security forces, according to a toll based on official reports.

Speaking to worshippers gathered in Tehran for a Shiite holiday, Khamenei said the protesters' economic demands in the sanctions-battered country were "just".

"The shopkeepers have protested against this situation and that is completely fair," he added.

But Khamenei nonetheless warned that while "authorities must have dialogue with protesters, it is useless to have dialogue with rioters. Those must be put in their place."

The first deaths were reported on Thursday as demonstrators clashed with authorities.

The Tasnim news agency, citing a local official, also reported a man was killed on Friday in the holy city of Qom, south of Tehran, when a grenade he was trying to use exploded "in his hands".

A 17-year-old boy, connected to the Qom protests and wounded by gunfire, also died from his injuries, Tasnim added.

However, local media do not necessarily report on every incident, and state media have downplayed coverage of protests, while videos flooding social media are often impossible to verify.

### Political demands

The Fars news agency reported gatherings on Friday in several working-class neighbourhoods of Tehran, which is home to around 10 million people.

In Darehshahr, in the country's west, around 300 people blocked streets, threw Molotov cocktails and "brandished Kalashnikovs" on Friday, according to Fars.

The movement kicked off on Sunday when shopkeepers went on strike in Tehran to protest economic conditions, and spread after university students elsewhere in the country took up the cause.

In recent days, the protests have taken on a more overtly political bent.

In Karaj, on the outskirts of the capital, "a few people burned the Iranian flag, shouting 'Death to the dictator!' and 'This isn't the last battle, Pahlavi is coming back!'" Fars reported, adding that others in the crowd objected to the slogans.

The pro-Western Pahlavi dynasty ruled Iran from 1925 to 1979, when it was toppled by the Islamic revolution.

Since the protests began, authorities have adopted a conciliatory tone when it comes to economic demands, while warning that destabilisation and chaos will not be tolerated.

Though widespread, the demonstrations are smaller than the ones that broke out in 2022, triggered by the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for allegedly violating Iran's strict dress code for women.

Her death sparked a nationwide wave of anger that left several hundred people dead, including dozens of members of the security forces.

Iran was also gripped by nationwide protests that began in late 2019 over a rise in fuel prices, eventually leading to calls to topple the country's clerical rulers.

AFP



# THE BLOODIEST ELECTION

“I arrived in Australia in 1996 in February with my parents... we always felt that for their children to have a better future is not to live under the dictatorship,” begins Mon Zin, a Myanmar-born pro-democracy activist based in Sydney. In this discussion with the Insight Myanmar Podcast, she focuses on Myanmar’s planned 2025 election. Her perspective is informed both by personal experience and her present role coordinating international advocacy in support of the democracy movement in resistance to the military coup.

Mon Zin and her family emigrated when she was a teenager, after generations of suffering under military rule. Her father had participated in the 1988 uprising, and her grandfather’s businesses were confiscated during post-coup nationalization under Ne Win, leaving the family with direct experience of how military power reached into private life, property, and security. For her, dictatorship was not an abstract political condition; it was a force that had shaped her family’s prospects, disrupted livelihoods, and pushed them toward exile. So migration, she explains, was not merely economic but existential.

Mon Zin then turns to the 2021 coup. Before that, she says she had been observing the country’s politics from afar, but the coup moved her to become directly

engaged in anti-junta activism, describing her main role now as a founding member of the Global Myanmar Spring Revolution. GMSR is a network that coordinates diaspora communities across Australia, the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, and Canada for the purpose of amplifying the Burmese people’s clear rejection of the junta for an international audience. It directs its advocacy at governments, particularly around sanctions, diplomatic recognition, and the illegitimacy of the junta’s election. She characterizes the organization’s activities as a deliberate effort to keep the revolution’s core message from being diluted into vague calls for “stability” or “dialogue,” and which ignores the power imbalance created by a military that seized the state through violence.

Mon Zin stresses that the Burmese people made their demands quite clear after 2021: they do not want a return to a constrained, military-dominated constitutional order, and they do not want to return to a system in which military power remained permanently embedded in the state. She says that in the decade before the coup, many people had lived through a parallel arrangement in which a civilian government appeared to govern while the military retained veto power and decisive authority. While that period produced openings and a sense of forward motion, she portrays it as a compromise that people accepted for the sake of peace, development, and the possibility of democratic growth. After the coup, that tolerance collapsed, and the demand became total liberation from military rule rather than a negotiated balance with it.

## CATCH THE PODCAST

Read more and listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/12/24/episode-455-the-bloodiest-election>



Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.  
Photo: AFP

# MYANMAR JUNTA LEADER REITERATES THE MILITARY'S POLITICAL ROLE IN 78TH INDEPENDENCE DAY ANNIVERSARY MESSAGE

**M**yanmar's military leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, used his Independence Day message to reassert the junta's political narrative. Portraying the armed forces as the sole guarantor of national unity and stability, he sharply criticised ethnic armed organisations and unnamed foreign actors.

The translated speech accompanied official ceremonies marking the 78th anniversary of independence, and was published by the junta-run Global New Light of Myanmar on 4 January.

Through his anniversary message, Min Aung Hlaing framed the post-coup crisis as the result of what he termed "ethnic extremism," "ideological rigidity," and the manipulation of armed struggle for "personal gain."

He argued these forces were responsible for prolonging the conflict and impeding national development. In contrast, he cast the military's role as a stabilising force safeguarding Myanmar's independence. He noted the independence could still be lost if "misguided ideas, beliefs, or actions prevail" during the current period of internal division.

Turning to the current elections, the general reiterated long-standing junta claims that the February 2021 coup was a constitutional response to alleged "vote irregularities" in the 2020 election. He highlighted the junta's ongoing phased election process, which

began in late December 2025, as evidence of a return to multiparty democracy.

The elections have been widely dismissed by opposition groups, human rights organisations, governments, and international bodies as a sham.

Peace and national unity featured prominently in the message. Min Aung Hlaing called for all ethnic groups to support the military's three "national causes" – non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of sovereignty. He also urged all stakeholders, including armed groups, to recommit to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) despite its collapse following the 2021 coup.

The address also touched on economic plans. The junta leader highlighted support for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), import substitution, and the One Region–One Product initiative, alongside expanded education and healthcare programmes.

These development pledges were framed, however, as contingent on nationwide stability, something the junta argues can only be achieved through alignment with its political roadmap.

Overall, the message aimed to reinforce the junta's core themes of unity under military leadership, rejection of dissent, and insistence that its controlled electoral process represents a genuine democratic transition.



Voters check the voting lists at a polling station.  
Photo: AFP

# DOUBTS VOICED ON SOCIAL MEDIA ABOUT OFFICIAL VOTER TURNOUT FIGURES

One of the most discussed election-related topics on Myanmar social media last week was public doubt over the official voter turnout figures linked to the military-planned election. Across Facebook, Telegram and X, users are questioning whether the turnout numbers being circulated by pro-military sources reflect the reality on the ground.

Public sentiment is largely sceptical. Many users say the turnout figures appear exaggerated and do not match what they personally observed in their neighbourhoods.

Common user-style comments include:

"They will announce high turnout, but polling stations were empty."

"No one in my ward went to vote."

"Official numbers are just for show."

"Only ward leaders and public servants were there."

The factual background to this discussion is the absence of independently verifiable data on voter turnout, combined with strict security conditions and widespread public distrust of the election process. While official statements and supportive media may present high participation figures, social media has become the main space where citizens openly challenge those claims.

# mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



## DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Our relaunched magazine Mizzima Weekly provides readers with a more focused read on what matters in Myanmar and the wider region, with an emphasis on analysis, insight and providing key talking points.