

Heiduk, Felix

Research Report

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SWP Comment

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Sham Elections amid the War in Myanmar

Prospects for National Stability and International Cooperation

Felix Heiduk

Five years after the bloody military coup and amid a civil war, elections have taken place in Myanmar. They were neither free nor fair, nor was any attempt made to keep up an appearance of even minimum democratic standards. From the outset, the main purpose of the elections was not political participation but an authoritarian-led transition from military rule to a “civilian” government. The country’s new executive is intended to appear legitimate both nationally and internationally (on account of the ballot) and at the same time consolidate the military’s dominance. For its part, Myanmar’s military leadership claims the elections mark a “new beginning” to restore political stability in the country and break its international isolation. The reference here is, among others, to the European Union (EU) and its member states, which have imposed sanctions against Myanmar. However, they should not believe the myth of a “civilian” elected government and a “return” to constitutional order; and, accordingly, they should not seek to normalise relations with Myanmar for the time being.

After decades of military rule in Myanmar, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, prevailed in both the 2015 and 2020 parliamentary elections. A critic of the military, the NLD operated in the context of a liberalisation process that the military itself had initiated in 2010 to counteract the international isolation of the country. The 2008 constitution, written by the military, guarantees the armed forces 25 per cent of the seats in the parliament. Since a majority of more than 75 per cent is required for constitutional amendments, the military has a de facto blocking minority. The constitution also stipulates that important ministries must be headed by military personnel – for example, the min-

istries of defence, the interior and border protection. Moreover, the military can declare a state of emergency at any time and thereby strip civilian institutions of their power.

After the NLD had announced an overhaul of the security sector, among other reforms, following its re-election in 2020, the military leadership under Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup on 1 February 2021, the day on which the democratically elected parliament was scheduled to be constituted. The justification for the coup was claimed to be “election fraud”, without any evidence being provided. Since then, the situation in Myanmar has been catastrophic in virtually every



respect: the military declared a state of emergency, dissolved the parliament, detained the NLD's top leadership and restricted human and civil rights. Those measures led to mass civilian protests against the coup, which were brutally suppressed by the junta. Hundreds of protesters were killed and thousands arrested, whereupon the violence escalated in almost every part of the country. The NLD not only called for armed resistance against the military by forming People's Defence Force (PDF) units; it also sought to ally itself with the armed opposition groups of ethnic minorities – the so-called ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) – in the border regions of the country. For decades now, the EAOs have been fighting to secure minority rights, regional autonomy and the federalisation of state power. It is a struggle that is directed against both the central government and the military and does not shy from using armed force.

Since spring 2021, a large number of armed groups have been fighting the junta in many parts of the country. Some of those groups are associated with the exiled National Unity Government (NUG), which is dominated by the NLD, while others have no connection to it. In some respects, the armed groups differ significantly – for example, in terms of ideological orientation (ranging from authoritarian and ethno-nationalist to liberal-democratic), goals (from secession and the formation of autonomous authoritarian enclaves to democratic federalism), size (from a few dozen to tens of thousands of fighters) and armament (from homemade rifles to artillery and combat drones). And, at times, those groups – which often have little more in common than the rejection of the coup and the military government – start fighting one another.

Myanmar's current "polycrisis"

While the number of armed conflicts in Myanmar fell by 17 per cent nationwide in 2025 compared with the previous year, this is to be attributed mainly to a significant

decline in the fighting in the centre of the country, primarily in Sagaing State, as a result of massive military operations. Other states, such as Rakhine and Kayin, saw a significant increase in the fighting on their territory. It is estimated that the junta currently controls only about 30–40 per cent of the country. The border regions, in particular, remain under the control of various opposition groups that have established parallel state structures (including their own tax collection, administration and security forces).

According to estimates, more than 90,000 people have been victims of the civil war since 2021 (more than 15,000 in 2025 alone), while 3.5 million have been internally displaced and more than 1.5 million have left the country. Bangladesh is home to the world's largest refugee camp for displaced Rohingya from Myanmar, who have no prospect of returning at present. Thailand and India are hosting a large number of refugees, too; for its part, New Delhi has begun building a fence along the border with Myanmar to stem the flow. Well over a third of Myanmar's population (some 18 million people) depend on humanitarian aid. In the United Nations (UN) *Hunger Hotspots 2025* report, Myanmar is classified as a hotspot "of very high concern" because millions of residents are threatened by acute food insecurity.

Almost half of the population now lives below the national poverty line – before the coup, it was just under a quarter. Moreover, large parts of the country's infrastructure have been destroyed or damaged as a result of the fighting; and important economic sectors such as tourism, manufacturing and construction lie in ruins. Foreign direct investment has fallen by 74 per cent since the coup. Further, organised crime is rampant, especially drug production and trafficking, and there are numerous scam centres at which large-scale internet fraud is carried out through the use of forced labour, torture and extortion. According to the Global Organized Crime Index, Myanmar is currently the country most affected by organised crime.

It is for these reasons that the UN describes the state of affairs in Myanmar as a “polycrisis” – in reference both to the humanitarian disaster and to the political and economic situation in the country. That crisis is also having an impact on the diverse interests of neighbouring countries. Against this backdrop, the military will have to overcome formidable challenges if it is to keep its promise to “return” to constitutional political order through the recent elections. A durable stabilisation cannot be expected at present.

The elections and their political significance

For such a “return”, including the reinstatement of the bicameral parliament, it would have been necessary to hold the elections nationwide. However, that was far from being the case owing to the civil war. Even before the ballot, the junta had been forced to admit publicly that voting would take place in just 265 of the 330 townships (the third administrative tier of Myanmar’s governance structure, below that of the states and districts). However, it does not fully control all of those 265 townships. In addition, millions of people have been displaced; and, despite amnesties, tens of thousands remain in prison and were therefore unable to participate in the elections.

In the run-up to election day, more than 50 political parties – including the NLD – were barred from participating. Combined, those parties had won more than 90 per cent of the seats in the last free elections, which took place in 2020. As a result of their exclusion in 2025, it was only representatives of the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) who ran for election in several dozen townships. Aung San Suu Kyi and other leading opposition politicians remained or remain in detention, under house arrest or in exile. Thus, even before the elections, it looked certain that the military-backed USDP would win. The voting took place in three phases between the end of December 2025

and the end of January 2026. After the elections, the USDP declared itself the winner; according to the official final results, it won 72 per cent of the vote (compared with just 6 per cent in 2020). Voter turnout was officially reported at just over 50 per cent, even though pressure had been exerted on the population to vote.

Any criticism of the legitimacy and credibility of the elections was rejected by the junta. More than 200 election critics, including opposition politicians, journalists and artists, were detained during the election campaign under the new “Election Protection Act”. Even social media posts expressing criticism of the elections could lead to an arrest.

The “successful” conduct of the elections is unlikely to increase the legitimacy of either the coup carried out under the military leadership of Min Aung Hlaing or the elected “civilian” government in Myanmar. In terms of both personnel and ideology, the latter will have very close ties to the current military leaders, especially since Min Aung Hlaing has filled many top positions in the with retired military figures and the constitution stipulates that 25 per cent of parliamentary seats are to be reserved for active military personnel. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the majority of the population is unlikely to regard the new government as legitimate. Moreover, the fact that military operations continued during the election campaign – in particular, villages and towns were bombed, claiming many civilian casualties – will not have gone unnoticed. Domestically, the new Myanmar government is likely to face an opposition that is heterogeneous but united in its rejection of both the elections and the new government.

Nevertheless, the way has been paved for a transition from a military junta widely criticized internationally and sanctioned by some countries to a “civilian” government that has been formed on the basis of the recent (sham) elections. The hope of some neighbouring states, including Thailand, that a reform process similar to the one that followed the 2010 elections can now be

launched seems unrealistic at this point. Following the military-dominated elections in 2010, President Thein Sein, a former general, ushered in the liberalisation process through reforms; and it was this process that ultimately led to the NLD's election victory in 2015. Concurrently, today's military leadership views Thein Sein's actions at that time as the reason for the coming to power of the NLD, which it perceives as being antagonistic towards the armed forces. Thus, another liberalisation process initiated by reform-minded former military personnel cannot be expected today.

Despite its composition, Myanmar's new government will be able to maintain a civilian guise, which will facilitate the normalisation of relations at the international level with willing partners. Such a development is not only of interest to the junta but also to neighbouring countries such as India and China, both of which would like to intensify their relations with Myanmar. It was, above all, the Chinese leadership that had urged the junta to hold elections so that an (authoritarian) transition from a military dictatorship to an elected "civilian" government could take place.

The end of international isolation

Initially, the coup drove Myanmar into international isolation. The military takeover was heavily criticised in the political West, particularly by the US and Europe, and the military government subsequently came under sweeping sanctions. There was also open criticism of the putsch from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to which Myanmar belongs and whose joint meetings the junta was not allowed to attend. Accordingly, neither ASEAN, the EU, the UK, Australia nor the US supported the recent elections in Myanmar, which they branded as not credible.

But the international isolation of the coup leadership was limited from the outset. The neighbouring countries of Thailand, India and China were all critical of the instability caused by the coup but did

not participate in isolating Myanmar owing to their own strategic, security and economic interests. By acting in this way, they prevented the establishment of an effective sanctions regime.

As traditional partners, Russia, China and North Korea continued to supply weapons to the military – as, indeed, did India. High-ranking members of the junta, including Min Aung Hlaing, went to Beijing and Moscow, among other places, and received diplomatic support on the international stage. Thus, it is not surprising that countries such as China, Russia and India welcomed the decision to hold the recent elections and sent election observers. ASEAN refrained from doing likewise, but ASEAN members Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia all sent their own observers.

The interest of all these states in supporting the elections has little to do with the ballot itself. Indeed, there are three main reasons why they are intent on further normalising relations with Myanmar. First, Myanmar is very rich in mineral resources. Although almost half of the country's population lives below the poverty line, Myanmar is the world's third-largest producer of rare earths. More than 50 per cent of the rare earths processed in China today is mined in Myanmar, with much of that mining taking place at illegal sites inside conflict areas. Most of Myanmar's mines are located in the border region with China and are currently under the control of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), which is hostile to the junta and maintains close relations with Beijing. Access to rare earths and other raw materials such as jade, gold, copper and aluminium attracts not only China and India but also other neighbouring countries. And for Thailand, the environmental pollution associated with mining – for example, the discharge of toxins into rivers – is another important reason to engage with Myanmar in this sector.

Second, many neighbouring countries are concerned about Myanmar's role as a hub for organised crime since they have to deal with the negative fallout. Many of the

workers exploited at the scam centres are lured to Myanmar from China, Thailand and other Asian countries with false promises. The same applies to their victims, many of whom come from neighbouring countries, too. Moreover, according to the UN, Myanmar is the world's largest producer of illegal opium and one of the largest manufacturers of crystal meth in the world. China and Southeast Asia are among the main transit and sales markets for drugs from Myanmar. In the effort to secure their own external borders, neighbouring countries have focused on combating cross-border crime that originates in Myanmar. That is why they are interested in ongoing cooperation with Myanmar, not least for the purpose of law enforcement and for the repatriation of their own citizens. More specifically, they are interested in cooperating with both the EAOs and the state security forces.

Third, there are strategic reasons for further normalising bilateral relations. For Beijing, in particular, Myanmar serves as a strategic corridor to increase its own security of supply in the event of a crisis. China has financed transport routes as well as oil and gas pipelines between Myanmar's Rakhine State, which stretches along the Bay of Bengal, and the Chinese province of Yunnan. In this way, Beijing is attempting to secure direct access to the Indian Ocean without having to pass through the Strait of Malacca, which could easily be blocked by the US and its allies (China's so-called "Malacca dilemma"). In addition, Myanmar is considered a strategic buffer against US influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

India, for its part, sees a potentially China-dominated Myanmar on its "eastern flank" as a strategic challenge. Closer relations with Myanmar are intended to prevent the country from being "lost" to China. And planned east-west economic corridors are intended to link India's eastern states more closely with mainland Southeast Asia.

Prospects for international cooperation

For all the reasons identified above, Myanmar's neighbours will — directly or indirectly — recognise its "civilian" government and begin to normalise relations with the country, regardless of the political and economic instability that persists there even after the recent elections.

It remains to be seen to what extent Washington, which has been critical of the sham elections, will aim to normalise relations with Myanmar. Some steps taken by the Trump administration point to normalisation, most notably the recent lifting of sanctions against businesspeople close to the junta and the military-linked companies belonging to them. Such moves are to be seen in the context of reports that the Trump administration is exploring ways to gain access to Myanmar's rare earths in order to limit the access of China — the United States' main strategic rival — to those resources.

However, Germany and the EU should continue to reject outright any normalisation of relations with Myanmar and refrain from recognising the new "civilian" government — for three reasons. First, it is very unlikely that the sham election will do much to resolve Myanmar's "polycrisis". The actors responsible for this crisis, who have been actively involved in turning parts of the country into a global centre of organised crime, simply want to swap their military uniforms for civilian clothes without ushering in any significant political, economic or social change.

Second, given the deliberate exclusion of any opposition groups from the elections, it is almost inconceivable that, in the medium term, there could be a more inclusive form of government (democratic or otherwise) that could bring about (genuine) political stabilisation in the country.

Third, political and geographical factors make it impossible for Europe to play a significant role in the competition for Myanmar's rare earths. Europe does not have the close political ties either to the junta or to



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SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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the KIO that would facilitate such cooperation. Furthermore, the mining of rare earths is both environmentally damaging and dangerous — especially in a civil war zone. Therefore, it is unlikely that European companies would take the associated risks, which include potential damage to their image. And even if they were to do so and, at the same time, dismiss legal frameworks such as the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), such a project would be constrained by the export corridors for rare earths from Myanmar. That is because these routes run either northward across the border to China or southward through areas controlled partly by EAOs and partly by the junta.

In the geopolitical struggle for influence in Myanmar, Berlin and Brussels will continue to play no role even in the wake of the recent elections. But in the area of humanitarian aid, Germany (like other EU member states) should continue to at least uphold its commitments, not only because of the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Myanmar but also because the US has cut its aid. To this end, it is important that Germany and Europe cooperate with the UN wherever possible, not least with a view to countering the delegitimation of multilateral international institutions. Furthermore, the established relations with the democratic opposition both in Myanmar itself and in exile should continue to be preserved.

At the international level, Berlin and Brussels should carry on exerting diplomatic pressure on the government of Myanmar. At the very least, Europeans must insist — potentially together with the UN, ASEAN (and the Philippines, which currently holds the ASEAN chairmanship) and Myanmar's neighbouring countries — on a sustainable improvement in the humanitarian situation in Myanmar, a nationwide ceasefire and talks being held between the government and the opposition. In addition to the actors in Myanmar itself, the neighbouring

countries of China, India and Thailand, in particular, have an important role to play in managing the country's ongoing "poly-crisis". The reality in Myanmar is that the military, some members of which now appear in civilian garb, is likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future. Any easing of EU sanctions and intensification of cooperative relations with the new "civilian" government below the threshold of diplomatic recognition should be linked to corresponding progress — for example, towards significantly improving in the humanitarian situation and holding ceasefire negotiations.

*Dr Felix Heiduk is Head of SWP's Asia Research Division.
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