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Victory for the Mother of the Nation

With a clever rebranding, de facto prime minister Aung San Suu Kyi and her party have won a landslide in Myanmar's election

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The ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) and party leader Aung San Suu Kyi have won the parliamentary elections in Myanmar by an unexpected margin. Despite earlier concerns, election day passed peacefully and largely without major incidents. Although the increased turnout led to long queues – not to mention the Covid-19 factor – it was conducted in an orderly fashion. Particularly in the urban centres in Yangon province the queues of voters, despite various problems, reflected the country's ethnic and religious diversity. It seems that for most people, the second democratic elections since the military government launched the transformation process made a day to be celebrated.

To be sure, there were heightened tensions in the run-up to the elections, as well as some politically motivated disinformation. Given the somewhat one-sided party spectrum, from which certain voices were missing entirely, many voters didn't have much of a choice. The pro-market economic policy of the major national parties leaves little room for alternative development models. That includes a more socially oriented policy that might cushion the risks and failures of the current laissez faire approach. Young people in particular bemoan the lack of job opportunities and unemployment.

The role of the central election commission – and whether it is really independent – were particular causes of tension in the election run-up. For example, in some parts of the country the elections were called off (to some extent dubiously) because of the security situation. This basically deprived more than 1 million potential voters of access to the voting booth.

The fear was that this measure would especially favour the NLD. One of the most prominent critics was commander-in-chief of the armed forces Min Aung Hlaing. He publically remarked that breaches of the electoral

regulations might destabilise democracy. Even though election observers could identify no major election irregularities, there were a number of problems. While smaller parties adhered to the Covid-19 safety measures the major parties continued to campaign publically. Internal labour migrants and the poor were often unable to cast a ballot, lacking identification or household registration.

The rebranding of Aung San Suu Kyi

While tactical voting played a major role in the NLD's success, a number of factors unrelated to what people expect of the government also featured. Three key elements were the expected balance of power in parliament, the successful rebranding of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and a fundamental desire for continuity.

Under the constitution the military is still guaranteed 25 per cent of the seats in both the lower and upper chambers. That means that the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which is close to the military, only needs just over a quarter of the votes to secure a majority. Voter anxiety was exacerbated prior to the election by concerns about the role of the military. Because at present the NLD is the only party able to stand up to military influence a large proportion of its votes are likely to have been tactical. That also means, ironically, that the military's proportional representation works to the NLD's electoral advantage, while hindering the smaller parties.

Suu Kyi's image as Mother of the Nation was further boosted by the population's need for stability in a period of rapid change, uncertainty and social emergency.

In the run-up to the election the NLD – not so much the party itself as its leader Aung San Suu Kyi – managed to acquire a new image. Roughly speaking, the former icon of freedom and democracy was rebranded the Mother of the Nation. While the USDP refrained entirely from nominating a Spitzenkandidat, Suu Kyi had plenty of options to pull off her rebranding. Just as her father General Aung San was increasingly presented as a patriotic folk hero and liberator, she was able to leverage her role on the international stage as foreign minister.

Her speech at the International Court of Justice in The Hague and her defence against charges of genocide enabled her to demonstrate patriotic spirit. In the broad public perception the whole nation was in the dock and Aung San Suu Kyi's steadfastness was received very positively. The patriotic stance was heightened by the fact that she spoke for the whole nation, including the military, while at the same time putting the latter

under pressure. This public perception has less to do with anti-Islamist sentiment than with defence against another anti-Myanmar narrative pushed by outsiders. In fact, although anti-Islamic sentiment – especially in regional centres – is widespread, it generally finds expression in votes for the USDP, regardless of individual political convictions. By and large, this indirectly turned international critics of Aung San Suu Kyi into surrogate election supporters.

Myanmar needs political alternatives

Suu Kyi's image as Mother of the Nation was further boosted by the population's need for stability in a period of rapid change, uncertainty and social emergency. During the Covid-19 crisis, she has enjoyed a strong media presence. Over the years, her stance under the military government elevated her into a kind of patron saint. At a time of considerable economic and social turmoil she represents a beacon of hope for everyday survival in a deregulated market economy. In the face of existential fears many regard international concerns about civic education and lack of political participation as luxuries.

In a landslide the NLD won over 80 per cent of the vacant seats in the lower and upper chambers. But it faces a series of challenges. The fact is that there was no opportunity to raise crucial social and economic issues during the campaign. It was mainly about the status quo. With the demise of the opposition, including parties that had staked out a policy position, it will be hard to strike out on a reform path that reflects Myanmar's diverse interests.

The representation of ethnic parties has also diminished, except for the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) in Shan province. If it is to meet the growing challenges the NLD needs to look deep within itself. It also has to implement much needed reforms, including internal party democracy, capacity-building and dialogue with other social actors.

The constitutional rule that gives the military 25 per cent of the seats will hinder the emergence of a third political force. That's assuming the smaller parties are unable to form alliances. To date, Myanmar has been short of political alternatives. But it sorely needs them if it's to have a chance of preventing a slide into an elite-dominated economy and the political weakening of its nascent middle class.



Bernt Berger
Yangon

Bernt Berger heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Myanmar. Previously, he was a Senior Fellow at the DGAP and responsible for the area of Asia research at the Research Institute.

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