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The Union Election Commission (UEC) announced on 08 July 2015 that the much anticipated general election will be held on Sunday the November 8, of this year. The last election held in November 2010 (which voted the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to power) was considered a sham and the main opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) had boycotted it. With all the promises made by the Government for a free and fair poll and with national and international observers to monitor, this election is expected to be the first credible election since 1990.

Elections are going to be held for 1142 seats between the Union Parliament and the regional legislatures. In an official announcement dated 01 July, the UEC said 330 constituencies were confirmed for the lower house, 168 for the upper house and 644 for regional parliaments. A further 29 regional seats will be appointed to national race representatives (DVB – 03 July 2015). It may be noted that in addition 110 seats in the lower house, 56 in the upper house and 25% of the regional parliament seats are reserved for the military appointees.

After a prolonged debate in the parliament on a changeover to some form of proportional representation system for the ensuing elections, the UEC decided to continue to use the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system in the November elections for both the upper and lower houses and the regional parliaments.

The election commission announced (22 July 2015) that 32 million citizens of the country's population of roughly 54 million would be eligible to vote in the November elections.

Around 90 political parties are contesting in this election. The parties have to submit their candidates list along with the constituencies from

which they will be contesting by August 8, 2015.

Political Parties

Of the 90 odd parties that will be contesting the elections, about two-thirds of the parties represent minority ethnic groups.

Of these ethnic parties 23 parties have formed a coalition called the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF) with the aim of capturing a quarter of the regional parliament seats in the polls.

“Should the coalition sweep the field in November and remain united, the next government would be forced to negotiate with either the NBF or the military – which maintains a 25 percent allocation of the seats in every legislature across the country – in the formation of the next executive and any future tilts at constitutional reform. Saw Than Myint has told The Irrawaddy the NBF has no intention of negotiating an alliance with the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) ahead of the election.” – The Irrawaddy 22 July, 2015

The ruling party, Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) are the only parties that will be contesting most constituencies nationwide.

The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)

Being in power since 2010, it has the advantage of incumbency. With a wide network of branches and staff. USDP has started enticing the electorate, long before the elections, by promising financial support, development and infrastructure in their constituencies.

However, the USDP has some inherent disadvantages, in that it is unpopular because of being allied to the military. But for the military leaders in power including the president, it has no charismatic leaders of the stature of Aung San Suu Kyi.

There are some media reports to indicate that the party is divided with a faction strongly aligned to the military and insisting on upholding the 2008 constitution in its present form while the other faction is projecting an image of moving away from militarism and striving for democratic ideals and ethnic unity.

As in 2012 by-elections, the party seems to be heading for a dismal performance in the general elections.

The National League for Democracy (NLD)

Though the NLD was hinting at boycotting the elections in view of the failure to amend the main provisions of the constitution, Aung San Suu Kyi announced on July 11 that the party will contest the general elections “to continue implementing the democratic transition that has yet to

be achieved.”

The NLD plans to contest nationwide in the elections except for some ethnic constituencies because of an agreement entered into with a committee representing the ethnic parties.

In view of her disqualification to become the president under Article 59 (f) of the Constitution which stipulates that the candidate's legitimate children should not “owe allegiance to a foreign power” (her two sons being British citizens), she announced that “the presidential candidate will be chosen from within the party” and if such a person is not a member now, he must become a member later.

The NLD also revealed, the broad outlines of its economic platform to be implemented if it is voted to power.

Ko Ko Gyi and some other members from the 88 Generation have decided to contest the election as members of the NLD. This move has strengthened the party with the major support of the 88 Generation with which the NLD was having consultations for a long time over charter amendments.

Leading activists and academics in Myanmar are uniting behind opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi for this election with the fond hope that a major win for her party would force the military to relax its grip on power according to a report by Reuters on 23 July, 2015.

The NLD seems well poised for a major victory in the ensuing polls through it may not be a repeat performance of the 1990 polls. While it may sweep the polls in the Bamar predominant areas, the ethnic parties seem to have an edge over the NLD in the areas where the ethnic minorities are in greater numbers.

Race for the President

The president is not elected directly but through an electoral college consisting of the elected representatives of the Lower House, the elected representatives of the Upper House and the nominated military representatives. Each group proposes a candidate and the three candidates face a vote in the joint session of the parliament. The winner becomes the president and the two losers vice presidents. It is to be noted that the president need not be an elected representative. Though the general election is in November 2015 the presidential election will be only in March 2016.

With Aung San Suu Kyi disqualified for the post of the president under Article 59 (f) of the 2008 Constitution, the race has narrowed down to the following contenders.

- President Thein Sein
- Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann

- Commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing
- Candidate from the NLD

President Thein Sein: Media reports quoting some authoritative sources indicated that the president is not seeking a second term. However President's office Director Zaw Htay denied these reports and said that the president will "run for a second term based on our country's political situation". Some media reports also indicated that President Thein Sein's name does not figure in the candidates list being prepared by the USDP. Hence it seems that he is keeping his options open and decide perhaps after the outcome of the general election.

U Shwe Mann: He has time and again openly declared his ambitions for the post of the President and is working for it. The USDP faces a stiff contest this time with the NLD tipped to sweep the polls, but it has some electoral advantages with its sound finances and a wide network across the country. Shwe Mann has also been shrewd in maintaining a cordial relationship with Aung San Suu Kyi and there is an outside chance of her supporting Shwe Mann's presidency. If the support of the military block is also in his favour, he seems to have a fair chance of making it to the top post.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing: He is due to retire soon and has hinted that he will take up the top job if the situation warrants it. Though he is assured of the support of the military appointees, that alone will not help him to assume the top post. With the poor reputation of the army, neither the NLD nor the ethnic parties will back him. Hence his chances are not very bright.

Candidate from the NLD: A media report indicated that U Tin Oo aged 88 and a former Commander-in-Chief of the military or the central committee member U Win Htein may be nominated as the alternative presidential candidate. U Tin Oo has subsequently announced that he has no such ambitions. The NLD will perhaps wait for the outcome of the elections to decide.

News Analysis

The Union Election Commission has committed to conduct a "free and fair" poll this time. To this effect it is making concerted efforts in a transparent way and has assured to eradicate the irregularities noticed in the 2010 election such as advance voting.

The commission has made a deliberate effort to update the voter list and digitise the voter roll, though the parties have come up with some serious discrepancies in the voter lists.

A code of conduct for electoral observation has been finalised and put in place. The US based Carter Centre and the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) will be sending their observers to monitor the election.

Elections may not be held in some of the areas where some clashes continue to take place between the army and ethnic armed organisations. The election commissioner has in a press briefing, said that as it happened in 2010, it may be not be in a position to hold

elections in some constituencies due to the local security situation.

The efforts of the President to have a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement before the polls have not succeeded till date. Hence, this responsibility may be passed on to the new administration.

There is lot of fervour and enthusiasm in the general public for the ensuing elections and the political parties (particularly the NLD) are struggling to finalise their candidates list before the deadline (Aug.8).

Academics, political activists, reformists and some leaders of 88 Generation have decided to join hands with NLD and represent that party as candidates in their fight to vote the military out of power.

With all the mass support, the NLD is most likely to sweep the polls though it may not fare as well as in the 1990 elections.

The performance of the NLD in the Bamar predominant areas will be much better than in the ethnic controlled areas where the ethnic minority parties have an edge.

The ruling party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) despite its advantages of incumbency and wide network of branches, is rather a divided house and seems to be heading for a dismal performance.

The question arises whether the military will honour the result if the NLD sweeps the polls? Analysts are of the opinion, that this time (unlike in 1990) the results will be honoured.

In the event of a major victory for the NLD in the polls what will be the future role of Aung San Suu Kyi? Will she settle down for the post of the lower house speaker? Only time can tell.

With Aung San Suu Kyi's disqualification for the post of the president, the race has narrowed down to the three former generals – President Thein Sein, Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann and the C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. However there can be some new developments in the transition period of three months between the general election and the presidential election and the NLD fields an alternative presidential candidate.

The general election is expected to bring about some significant changes in the political set-up and become a watershed in the country's transition towards democracy.

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