

Myanmar must not disenfranchise minority voters

The election commission's recent decision to not hold elections in areas affected by unrest will hamper Myanmar's democratisation process.



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Supporters of the governing National League for Democracy (NLD) party take part in a campaign rally ahead of a November 8 general election, in the outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar, October 25, 2020 [Shwe Paw Mya Tin/Reuters]

On November 8, Myanmar is set to hold general elections for the second time since the end of military rule in 2011. However, not everyone in the country will get a chance to cast a vote in the upcoming poll. On October 16, the Union Election Commission (UEC), Myanmar's election supervisory body, announced a long list of constituencies where the election will not take place due to security concerns.

The commission cancelled polling in parts of the states of Rakhine, Shan, Kachin, Kayin and Mon, as well as the Bago region, all of which are troubled by various levels of unrest. "Those particular areas cannot guarantee conditions to hold free and fair elections and that is why the election is cancelled," the UEC said in a statement.

Free and fair elections are indeed essential to the democratic process, however, the UEC's decision is problematic for several reasons.

First of all, the areas in which the election is cancelled are home to several minority ethnic groups.

This means the commission's decision will disenfranchise nearly two millions of minority voters and prevent them from having a voice in the country's government.

In response to the UEC's decision, an alliance of ethnic parties – the Kachin State People's Party, Mon Unity Party, Chin National League for Democracy, Karen National Democratic Party and Kayah State Democratic Party – issued a scathing statement on October 18 accusing the election commission of acting against the interests of ethnic parties who call for self-determination and equal rights under a federal democratic system.

Second, the UEC's decision is construed by many as an attempt by the state to rig the election in favour of the governing National League for Democracy (NLD) party, especially in the Rakhine state, where elections will not be held in nine of the 17 constituencies.

It is true that the conditions in Rakhine state are not ideal for free and fair elections. Just three years ago, a military operation against "insurgents" in the state resulted in the deaths of thousands from the Rohingya minority community and led hundreds of thousands of others to flee into neighbouring Bangladesh. The Rohingya who remain in the state are still facing significant restrictions to their daily lives and are not allowed to vote as they are not considered to be citizens of Myanmar. Moreover, there is a continuing conflict between Myanmar security forces and the Arakan Army (AA), an armed group fighting for greater autonomy for the ethnic Rakhine community. Just last month, the AA claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of three NLD candidates.

Despite all this, the UEC's decision to cancel the election in large parts of the restive state, and disenfranchise some 1.1 million people, is seen by many as an attempt to weaken NLD's rivals, and especially the ethnic Rakhine Arakan National Party (ANP). Of the nine constituencies where the elections are cancelled in the state, seven are currently held by the ANP, and two by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Most of the eight unaffected townships, meanwhile, are held by the NLD.

Currently, the ANP is the third-largest party, and the largest ethnic minority group in Myanmar's bicameral national parliament, with 10 seats in the House of Nationalities and 12 in the House of Representatives. The ANP managed to achieve this result in the 2015 election because voters in all 17 constituencies of the state were allowed to go to the polls. The UEC's decision will undoubtedly affect the ANP's ability to retain its seats in the upcoming election, and more importantly, prevent the party from winning more seats.

The ANP secretary Tun Aung Kyaw openly stated that his party believes that the UEC's decision was based not on security but political concerns. "Most townships in Rakhine state where elections will not be held are areas the ANP would definitely win, so this is a deliberate ploy", he told the AFP, adding that he views this as "discrimination" against ethnic minorities.

And other ethnic parties across the country appear to share the belief that the UEC's decision to cancel the election in areas experiencing unrest is largely political. "There is a big question about whether the UEC is fair," Chin National League for Democracy's (CNLD) General Secretary Ceu Bik Thawng told The Irrawaddy following the UEC's announcement. "We often talk about how the NLD will need our help to choose the president after the election as we expect to win a majority in our states. It might be a major reason why they treated us this way." Many within Myanmar's ethnic parties have grown critical of the NLD since the party's landmark election victory in 2015, due to its failure to amend the military-drafted 2008 constitution, make lasting peace with the many armed ethnic groups active in the country and establish a functional federal democracy.

Legally, the UEC has the power and authority to hold or cancel elections in Myanmar as it sees fit. Moreover, there certainly is reason to believe it is currently not easy to hold free and fair elections in certain parts of the country. Nevertheless, as it is clear that the partial cancellation of the elections is going to harm Myanmar's already struggling democracy, the commission has a responsibility to reconsider its decision.

Cancelling the election in areas affected by conflict is most certainly not the only option.

The UEC can recommend the deployment of extra security personnel to affected areas on election day. This would be a somewhat risky move, as the presence of security forces alone may not be sufficient to prevent clashes between rival groups. Nevertheless, with sufficient planning and preparations, and the support of local authorities,

creating the conditions for free and fair elections can be possible in most areas. The election commission may also consider sending independent domestic and international observers to supervise the vote in these areas. If the observers witness anomalies or any other forms of disturbance or disruption during the poll, they may recommend local repolls.

However, the best possible way to guarantee the safety of the voters and the integrity of the election is postponing the vote to a later date in all areas experiencing unrest. If the UEC consults all political parties active in the affected areas, and comes up with a new election date acceptable for both the local ethnic groups and the central government, it can prevent hundreds of thousands of minority voters from being deprived of their constitutional right to vote.

The bottom line is the UEC has a responsibility to protect the right of all citizens of Myanmar, including the minorities, to freely choose their political representatives. By ignoring the complaints and criticisms of ethnic parties, the UEC is only widening the division between Myanmar's many ethnic minority groups and the Bamar majority.

Not holding elections in some parts of the country can also justify continued armed resistance, and possibly lead to many more minority youths taking up arms against the central government.

More importantly, disenfranchisement of millions of voters from ethnic minority groups will hamper the country's democratisation process.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.



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