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Trends in Southeast Asia

MAKING SENSE OF THE ELECTION
RESULTS IN MYANMAR'S RAKHINE
AND SHAN STATES

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Making Sense of the Election Results in Myanmar's Rakhine and Shan States

By Su-Ann Oh

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This paper examines why ethnic parties did well in Rakhine and Shan States despite the fact that the National League for Democracy (NLD) was given a manifest mandate by the Myanmar electorate to represent its interests nationwide.
- In Rakhine State, the electorate chose the Arakan National Party (ANP) over the other parties because of the fear that their cultural identity and right to govern themselves are threatened by Bamar political and cultural hegemony and Muslim/South Asian encroachment from the western border. Moreover, they believe that the ANP are more likely than the NLD or the USDP to look out for their economic and social interests. Most importantly, the inter-religious violence in 2012 afforded Rakhine nationalist politicians the opportunity to present themselves as the legitimate representatives of the Buddhist Rakhine population.
- The diversity of political representation (ethnic and otherwise) in the Shan State election results needs to be understood in the light of subnational administrative systems and competing regulatory authorities (many of which are not sanctioned by law or by the Constitution). The former includes Shan State and self-administered areas while the latter is composed of non-state armed groups and militias.
- In Shan State, excluding the self-administered areas, the vote was split between the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) and the NLD. This was the only state/region where the USDP won the most number of seats.

- Given the lack of available data, the best explanation that can be offered at present is that the combination of non-state armed ethnic group fighting, recent ceasefire agreements, and economic development of places such as the self-administered areas and urban centres influenced Shan State voters to choose the USDP.
- The results of the election for ethnic affairs ministers approximate those of the nationwide results. Like the national and regional election results, the Rakhine as well as ethnic groups in Shan State voted for candidates from ethnic parties, indicating that the agenda of these ethnic parties is particularly important for those populations.
- The nature of electoral politics in Myanmar is shaped by ethnic conflict, armed and otherwise. This has a bearing on the peace process, particularly since the plan for peace involves armed groups joining the political process as political parties and winning seats in elections to govern the administrative structure set out by the 2008 Constitution.
- However, before this can happen, there needs to be: (1) an expansion of the responsibilities and powers of state and region governments vis-à-vis the central government; (2) an agreement on how governance structures set up by the non-state armed groups will relate to structures sanctioned by the Constitution; and (3) strategic and political steps taken by the NLD to reconcile with the army, the various non-stated armed groups, militias and ethnic communities.

Making Sense of the Election Results in Myanmar's Rakhine and Shan States

By Su-Ann Oh¹

INTRODUCTION

The general election held on 8 November 2015 saw the National League for Democracy (NLD), headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, sweeping the board and taking 77 per cent of all available seats. Trailing behind in second place, the military-created Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won 10.2 per cent of the seats available. In third and fourth place were two ethnic parties, the Arakan National Party (ANP) with 3.9 per cent of the total seats available and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) with 3.5 per cent (see Table 1). Out of the twenty-three parties that won seats, seventeen were ethnic political parties (parties in bold in Table 1) but they only gleaned 12 per cent of the available seats.

Given that Myanmar's citizens overwhelmingly chose the NLD rather than ethnic parties to represent their interests in both the central and regional parliaments, this paper looks specifically at why the ethnic parties did well in Rakhine and Shan States.² A closer study of the results shows that:

¹ Su-Ann Oh is Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. She would like to thank Trends in Southeast Asia editors and reviewers for their help in editing and improving the draft of this paper.

² See Robert Taylor, "Fog of Ethnicity Weighs on Myanmar's Future", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 4 December 2015 <<http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Fog-of-ethnicity-weighs-on-Myanmar-s-future?page=1>> (accessed

Table 1: Composition of National and State/Division Parliaments

Party	Total	Parliament		State/Division Parliament	
		Lower House	Upper House	State/Division	Ethnic Affairs Minister
National League for Democracy (NLD)	886	255	135	475	21
Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)	118	30	11	74	2
Arakan National Party (ANP)	45	12	10	22	1
<i>Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)</i>	40	12	3	25	
<i>Ta'ang (Palaung) National Party</i>	11	3	2	7	
<i>Pa-O National Organization (PNO)</i>	10	3	1	6	
Zomi Congress for Democracy	6	2	2	2	
<i>Lisu National Development Party (LNDP)</i>	5	2		2	1
Kachin State Democracy Party	4	1		3	
Mon National Party	3		1	2	
<i>Wa Democratic Party</i>	3	1		2	
<i>Kokang Democracy and Unity Party</i>	2	1		1	
<i>Lahu National Development Party</i>	2			1	1
Tai-Leng Nationalities Development Party	2			1	1
All Mon Region Democracy Party	1			1	
<i>Wa National Unity Party</i>	1			1	
<i>Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP)</i>	1			1	
Kayin People's Party (KPP)	1			1	
Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UDPKS)	1			1	
Democratic Party (Myanmar)	1			1	
<i>Akha National Development Party</i>	1				1
National Unity Party	1		1		
Independent	5	1	2	1	1
Total	1150	323	168	630	29

Notes: Text in bold — ethnic parties.

Text in bold italics — ethnic parties that are based in Shan State or have interests in Shan State.

Source: *The Irrawaddy*, "Burma Results 2015", n.d. <<http://www.irrawaddy.com/election/results>> (accessed 10 December 2015).

- Both the ANP and the SNLD were able to win substantially more seats in the national assembly than other ethnic parties (see Table 1).
- The Rakhine and Shan State assemblies were the only ones where the NLD did not dominate (see Tables 2 and 3).
- Only one ethnic party — the ANP — was voted in from Rakhine State and it won the most number of seats in the State parliament (see Table 2) whereas many different parties (ethnic and otherwise) secured seats in the Shan State regional election, with the USDP, the SNLD and the NLD winning the most seats (see Table 3).
- Shan State is the only region where the USDP won the most number of seats (see Table 3).
- The results of the election for ethnic affairs ministers mirror those of the nationwide results (see Table 6).

These results are considered in the light of ethnic politics, administrative systems and governance actors in these two states, taking into account recent inter-religious violence in Rakhine State, the nationwide ceasefire accord and the government's peace negotiations with non-state armed groups.

THE ARAKAN NATIONAL PARTY (ANP) AND RAKHINE STATE

The Arakan National Party (ANP) contested sixty-three seats in Rakhine State, Chin State, the Ayeyarwady Region, and Yangon. It won twenty-two of the twenty-nine national level seats in Rakhine State — ten in the Upper House and twelve in the Lower House (see Table 1). As it only holds 3.9 per cent of the available seats, this gives it very little influence at the national level.

The situation is reversed at the regional level. The ANP won the largest number of seats in the Rakhine State assembly (as shown in Table 2) and even managed to increase the number of seats it had previously held by four. This, however, did not translate into the majority because of the 25 per cent bloc allocated to the military. Nevertheless, the results show that an overwhelming number of Rakhine State residents

Table 2: Composition of the Rakhine State Assembly after the 2015 General Elections

Party	Seats won	Percentage of available seats	Percentage of total seats
Arakan National Party (ANP)	22	62.86	46.81
National League for Democracy (NLD)	9	25.71	19.15
Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)	3	8.57	6.38
Independent	1	2.86	2.13
Military Appointees	12	NA	25.53
<i>Total</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

Source: *Myanmar Times*, “State/Region Hluttaw Results: Graphics”, 20 December 2015 <<http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17642-state-and-region-hluttaw-results-graphics.html>> (accessed 21 December 2015), excludes numbers for ethnic affairs ministers.

believe in the ANP over all the other political parties (ethnic³ or otherwise) as being able to represent their interests.

This may be attributed to strategic and ethnic-related reasons. First, the ANP is the product of a successful merger in 2013 between the Rakhine

on 10 December 2015); Adam Burke, “Why didn’t Ethnic Parties do better in Myanmar’s Elections?”, *New Mandala Inquirer*, November 2015 <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/20151126-NMInquirer-November2015-MyanmarElections.pdf>> (accessed on 10 December 2015).

³ Some of the other ethnic parties that contested were: Rakhine State National United Party (based in Yangon); the Arakan Patriotic Party (based in Sittwe, Rakhine State); Ka Man National Development Party (based in Yangon); Mro Nationality Party (based in Buthidaung, Rakhine State); Mro National Democracy Party (based in Mrauk U, Rakhine State, with some presence in southern Chin State); Mro National Development Party (based in Kyauktaw, Rakhine State); Daingnet National Development Party (based in Buthidaung, Rakhine State). See *Myanmar Times*, “Election Parties”, 2 September 2015 <<http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/election-2015/parties.html>> (accessed 10 December 2015).

Nationalities Development Party and the Arakan League for Democracy. The former had won eighteen seats in the Rakhine State parliament in the 2010 elections; the latter had boycotted the 2010 elections but had secured eleven seats in the 1990 general elections and received the majority of the vote in Rakhine State. This time around, joining forces enabled them to procure the ethnic Rakhine vote, particularly as there were no other significant Rakhine parties in the contest.

Second, ANP politicians supported national campaigns to revoke the voting rights of holders of Temporary Registration Certificates (“White Cards”), which affected an estimated 800,000 residents countrywide. A large proportion of White Card holders are Muslim (the other groups include the Kokang, Wa, and other ethnic groups including Chinese and Indian residents in other states). They were unlikely to vote for a party that promotes a Rakhine (Buddhist) agenda claiming that many Muslim residents are illegal immigrants. In addition, eighty-nine prospective election candidates — including existing Ministers of Parliament, many of them Muslim — who were “White Card” holders were prevented from competing in the elections.⁴

There are three main reasons why so many Rakhine (Buddhist) chose a political party that represents Rakhine ethnic interests over the USDP or the NLD. First, they fear that their cultural identity and right to govern themselves are threatened by Bamar political and cultural hegemony. The Rakhine perceive themselves as historically, culturally and religiously distinct from that of the Bamar. Although they are also Buddhist, they believe themselves to be inheritors of territory that was blessed by the Buddha and who have a specific religious duty.⁵ The Arakan kingdom⁶ was conquered by the Burmese in the eighteenth

⁴ Transnational Institute, “Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar”, *Myanmar Policy Briefing*, 26 September 2015, p. 13 <https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb16_web_16092015.pdf> (accessed 10 December 2015).

⁵ See Alexandra de Mersan, “The ‘Land of the Great Image’ and the Test of Time. The Making of a Buddha Image in Arakan (Burma/Myanmar)”, in *The Spirit of Things: Materiality in the Age of Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*, edited by Julius Bautista (Cornell: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), pp. 95–110.

⁶ The Arakan kingdom was the precursor to the Rakhine State. It was recognized as a state by the Burmese military government in 1974.

century and then colonized by the British in the nineteenth century, two periods which Jacques Leider describes as “Humiliation under the Burmese — Dereliction under the British”.⁷

Burmese rule did not only mark the end of their political independence; the exile of their king, the elimination of their local elite, and the interference in the monastic order aimed at the eradication of Arakan’s cultural and religious autonomy. A core belief of the Arakanese Buddhists was further shattered when the Mahamuni was deported like a vulgar trophy. He, Lord Buddha’s “younger brother,” was supposed to protect the country and its kings until the end of the cosmic cycle. As physical resistance to the new rulers was doomed to fail, the Arakanese had no choice but to accommodate to the regime or leave as so many did after a few years. Forty years later, political degradation entered a new phase with the arrival of the East India Company and the massive influx of Bengali labor migrants.⁸

Burmanization continued after independence in Rakhine State and other minority ethnic domains,⁹ reinforcing “Burman-ness as a privileged identity”.¹⁰

⁷ Jacques P. Leider, “Forging Buddhist Credentials as a Tool of Legitimacy and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Arakan’s Subjection in Nineteenth-Century Burma”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51 (2008), p. 422.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

⁹ See Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999); David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, Politics in Asia series (London: Routledge, 1994). Other ethnic groups were also subjected to Burmanization, see James L. Lewis, “The Burmanization of the Karen People: A Study in Racial Adaptability”, Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1924; Jean A. Berlie, *The Burmanization of Myanmar’s Muslims* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Matthew J. Walton, “The “Wages of Burman-ness: Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013), p. 3.

Decades of hegemonic rule, repression and underdevelopment under the Bamar military junta have left many Rakhine State residents living in impoverished circumstances, more so than their compatriots. At 10.4 per cent, the labour force participation rate in Rakhine is the lowest in the whole country (67 per cent), and the unemployment rate of 10.4 per cent is the highest in the country; the countrywide rate is only 4 per cent.¹¹ This stark difference in employment rates is compounded by household living conditions. According to the 2014 census, only 31.8 per cent of households in the state have improved sanitation facilities, as compared to 74.3 per cent for the country as a whole. There is a glaring difference between the two states ranked lowest and second lowest (Shan State). The latter reported 63.8 per cent of households with improved sanitation, double that of Rakhine State.¹² Rakhine State also has the lowest proportion of houses with improved drinking water (37.7 per cent), as compared to a nationwide figure of 69.5 per cent.¹³ It is important to note that the data in the census reflects the views of about 70 per cent of the residents of Rakhine State only, as approximately 30 per cent of the population, mostly Muslims in the north, were not included in the census.¹⁴

¹¹ I would like to thank Alexandra de Mersan for having alerted me to this data. Ministry of Immigration and Population, *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, The Union Report*, Census Report Volume 2 (Naypyitaw: Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, Office no. 48, 2015), p. 29 <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B067GBtstE5TeUIIVjRjSjVzWlk/view>> (accessed 10 December 2015).

¹² Ministry of Immigration and Population, *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, The Union Report*, p. 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ They were excluded from the census by the government because they refused to be categorized ethnically as Bengali. For details, see “The 2014 Population and Housing Census of Myanmar”, *Findings of the Census Observation Mission: An Overview Myanmar 2014*, 2014. <http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/drive/FindingsoftheCensusObservation_ENG.pdf> (accessed 10 December 2015).

In addition, the residents of Rakhine State believe that their economic opportunities have been usurped by “outsiders”: the military and Bamar “crony” companies dominate the large-scale natural resource extraction industry, while Muslims are perceived to be controlling small businesses.¹⁵ The rancour and bitterness that Rakhine State residents feel about being left out of economic opportunities are more easily directed towards the “other”, in this case Muslims, particularly business owners, rather than the Chinese whose investments are larger and connected to the Burmese governing elite.¹⁶ They believe that the fairly low population density and existence of natural resources in their state will attract large numbers of South Asians eager to exploit the state’s assets at their expense.¹⁷

This underlies their deep-rooted fear of becoming a minority in their own state. Despite the fact that they make up the majority of the state (at about 60 per cent of the 3.2 million population), the Rakhine are deeply concerned about Muslim/South Asian encroachment from the western border and the perceived prolific birth rate of the Muslims. This worry is so endemic that many Rakhine feel resentment towards Aung San Suu Kyi for having called for unity and peace in Rakhine State and in Myanmar when asked about the Rohingya.¹⁸ These neutral comments, the first that she offered on this issue (in October 2015) while incendiary

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, Asia Report No. 261, 2014, p. 15 <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/261-myanmar-the-politics-of-rakhine-state.pdf>> (accessed 10 December 2015).

¹⁶ Alexandra de Mersan, “The 2010 Election and the Making of a Parliamentary Representative”, in *Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar*, edited by Renaud Egretteau and Francois Robinne (Singapore: NUS Press and IRASEC, 2015), p. 48.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, *Myanmar*, p. 18.

¹⁸ I would like to thank Celine Coderey for sharing her insights. See also *Straits Times*, “Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi speaks on Rohingya, but vaguely”, undated, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/myanmars-aung-san-suuky-i-speaks-on-rohingya-but-vaguely-the-statesman>> (accessed 28 December 2015).

in the eyes of the Rakhine, were considered vague and inadequate by the international community. The ANP, on the contrary, have been clear about their position: stateless residents (such as the Rohingya) are foreign interlopers who should be segregated from the Rakhine and deported, a view that mirrors the opinions of many Rakhine.

The dominance of the ANP in the polls is most adequately explained by the actions of politicians during the episodes of inter-religious violence in 2012. The conflict served as a platform for Rakhine nationalist politicians to “present themselves and be acknowledged as the legitimate representatives of the local population... In other words, the conflict helped them to fulfil their duties and mandate, and act as effective leaders of Arakanese political life.”¹⁹ Party members organized support, managed the needs of the local populace affected by the conflict, collected and passed on information and so on for the benefit of the Rakhine. In doing so, their political participation transformed from an “ethno-regional” one encompassing all residents in Rakhine State to a religious (Buddhist) ethno-nationalist one that, as illustrated by the election results, “takes precedence over the NLD’s democratic values”.²⁰ This observation is reinforced by the election results in the four southernmost townships — Manaung, Toungup, Thandwe, Gwa — where religious conflict did not take place. The NLD won all the seats in these constituencies.

Like many other regions in Myanmar, Rakhine State has a myriad of ethnic groups that practise different religions.²¹ However, unlike these other regions, particularly Shan State, multiple regulatory authorities in the form of non-state armed ethnic groups and militias do not control Rakhine State. Here, the balance of power hinges upon three main groups — the Bamar, the Rakhine and the *kala* — configured in an obtuse

¹⁹ de Mersan, “The 2010 Election”, p. 64.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 65-66.

²¹ Muslim communities, including the Rohingya and the Kaman, make up about 30 per cent of the population, and the remaining 10 per cent consists of Chin (who are Buddhist, Christian or animist) and a number of other small minorities, such as the Mro, Khami, Dainet, Bengali Hindu and Marmagri.