



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION BY ETHNIC PARTIES IN MYANMAR



Myanmar has undergone a democratic opening that has been followed by negotiations to end the country's many and protracted armed conflicts. The substance of democracy is, however, challenged by the military's continued power, and the peace process has been inconclusive. In this situation, the forthcoming election in late 2020 is a critical juncture for the future of peace and democracy. One key question is about the role of ethnic parties in political representation of ethnic nationalities. Will ethnic parties be able to challenge the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) and provide more substantive representation for ethnic nationalities, and thereby also contribute towards substantive democracy and peace?

Kristian Stokke, September 2020

INTRODUCTION

An ethnic party can be defined as “a party that is the champion of the particular interests of one ethnic category or set of categories” (Chandra, 2011, p. 155). Ethnic parties see themselves as representing predefined ethnic groups and argue that substantive representation requires ethnic resemblance between the representatives and those being represented. A more analytical approach recognizes that social groups are constructed and changeable and that ethnic and non-ethnic parties make strategic representative claims to mobilize voters and gain political influence.

Political discourse in Myanmar is imbued with fixed notions of ethnic identities. Ethnic categories have been institutionalized and politicized through contentious politics of statebuilding, counterposing demands for ethnic self-determination, representation and equality against the centralized and militarized unitary state. Myanmar officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups, as subdivisions of eight ‘major national ethnic races’ (Bamar, Shan, Mon, Kayin, Kayah, Kachin, Rakhine and Chin). These ethnic categories are the basis for the territorial organization of the state, consisting of seven regions dominated by the Bamar majority, seven ethnic states and six self-administered areas for minority groups within ethnic states.

Myanmar's political opening, after five decades of military rule, introduced an institutional framework for elections, parliamentary politics and civilian government at both Union and State/Region levels. The substance of democracy is, however, constrained by constitutional

provisions that grant the military authority over national security and strong influence in parliament, government and public administration (Egreteau, 2017; Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, 2020). General elections have been held in 2010 and 2015, in addition to an earlier election in 1990 that was annulled by the military regime. These electoral openings have produced a multitude of political parties. Approximately 100 parties are expected to contest the 2020 election, but very few of them have won any parliamentary seats in the past. Only four parties won more than five seats in the Union Parliament in 2015: National League for Democracy (NLD), Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP); Arakan National Party (ANP) and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)

Myanmar's multitude of parties revolves around three party clusters: non-ethnic parties that originate from and maintain close links to the military (primarily USDP); non-ethnic parties that stem from the pro-democracy movement (primarily NLD); and, ethnic parties representing non-Bamar nationalities. There is also a divide between old movement parties founded in 1988-90 and new electoralist parties that were formed before the 2010 election, when the old parties were prevented from re-registering or refused to participate in elections under the military-designed 2008 Constitution.

This situation raises critical questions about political representation through ethnic parties: How successful have ethnic parties been in achieving formal political representation and what explains their electoral performance? What are the strategies of ethnic parties to strengthen their electoral competitiveness and how will they perform in the 2020 election? The next section summarizes key research findings on these questions (Stokke, 2020; Stokke, Khine Win, & Soe Myint Aung, 2015).

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The elections in 1990, 2010 and 2015 provide a basis for assessing political representation by ethnic parties. The 1990 election was free but the results were annulled by the military regime, while the 2010 election was neither free nor fair. In contrast, the 2015 election was found to be free but not fully fair, due to the disenfranchisement of the Rohingya population in Rakhine State, cancelled elections in parts of Shan State, and a first-past-the-post electoral system that distorts the proportionality of votes. Figure 1 shows the share of seats won by military parties, democracy parties and ethnic parties in these elections at the union level. Ethnic parties have won 11-15 percent of the seats, which is well below the estimated 1/3 share of non-Bamar ethnic groups in the population. They have thus not managed to provide fair descriptive representation of ethnic constituencies, although this is nuanced by the presence of ethnic parliamentarians from military and democracy parties.

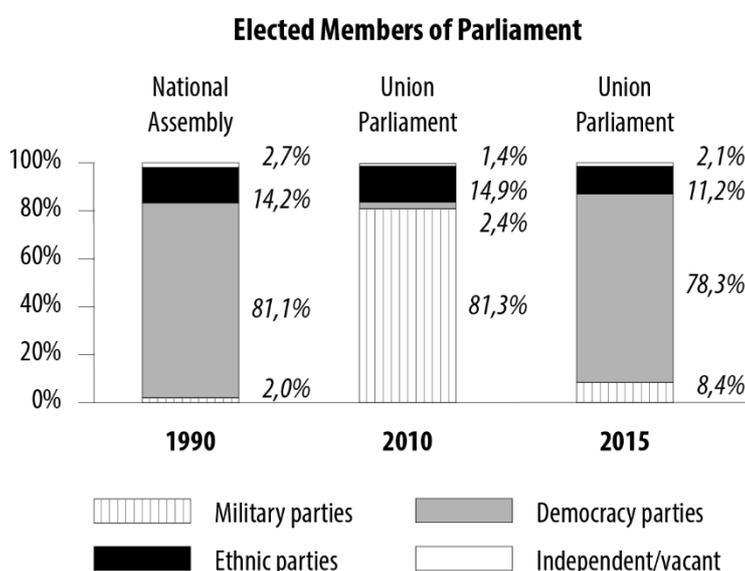


Figure 1. Percentage of elected Members of Union Parliament held by different party types

While military parties won most of the seats in the military-controlled and fraudulent 2010 election, they were strongly defeated by NLD in the 2015 election, mirroring the results of the 1990 election. Since 2015, representation of military interests has largely relied on the 25 percent of parliamentary seats that is reserved for military appointees. Likewise, most of the new democracy and ethnic parties that were created before the 2010 election, were defeated by older democracy-movement parties in the 2015 election. In addition to the major parties (NLD, USDP, ANP and SNLD), a smaller number of parliamentary seats are held by ethnic parties that typically represent small but geographically concentrated ethnic groups, some of which also have special administrative zones. Election results at the state/region level show that ethnic parties won few seats in most ethnic states, and fewer seats in 2015 than in 2010, with the exception of ANP in Rakhine State and SNLD in Shan State. This means that the representation of ethnic constituencies by ethnic parties is uneven and generally weak. Most ethnic parties have been unable to secure formal representation through elections, and have thus been poorly positioned to provide substantive representation of ethnic interests in parliamentary politics.

What are the explanations for this weak electoral performance by ethnic parties and what are their responses and strategies for the up-coming election in 2020. While various answers have been offered, they converge around two main challenges: (1) fragmentation of ethnic parties and electoral vote-splitting, and (2) weak party institutionalization and ineffective representative claims. These explanations are complementary rather than mutually exclusive, but have produced different party-building strategies.

On the one hand, it is a common perception that vote-splitting has played a decisive role in the context of a first-past-the-post electoral system and single member electoral districts. The large number of ethnic parties – reflecting both the plurality of ethnic groups and the personal ambitions of political leaders – is seen as the main cause of electoral defeat in 2015. It is also observed that ethnic parties were overshadowed by the polarized contest between USDP and NLD. The election became a referendum between the legacy of military rule in the form of USDP's call for 'unity and development', and the legacy of the pro-democracy movement expressed as NLD's call for 'change'. In this polarized contest between two large non-ethnic parties, the multitude of small ethnic parties was unable to win what they see as a proportional number of seats in 2015 and face the same risk in 2020.

On the other hand, there is an alternative interpretation that highlights the political weaknesses of ethnic parties and the uncertainty about their ability to provide substantive representation. Many ethnic parties are poorly institutionalised, lack clear political programs, and have limited capacity to run effective campaigns, mobilize voters and function as political representatives. They rely instead on ethnic identity politics and the symbolic capital of party leader to make representative claims. Their political influence has also been limited by the strong majority held by NLD. In this situation, many ethnic voters supported NLD for strategic or political reasons in 2015 and may also do the same in 2020.

The 2015 election has been followed by various initiatives for ethnic party-building, in preparation for the coming election. The foremost strategic response has been to merge parties within each ethnic state. This consolidation strategy is based on the realization that most of the major ethnic groups were represented by at least two competing parties in 2015, not the least due to the divide between old (1990-era) parties and new (2010-era) parties. Party mergers and electoral alliances are thus strategic responses to the problem of vote-splitting. Nevertheless, the extent to which such mergers has happened has taken observers by surprise, in light of the hesitance to merge parties in the past. In the run-up to the 2020 election, several parties in Karen, Kayah, Kachin, Mon and Chin states have merged and registered new parties. The success of the merged ANP in 2015 set a precedence for other ethnic parties. However, post-election factionalism and the subsequent split of ANP in 2017 also demonstrate the limitations of a narrow focus on party mergers without sufficient attention to political party institutionalization.

While the primary focus has been on merging parties, there are also examples of more political party-building strategies. In Shan State, where SNLD was relatively successful in the 2015

election, post-election party-development has taken a different path. SNLD's strategy has been to build a policy-based party and to strengthen communication and accountability vis-à-vis the voters. Towards this end, SNLD has held internal policy workshops, organized working committees and drafted party policies for prioritized thematic areas. This strategic focus on party platform and accountability relations means that SNLD now seems to be the most institutionalized ethnic party.

Many respondents from ethnic parties express optimism regarding the 2020 election. Their expectation is that ethnic parties may gain a more prominent position and increase their bargaining power in parliament and government. This is justified with reference to the party-building initiatives, but also the perception that ethnic voters are increasingly dissatisfied with the NLD government. Observers find support for this expectation in the outcomes of the 2017 and 2018 by-elections, when NLD won fewer seats than expected, especially in ethnic states. This is seen as an indication of reduced support for NLD among ethnic voters, while consolidated ethnic parties are expected to attract more ethnic votes in 2020. It is thus expected that ethnic parties will win a stronger position and could be included in a governing alliance after the election. There are, however, also persistent concerns about the capacity of ethnic parties to mobilize electoral support and provide substantive representation if elected. Their representative claims continue to rely on ethnic belonging, while party organizations and political programmes tend to be poorly developed. In this situation, the 2020 election will be a new test on how ethnic voters see themselves best represented: by the ruling NLD or ethnic parties, and whether these parties will provide substantive representation after the election.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethnic parties in Myanmar have been relatively ineffective in ensuring formal and substantive representation of ethnic groups. This limits their role in transforming Myanmar towards substantive democracy and peace. While there have been important strategic initiatives in preparation for the next election, there are also persistent capacity problems among ethnic parties. International democracy promoters have provided general support for development of the party-system in recent years, but there is a need for increased attention to the institutionalization of individual parties. This includes development of political programs and policies, strengthening of links between society and parties, organizational development and internal democracy within parties, and enhanced capacity to represent electoral constituencies in parliament and government. These are challenges that most parties face, but they seem especially pressing among ethnic parties. Ethnic parties are important as alternative channels of political representation in multi-ethnic and conflict-ridden Myanmar, but their political spaces and capacities remain limited. This limits the democratic role of the parties and the prospects for political transformation of subnational conflicts.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA) is an interdisciplinary research project that studies multiple forces affecting regional integration in Southeast Asia and the challenges they present to the peoples of Southeast Asia and its regional institutional framework, ASEAN.

CRISEA innovates by encouraging 'macro-micro' dialogue between disciplines: global level analyses in international relations and political economy alongside socio-cultural insights from the grassroots methodologies of social sciences and the humanities.

Coordinated by the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) with its unique network of ten field centres in Southeast Asia, the project brings together researchers from seven European and six Southeast Asian institutions, with three objectives:

1. Research on regional integration

Multiple internal and external forces drive regional integration in Southeast Asia and compete for resources and legitimacy. CRISEA has identified five 'arenas of competition' for the interplay of these

forces, investigated in the project's five research Work Packages. It further aims to assess the extent to which they call into question the centrality of ASEAN's regional model.

2. Policy relevance

CRISEA reaches beyond academia to engage in public debate and impact on practitioners in government and non-government spheres. By establishing mechanisms for dialogue with targeted audiences of policymakers, stakeholders and the public, the project furthers European science diplomacy in Southeast Asia and promotes evidence-based policymaking.

3. Networking and capacity-building

CRISEA reinforces the European Research Area (ERA) in the field of Asian Studies through coordinated EU-ASEAN academic exchange and network development. It connects major research hubs with emerging expertise across Europe and Southeast Asia. CRISEA also promotes participation of younger generation academics in all its activities, notably policy dialogues.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Competing Integrations in Southeast Asia (CRISEA)
COORDINATOR	Andrew Hardy, EFEO, Paris, France, hardyv25@yahoo.com.
CONSORTIUM	Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient – EFEO – Paris, France University of Hamburg – UHAM – Hamburg, Germany University of Naples l'Orientale – UNO – Naples, Italy Institute of Social and Political Sciences – ISCSP - Lisbon, Portugal University of Lodz - UL – Lodz, Poland University of Oslo – UiO – Oslo, Norway University of Cambridge – Cam – Cambridge, UK Chiang Mai University – CMU – Chiang Mai, Thailand The Centre for Strategic and International Studies - CSIS – Jakarta, Indonesia Ateneo de Manila University – ADMU – Quezon City, Philippines University of Malaya – UM – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences – VASS – Hanoi, Vietnam The University of Mandalay – MU – Mandalay, Myanmar
FUNDING SCHEME	H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union – Research Innovation Action (RIA) – Europe in a changing world, Engaging together globally
DURATION	November 2017 – October 2020 (36 months)
BUDGET	EU contribution: €2,500,000.00
WEBSITE	www.crisea.eu
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Jacques LEIDER, CRISEA scientific coordinator – jacques.leider@efeo.net Elisabeth LACROIX, CRISEA project manager – ideas.lacroix@gmail.com
FURTHER READING	Chandra, K. (2011). What is an ethnic party? <i>Party Politics</i> , 17(2), 151-169. Egretau, R. (2017). <i>Parliamentary Development in Myanmar: An Overview of the Union Parliament 2011-2016</i> . Yangon: Asia Foundation.

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