

Myanmar's Political Parties and Personalities

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SUMMARY A look at the parties involved in Myanmar's 2015 general election and how the battle for the presidency might play out.

Political Parties

Major Parties

It is easy to form a political party in Myanmar. The Union Election Commission website lists 73 groups as of early May that have registered to contest the 2015 general election. Most political parties are tiny to small; only four have national presence:

- The ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)
- The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD)
- The National Unity Party (previously called the Burma Socialist Program Party)
- The National Democratic Force (NDF)

Ethnic Parties

Many parties focus on their ethnic base. Among these ethnic parties, the biggest are in Rakhine State and include the Arakan National Party (ANP), which enjoys strong support among the Rakhine Buddhists.

The ethnic parties try to coordinate among themselves on key issues. One avenue for working together is through the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation, which is a coalition of 25 ethnic parties. If this coalition does well in the ethnic minority states (where the USDP and NLD are relatively weak), then it could very well be the kingmaker in choosing the next president.

Platforms

Myanmar's political parties tend not to be differentiated by their platforms. As in other Southeast Asian countries, politics is personalized and voters differentiate between parties based on their leaders. For example, voters are aware of the NLD's leader—the charismatic Aung San Suu

Kyi—but not necessarily its position on issues. The same is true of the USDP; the only two members known to voters are Thein Sein, the incumbent president, and Shwe Mann, the speaker of the lower house of parliament and chairman of the party.

General Elections

Figure 1. Composition of Parliament

Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives, lower house)
Total Seats: 440



Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities, upper house)
Total Seats: 224



Sources: Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, "National Parliament - Overview," last accessed May 11, 2015, <http://www.alasean.org/Research/Parliament/220Watch/Legislative/National%20Parliament/Overview.php>, and Michael F. Martin, "Burma's April Parliamentary By-elections," Congressional Research Service, March 26, 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42438.pdf>.

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Number of parties registered for the 2015 vote (as of early May 2015): 73

Registration Requirements for Parties

Parties must:

- Have 1,000 members
- Have fifteen executive committee members
- Run in at least three constituencies

Campaigning

Party candidates running for election can only campaign after the 2015 election date has been announced. The campaign period is expected to last sixty days.

Leading Personalities

Aung San Suu Kyi

Party: NLD

Current Position: Chairperson of NLD

Age: 69

Key Info: Prominent opposition leader, Noble Peace Prize winner

Aung San Suu Kyi not only dominates Myanmar's political landscape like a colossus but is a well-known and well-loved political figure globally. Known as "the Lady," she has been the fearless voice of Myanmar's conscience through the last quarter century (of which fifteen years were spent under house arrest). Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 as well as a democracy icon, she has been compared by many in the West to South Africa's Nelson Mandela and



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Her party, the National League for Democracy, decisively won the 1990 election, but the vote was annulled and she was arrested. The next time the NLD entered the political fray was in the by-election of 2012 when it won 43 of 44 contested seats, almost entirely on the strength of her popular appeal.

As a member of parliament and leader of the opposition, she appears to have transformed herself from a human rights advocate into a pragmatic politician. Her statements on human rights violations carried out against the Rohingya Muslim minority and on fighting in the ethnic states disappointed many, and when she chaired a panel investigating a land-grab dispute between poor farmers and a copper mining company, she ruled in favor of the company. While this may have taken some of the shine off her reputation, she remains the most popular politician in Myanmar, with far greater support than any other political personality.

Aung San Suu Kyi cannot be nominated for the presidency because of a constitutional provision that prevents anyone whose spouse or children are foreign nationals from holding the office of president or vice president (her children are British).



Thein Sein

Party: USDP

Current Position: President

Age: 70

Key Info: Former general

The incumbent president, Thein Sein, was born in a small village and had a humble upbringing. His parents were farmers, and like many others pursuing upward mobility, he joined the army to seek his fortune. He rose steadily through the ranks in his forty-year career, reaching the armed forces' leadership circle in the 1990s when he became a member of the State Peace and Development Council.

In 2007, when the prime minister fell ill, Thein Sein was made acting prime minister and was confirmed in the post in October that year. In April

2010, he swapped his military uniform for civilian garb to form the USDP, which dominated the election in November 2010 and took control of parliament.

Many said at the time that his appointment was orchestrated by junta leader Than Shwe, who needed an acceptable face to front the country's transition. But once he took office, Thein Sein initiated a process of reform that surprised most Myanmar watchers. He met with Aung San Suu Kyi, who subsequently chose to bring her NLD party back into the political process. Known to be reserved by nature, Thein Sein nevertheless successfully chaired the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2014, engaged with world leaders, began a steady push for the West to lift sanctions, and dealt deftly with the international media.

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Shwe Mann

Party: USDP

Current Position: Speaker of lower house and Union Parliament speaker

Age: 67

Key Info: Former general, also currently USDP chairperson

Although he doesn't command the celebrity status of Aung San Suu Kyi and lacks the prestige of Thein Sein, Shwe Mann has become a credible candidate for the presidency by gaining a reputation as a reformer and a person who can bring disparate sides together. He has single-handedly helped grow parliament's authority relative to the executive, which may emerge as an important foundation for a stable democratic system in Myanmar.

Shwe Mann is one of the few good options for the presidency at the moment and would be a compelling candidate. And most observers of Myanmar believe he is ambitious and has his eye on the presidency.

But allegations of shady practices by members of his family could plague his bid for the highest office. Moreover, he has to contend with the prospect that President Thein Sein has not completely ruled out running for a second term.

Min Aung Hlaing

Party: None (active military)

Current Position: Commander in chief

Age: 60

Key Info: Expected to retire from the military soon

The third potential contender is Min Aung Hlaing, the charismatic commander in chief of the armed forces who is due to retire soon and could make a bid for the presidency. Min Aung Hlaing, like Thein Sein, joined the army and rose to prominence in 2009 after leading an offensive against the insurgent Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in Kokang, one of the country's northernmost areas near the Chinese border. In June 2010, he became joint chief of staff of the army, navy, and air force, and he was promoted to senior general in March 2013.

Min Aung Hlaing is known for his strong adherence to the Myanmar military doctrine of total defense and his tough stance against the ethnic armed groups. Because of this, it is difficult to see how he will find support for his presidential bid from either the NLD or the ethnic parties.

The Battle for the Presidency

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barred from running for the presidency, the three principal contenders are likely to be Thein Sein, Shwe Mann, and Min Aung Hlaing.

The USDP can count on all of the military's votes in parliament, which adds up to 25 percent of the total, so it needs just another 25 percent to get its proposed candidate over the line. But even if it wins a smaller proportion of the seats—which is very likely—it could still fashion a coalition with some of the ethnic groups that trust the USDP.

Since Min Aung Hlaing has little popular support in parliament, the battle for the presidency is most likely to boil down to a contest between Shwe Mann and Thein Sein. The military trusts Thein Sein more than it does Shwe Mann, who

it believes may have become too much of a reformer and could, as president, possibly weaken the military further.

The NLD is likely to win the most seats in the new parliament. But if the USDP wins enough seats to fashion a coalition with the support of the armed forces faction and some ethnic parties, then it is very possible that despite being the largest group in parliament, the NLD could still remain an opposition party.

Aung San Suu Kyi, as leader of the party that is likely to garner the most parliamentary seats, will probably become the speaker of the lower house, so her relationship with the next president will become crucial. She and the president will have to work closely together to design and push legislation through parliament, placing her in a politically powerful position.

There is also the small chance that the NLD could win over two-thirds of the seats in parliament. Then, notwithstanding the 25 percent military vote in parliament, the NLD would command a majority of the votes in the Presidential Electoral College that will elect the president. In this scenario, Aung San Suu Kyi could alone decide who the next president will be. She may still choose a candidate from among the two USDP leaders—Shwe Mann and Thein Sein—or she could reach deep into the NLD and pick a relative unknown. But the winner in such a scenario would unequivocally be Aung San Suu Kyi herself, for not only would she be the speaker of the lower house, she would also become the country's de facto shadow president.

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