

Myanmar's Historic Election Sunday Might Be Victory for Democracy, but not for Country's Muslims

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Myanmar's Historic Election Sunday Might Be Victory for Democracy, but not for Country's Muslims

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compiled by JULIE POUCHER HARBIN, EDITOR, ISLAMiCommentary on NOVEMBER 5, 2015:

In historic parliamentary elections on Sunday, Nobel Peace laureate and Burmese activist and politician Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) will compete for votes against Myanmar's military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). (Suu Kyi spent 15 years of the last 21 years under house arrest).

While there are more than 90 parties in the race to control of the two houses of parliament, which in turn elect the president, the NLD is predicted to be the most successful.

"The last time Myanmar went to the polls, in 1990, the overwhelming vote in favour of the pro-reform National League for Democracy (NLD) was ignored by the military regime, which then imprisoned NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi," wrote Damien Kingsbury, a professor in international politics at Deakin University who's in Myanmar as coordinator of the Australia Myanmar Election Observer Mission. He said that if NLD wins, "it may still struggle to form government and could not choose its own leader as its presidential candidate." (For Kingsbury's analysis of the upcoming poll click [here](#))

Thomas Pepinsky, associate professor in Cornell University's department of government, an expert in emerging market economies in Southeast Asia, said the upcoming election provides the regime with a veneer of democracy, which it needs to "keep Western economic partners engaged in trade" and attract Western investments.

"The upcoming Myanmar elections represent a key milestone in the country's recent journey of political and economic liberalization," he said in a [statement](#).

But Chiara Formichi, assistant professor in Cornell University's Department of Asian Studies, cautions that the extent of Myanmar's and even Suu Kyi's Kyi's democratic commitment might be limited.

"The anti-Rohingya rhetoric has created an anti-Muslim environment, which culminated in Aung San Suu Kyi's party refusing to list any Muslim candidate," Formichi said in a [statement](#).

"Hundreds of thousands of Muslims were removed from electoral lists on the grounds that they are not legal citizens," Formichi, who researches religion in Southeast Asia, explained. "This escalation, as well as the promulgation of Race and Religion Protection Laws, has been possible through the conflation of ethnic, religious and national identities. This process, started by the British over a century ago via census data collection practices, has continued under the junta with the goal of retaining a narrow definition of Myanmar citizenship as close to 'Burmari' as possible."

"Aung San Suu Kyi's disengagement from the Rohingya emergency is evidence of her transformation from an opposition leader under an authoritarian rule to active politician... In the current climate, where Ma Ba Tha and other extremist Buddhist groups hold political sway, speaking in favor of the Rohingya would surely cause negative setbacks to the National League of Democracy. It is on these same grounds that the league filed no Muslim candidate."

Formichi added that "the alignment of NLD's priorities with those of the USDP and Ma Ba Tha will affect the electoral outcome, as voters will question what the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi stand for."

"Given Suu Kyi's record as an activist for freedom and democracy in Myanmar, some voters might ask why she is not promoting the same standards in the treatment of Rohingya Muslims," she said.

As the BBC's Fergal Keane reported from Sittwe, "thousands of Muslims – known as the Rohingya – are denied citizenship and the vote."

Burma native and Texan Vijay Ganju wrote, in an article for the *Austin American Statesman*, that the ruling USDP's position is that "change (in Myanmar) is needed but within a 'unity' framework built on the current system."

"The USDP's support comes from rural areas where there has been infrastructural development, such as new roads and solar panel generators," he wrote. "The USDP also is supported by Buddhist conservatives who are strongly anti-Muslim. Myanmar has a large number of ethnic groups, many of whom have been persecuted over the years."

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