

After the Vote: Myanmar's Junta-Run Election and the Illusion of Normalcy

Elsa Jade, DTP Alumna

Nearly five years after the 2021 coup, Myanmar's military authorities are proceeding with so-called elections amid widespread fear, displacement, and indiscriminate violence across a fragile country. Attention has shifted from whether the vote can be completed to how the region and the international community will respond once it is held. **The real danger is not the completion of the vote, but whether it will be treated as a basis for political legitimacy and renewed engagement despite continued violence and exclusion.**

The elections are being held in three phases due to ongoing conflict and limited territorial control. The first phase took place on 28 December, followed by a second on 11 January, with a third scheduled for 25 January. Voting has occurred in 202 of Myanmar's 330 townships, while at least 65 are excluded due to active fighting.

Voting has taken place mainly in areas under military control, leaving large parts of the population, including those in conflict-affected and resistance-held areas, excluded. Even where voting occurred, the environment raises serious questions about the credibility and fairness of the process: heavy military presence, tightly restricted access at polling stations, repression of free expression, and reports of intimidation suggest participation was often compelled rather than freely chosen.

Turnout figures released by the authorities remain opaque and unverifiable, but available indications suggest participation is significantly lower than in previous elections, including the 2020 polls. Low turnout in this context should not be interpreted as disengagement, but as further evidence of widespread public rejection of a process conducted without choice, competition, or trust.

The electoral playing field itself has been carefully managed. **The clear winner of previous elections and the most popular party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), has been banned and is not on the ballot papers.** As a result, the military-backed [Union Solidarity and Development Party \(USDP\)](#) has dominated each phase of voting, benefiting from the dissolution or exclusion of major opposition forces, the detention or exile of political leaders, and the systematic elimination of independent media. Smaller, aligned parties have been permitted to compete, but only within tightly controlled boundaries designed to ensure that no genuine challenge to military power can emerge.

This process allows the military to claim progress along a political roadmap while deflecting attention from realities on the ground, including ongoing airstrikes, forced conscription, mass displacement, and a deepening humanitarian crisis. The vote does not resolve these conditions; it coexists with them. **How can an election conducted amid violence and instability be deemed free, fair, or credible?**

The risk, however, extends not only within Myanmar but beyond it. History shows that elections—however flawed—can become convenient reference points for external actors seeking re-engagement. For some governments prioritizing stability, the mere occurrence of voting can be misread as a basis for resuming business-as-usual diplomacy.

Ultimately, **the question is not whether engagement with Myanmar will resume, but on what terms?** In my view, electoral sequencing alone should not become a pathway to political recognition. Recognition of any government emerging from this process—absent meaningful political inclusion and an end to violence—risks legitimizing a political order sustained by force rather than the will of the people.

For ASEAN, the implications are especially acute. The bloc has invested political capital in managing the Myanmar crisis, yet its credibility depends on distinguishing engagement from endorsement. Despite formally endorsing ASEAN's 2021 Five-Point Consensus, the junta continues to defy its obligations by refusing dialogue and escalating attacks against civilians. In this context, treating the election as a sufficient political milestone would undermine ASEAN's stated commitments to inclusive dialogue and regional stability.

The same applies to international actors beyond the region. **Targeted sanctions and non-recognition of the election results—and any government formed through them**—remain essential tools to signal that elections alone do not confer legitimacy. Rolling back these measures simply because voting occurred would risk entrenching impunity and deepening violence.

Myanmar's crisis is not one of incomplete procedure, but of unresolved power. An election conducted under conditions of exclusion, fear, and force does not close the chapter opened by the 2021 coup; it reframes it. If phased voting is allowed to substitute for genuine political progress, the result will not be stability, but the premature normalization of a crisis that Myanmar's people continue to endure rather than choose.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect those of any organization with which she is affiliated.