

Myanmar's December 2025 Phased Elections: Context, Motivation's and Risks **PM Heblikar, Member to CNSS Council.**

On December 28, 2025, Myanmar's ruling military junta will embark on what it calls a "phased process" of parliamentary elections. To the generals in Naypyidaw, this is not a mere exercise in voting—it is a high-stakes performance designed to confer legitimacy, consolidate power, and project the illusion of a return to "constitutional order." Yet, behind this choreography lies a darker truth. The elections are not a step toward democracy but a survival mechanism for a regime that seized power in 2021, now battered by resistance, isolation, and war fatigue.

Coup and Constitutional Backdrop

The current political crisis began with the February 2021 coup that nullified the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Aung San Suu Kyi and her party had once again won overwhelming popular support, but the military annulled the results and detained civilian leaders. Its justification—claims of voter fraud—was never substantiated.

At its core, the coup was not about safeguarding democracy but about **protecting entrenched privileges** codified under the 2008 Constitution.

That military-drafted charter still guarantees the Tatmadaw a central role in politics:

- **25% of seats** in both parliamentary houses are reserved for serving officers.
- **Any constitutional amendment** requires a 75% majority, effectively giving the military veto power.
- **Eligibility rules** bar anyone with foreign family ties or criminal convictions from becoming president—clauses aimed squarely at Suu Kyi.

This constitutional design ensures that the military can never truly lose power. The forthcoming 2025 elections merely seek to **refresh this control** under the façade of legality.

Why Elections Now? The Junta's Calculus

The December 2025 elections reveal an unspoken admission by the junta: the Tatmadaw no longer believes it can win Myanmar's civil war outright. A senior regional intelligence analyst has described the polls as "a strategic façade" — a method to gain legitimacy through the optics of ballots rather than the barrel of a gun.

For the generals, the elections serve **three overlapping purposes**:

1. **To restore a semblance of legitimacy:** After nearly five years of sanctions, uprisings, and global condemnation, the junta hopes that elections—no matter how flawed—can help it rebrand as a constitutional government. Even limited

acceptance by neighbours or financial institutions could provide much-needed respite.

2. **To manage dissent through division:** By holding elections in phases across different regions, the regime can concentrate its forces where resistance is strongest, manipulate outcomes, and avoid voting in conflict zones. This allows it to claim a “national” process while excluding half the country.
3. **To entrench constitutional supremacy:** With 25% of seats automatically controlled by the military and candidate vetting heavily restricted, no civilian party can meaningfully challenge the generals. A managed opposition may exist, but only within limits the junta defines.

The Man Behind the Ballot: Min Aung Hlaing

At the centre of this political drama stands **Senior General Min Aung Hlaing**, the architect of Myanmar’s coup and its contested transition. His decisions are guided less by ideology than by **fear, ambition, and survival**.

- **Fear of Political Irrelevance:** In 2020, Min Aung Hlaing was nearing mandatory retirement. The NLD’s resounding victory threatened to leave him without political relevance or protection. The coup was therefore a pre-emptive strike to preserve his personal future and his institution’s dominance.
- **Apprehension of Accountability:** Having commanded operations that led to accusations of genocide against the Rohingya, he is deeply wary of international prosecution. Staying in control—or ensuring his loyalists remain in charge—is a shield against The Hague or other international mechanisms.
- **Reliance on Authoritarian Patrons:** Min Aung Hlaing has learned that democratic nations will never fully embrace him. His reliance on **China, Russia, and a few authoritarian partners** provides arms, diplomatic cover, and investment in exchange for strategic access and loyalty.
- **Paranoia About Resistance:** Despite commanding one of Southeast Asia’s largest militaries, he is haunted by insurgent advances and defections. The elections thus double as a **psychological operation** to project strength and inevitability.

In essence, Min Aung Hlaing governs not from confidence but from **deep insecurity**—a general trapped in the trappings of power, seeking validation through an illusion of democracy.

Obstacles and Risks

Despite elaborate planning, the junta faces mounting obstacles that could undermine its designs:

- **Opposition Coordination:** Ethnic minority parties and remnants of the NLD may unite tactically to deny the junta’s proxies a clean sweep in certain regions.

- **Armed Resistance:** The People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) have expanded their control since 2021. Whole districts are under their sway, making secure polling virtually impossible.
- **International non-recognition:** Western democracies have declared they will not recognize elections conducted under military rule. Continued sanctions and aid restrictions will deepen Myanmar's economic malaise.
- **Structural Deadlock:** Even if the junta's political arm, the USDP, dominates the elected seats, the 75% amendment barrier guarantees military supremacy. Any "transition" will be cosmetic.

A Country at War with Itself

Myanmar's civil war now spans multiple fronts. Ethnic armies such as the **Arakan Army, Kachin Independence Army, and Karen National Union**—along with numerous PDFs—control or contest roughly half the nation's territory.

Tatmadaw units are stretched thin and increasingly demoralized. Airstrikes, forced conscription, and scorched-earth tactics have displaced over three million civilians. Infrastructure is shattered, and humanitarian corridors are restricted.

By late 2025, the junta meaningfully governs perhaps one-fifth of the country. The rest is a patchwork of resistance zones and contested areas. Holding elections under such conditions is less about inclusion and more about denial—excluding areas the regime has already lost.

The Machinery of Manipulation

The 2025 polls are not elections in any meaningful democratic sense. They are meticulously engineered exercises in control.

Candidate eligibility rules bar most opposition figures. New laws criminalize calls for boycotts or criticism of the vote. Independent media outlets are censored or shuttered, and journalists risk arrest.

The phased structure of the election is itself a tactical weapon: by staging the process over months, the regime can adjust tactics, intimidate opponents, and reinforce areas where the USDP underperforms. Districts deemed "insecure" are simply removed from the electoral map, erasing anti-junta constituencies from participation.

The entire process functions less as an election and more as a state-managed plebiscite designed to fabricate consent.

Would the Military Ever Allow Defeat?

History offers little hope. The Tatmadaw annulled the **1990 elections** when Suu Kyi's NLD won overwhelmingly, and it **nullified the 2020 results** through a coup. Every

time the military faces potential loss, it invokes “national security” or “constitutional integrity” to justify intervention.

The 2025 elections, therefore, are unlikely to mark a real contest. They will instead measure how effectively the regime can manage dissent, contain unrest, and project the illusion of popular mandate.

Key Political Actors

Several power centres will shape Myanmar’s post-election landscape:

- **The Tatmadaw and Min Aung Hlaing:** The architects of the current system, intent on converting armed rule into a controlled civilian façade.
- **Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP):** The junta’s political proxy tasked with securing legislative dominance.
- **National Unity Government (NUG):** A parallel administration of ousted lawmakers and activists coordinating resistance and diplomacy from exile.
- **Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs):** Armed groups that hold de facto authority across large swathes of territory. Their cooperation or hostility will determine the security environment.
- **Union Election Commission (UEC):** Once semi-autonomous, now firmly under military control, responsible for legitimizing outcomes favourable to the regime.

External Actors and Election Diplomacy

The 2025 elections are not merely a domestic spectacle; they are a **geopolitical balancing act** involving competing external interests.

- **China** remains the most influential actor. Beijing’s core priorities are border stability, protection of Belt and Road investments—especially the **Kyaukphyu port**—and preventing refugee flows into Yunnan. While it advocates “all-inclusive elections,” it effectively shields the junta from harsh UN action.
- **Russia** serves as the junta’s military supplier and diplomatic partner, openly supporting the elections as a stabilizing step while seeking greater influence in Southeast Asia.
- **India** adopts a cautious stance. Concerned about border security, refugee flows, and connectivity projects like the **Kaladan Multimodal Transit**, New Delhi keeps communication channels open with both the junta and opposition groups. Its approach balances **principle with pragmatism**.
- **ASEAN** remains divided. Thailand and Cambodia favour quiet engagement, while Indonesia and Singapore press for inclusivity and reform. The absence of consensus has allowed China to shape the diplomatic narrative.
- **Western Democracies**—including the US, EU, UK, Japan, and Australia—have rejected the polls outright, maintaining sanctions and supporting civil society initiatives. Their influence, however, remains limited.

At the **46th ASEAN Summit in Malaysia**, Myanmar will face renewed calls to engage in peace talks, coinciding with President Trump's return to the regional stage. Yet, despite symbolic pressure, Naypyidaw offered no substantive concessions, confident in Chinese and Russian backing.

Civil Society and Humanitarian Fallout

Inside Myanmar, civic groups, activists, and ethnic leaders persist in the face of relentless repression. Across the border, Indian NGOs and think tanks assist refugees and advocate for a rights-based response, though official caution limits engagement.

The humanitarian toll is catastrophic: **millions displaced, basic services collapsed, and human rights abuses widespread**. Entire communities live under bombardment or in exile. For most citizens, the elections mean little more than another phase of military control under a different name.

The Likely Outcome

Few analysts expect genuine transformation. The junta's proxy, the USDP, will likely dominate, with Min Aung Hlaing positioned to assume a civilianized presidency.

Yet flawed polls will only deepen polarization, intensify conflict, and erode any remaining legitimacy. Myanmar's crisis will not end at the ballot box—it will likely deepen.

Looking Forward: Between Repression and Resistance

Myanmar today stands between two enduring forces: an entrenched military apparatus and a resilient civic and armed resistance. While the generals weaponize the ballot to project control, millions of citizens continue to resist through armed struggle, political activism, and sheer perseverance.

The December elections underscore three enduring fault lines:

- **Civil Conflict:** Ethnic and resistance forces retain control of large regions.
- **Humanitarian Collapse:** Displacement, poverty, and disease will continue.
- **Legitimacy Deficit:** No election held under occupation can claim credibility.

Conclusion: Elections Without Democracy

Myanmar's 2025 elections will not restore democracy. Instead, they epitomize how **elections can be weaponized as instruments of diplomacy and deception**—designed to impress outsiders rather than empower citizens.

In this struggle, the people of Myanmar remain sidelined. Their ballots are reduced to bargaining chips in a geopolitical contest shaped by generals and global powers.

The country's future will not be decided in December's staged vote but in whether its fractured society can eventually reclaim political agency from both its rulers and its foreign patrons. Until that happens, **election diplomacy—not democracy—will remain Myanmar's defining reality.**

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