

Myanmar Election: Lack of Consolidated Initiative Leads to Return of Military Rule

The external support by China and Russia lent support to the Tatmadaw, especially during the elections, and while ASEAN and western powers have refused to accept the legitimacy of the election, many of the immediate neighbours like India, Bangladesh, and Thailand prefer what they see as stability under the military, given their cross-border concerns.

By Prof Sreeradha Datta Apr 08, 2026



Myanmar Election

While three South Asian countries - Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal - that faced youths protests and civil society movements leading to the collapse of incumbent governments and new parliaments through electoral processes, Southeast Asian neighbour Myanmar is witnessing a contrarian experience. The new government led by former former military chief and coup leader, Min Aung Hlaing, reportedly assumed the presidency following a military-backed process as president on 3 April.

Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services since 2011, stepped down to assume this new position. Hlaing won 429 out of the 584 votes cast by MPs in the country's pro-military parliament according to official figures. The two runners-up have become vice presidents. Nyo Saw, a former general, and Nan Ni Ni Aye, an ethnic Karen from the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), will be the country's first woman vice president. General Ye Win Oo takes over as new Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services.

Despite four years' long violence and civil strife, the military held elections in 263 of Myanmar's 330 townships, an election that was engineered through debarring the majority of opposition parties including the National League for Democracy (NLD) from participation. While the voter turnout was officially said to be around 55 per cent, it has been suggested that the numbers were manipulated. Inevitably, the establishment-favoured USDP were declared winners.

Patchy Experiment with Democracy

Myanmar has an on-and-off experiment with democracy and post a popular struggle the Aung Suu Kyi-led NLD was elected to power in 2015. The next elections in late 2020 brought back the NLD with 396 seats, a clear majority in a 586 seated parliament, beating soundly the USDP. On the day the new parliament was to convene, the military - also known locally as Tatmadaw - took over the reigns of power. State Counsellor Aung

San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior political leaders were arrested, and a year-long state of emergency was declared.

The military coup in 2021 unseated the elected civilian government led by the NLD. Since then Myanmar has been thrown into a civil-war situation that has killed an estimated 75,000 people and left over three million displaced. A range of over 135 ethnic groups along with other rebel groups took to arms as the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) and the pro-democracy groups like the People's Defence Forces (PDF) fought against the military. New resistance groups, comprising students, lawyers, medics were formed that fought with a very repressive Tatmadaw. The military suffered a series of setbacks and was not in control of over half of the country's territory, but it announced and held elections as per schedule ensuring that this time around the win for USDP, garnering 232 of the 263 lower Pyithu Hluttaw house and 109 of the 157 seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw upper chamber. Despite a rather long valiant effort by civil society and democratic forces to take the military out of political life of Myanmar, the Tatmadaw continues to have the upper hand by sheer force and repression.

Junta Leveraged Ethnic Divisions

This is in sharp contrast to the three South Asian countries that were able to exert consolidated civil-society pressure to compel the incumbent governments to fall. In Myanmar the military appears as the most cohesive force despite many internal divisions that appear from time to time. Despite the major advances made by the EAOs and PDFs, each remained confined to its area of control and failed to consolidate their gains as a unified opposition to the military. While undoubtedly, the ethnic armed groups dented the military's strength in many areas, the inherent ethnic divisions have been leveraged by the junta that was able to establish some sort of legitimate government with the recent elections of the president. It is pertinent to recall that the sustained military regime from 1964 had to make way for democracy through a popular uprising of 1988.

This time around, the debarring of the NLD and other more popular parties guaranteed greater space for military consolidation. The National Unity Government (NUG) remained fragmented and lacked national appeal. The separate ethnic groups consolidated in their own areas and were successful in establishing some modicum of governance but were not able to come together with the pro-democracy movement or anti-Tatmadaw as a collective whole.

Future Looks Bleak

The external support by China and Russia lent support to the Tatmadaw, especially during the elections, and while ASEAN and western powers have refused to accept the legitimacy of the election, many of the immediate neighbours like India, Bangladesh, and Thailand prefer what they see as stability under the military, given their cross-border concerns.

While the exiled NUG has expressed its desire to fight the military regime, the continued instability will worsen the economy while unstable political state control will give way to greater proliferation of organized crime groups. While some of the ethnic stakeholders have emerged stronger and established some form of governance, they will have to find ways to bring together an ethnic consolidation to facilitate the return of popular rule again. Till then the 55 million people of Myanmar will continue to pay for and suffer, as they have been doing for the last few decades.

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