

Ballots Without Democracy in Myanmar

thewire.in/south-asia/ballots-without-democracy-in-myanmar

Amit Ranjan

February 18, 2026



The result of Myanmar's election that concluded on January 25, 2026, was hardly unexpected. In the Junta-administered elections, held in 263 out of 330 townships across the country, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) secured a commanding victory. It won 739 out of the 1,025 seats [contested for the legislature](#) (the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, comprising the Pyithu Hluttaw and Amyotha Hluttaw).

In 2015, the USDP won over 6% of seats, and in 2020, it gained about 5% of [seats in both houses](#). The National Unity Party, the successor to the Burma Socialist Programme Party, won 68 seats. The Shan and Nationalities Democratic Party won 39 seats; the People's Party won 30; the People's Pioneer Party won 20; and the remaining 60 seats were shared by 21 other parties and [one independent candidate](#).

In the three-phase elections, around 55% of the voters cast their votes. Major General Zaw Min Tun, Head of the Information Team of the National Defence and Security Council, said that he received positive feedback from international [observers to the elections](#). In the first phase, 32 representatives from eight countries, Russia, Belarus, China, Kazakhstan, Cambodia, India, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and an organisation, the Japan-Myanmar Association, observed the elections.

There was no international observer for the second phase [of the elections](#). Meanwhile, in the third phase, observers from seven countries, Belarus, Cambodia, Nepal, Indonesia, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and India, and an organisation, the International Conference of Asian Political Parties, participated. Representatives from 14 embassies based in Yangon also observed the [three phases of the elections](#).

Whatever the Junta and observers say about the elections, the USDP's electoral performance clearly shows the military's grip on the electoral process. Following the capture of political power in 2021, the military Junta has dismantled any form of dissent in the country. The political collapse is inseparable from the prolonged detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, former [President Win Myint](#), and thousands of elected representatives, activists and resistance figures. The Union Election Commission's [dissolution of the National League for Democracy](#) in 2023, along with around 40 other political groups, under the Political Parties Registration Law, was mainly a step towards the political erasure of someone the military does not like. Consequently, the NLD and many other political groups did not participate in the elections.

Contrary to what the junta insists, the participation of people in elections cannot confer legitimacy on the democratic exercise when dissent is criminalised and political alternatives are eliminated. The election functioned less as a nationwide democratic exercise and more as a selective performance staged in governable pockets of territory.

By invoking "[disciplined democracy](#)," the junta seeks to transform procedure into legitimacy. Myanmar's political architecture has long embedded military supremacy. The [2008 Constitution](#) of Myanmar grants 25% of parliamentary seats to the military and control over three key ministries: [defence, border and home affairs](#). Also, it controls large parts of the national economy.

With these important portfolios, the military will always remain in a strong position in the country's governance and the overall functioning of the administration. [With parliament set to convene in March to elect a president and a formal transfer of power scheduled for April](#), the regime's recalibration is already institutionalised.

Foreign countries and organisations reacted differently to the elections. Tom Andrews, the UN Human Rights Council-appointed Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, said, "By all measures, this is not a free, fair, nor legitimate election".

ASEAN too remains divided over whether to accept the electoral outcome. The member states fall into three categories: some want to move on, others are not for recognising the Junta-led regime unless certain conditions are met, and the rest are in-[between the two positions](#).

The European Union statement also said, "The essential elements of free and fair elections were not met, namely a credible, transparent and inclusive process, in line with [international standards](#)".

On the other hand, China congratulated the junta on the elections, saying it is ready to work [with the regime](#). New Delhi's position has been ambiguous. It used "carefully calibrated" words, upholding democratic norms without [upsetting its ties with the country's regime](#).

Unlike them, the Trump administration [has remained silent](#).

Myanmar's future largely hinges on whether federal aspirations for ethnic communities are satisfactorily addressed, displaced populations can return, and citizenship is reimagined beyond the existing hierarchies. The country is engulfed in conflict and widespread human rights violations.

Multiple reports suggest that despite being in power for five years, the military effectively controls only a limited portion of the country, largely concentrated in [urban centres and administrative hubs](#). For example, in August 2025, the Junta imposed martial law in 63 townships to “ensure law enforcement and stability” ahead of elections. Of the 63 townships, 46 are controlled by [anti-regime groups](#).

For now, the 2026 election results mark not a transformation but a consolidation of the military’s power.

Amit Ranjan is a senior research fellow, Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore. Kaveri is assistant professor, School of Development, Azim Premji University, Ranchi, Jharkhand.