

# Election Watch for the Digital Age



## Myanmar

### Preelection assessment

*General elections set for November 2020*

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Myanmar held its first open and competitive elections in 2015. After decades of military rule, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) handily defeated the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Suu Kyi is barred from the presidency under citizenship rules but serves as de facto leader and heads several key portfolios. Under the constitution, the military controls 25 percent of legislative seats and oversees the country's ministries of defense, home affairs, and border affairs.

General elections scheduled for November 2020 will see the NLD again face the USDP, as well as numerous ethnic parties. Harassment, prosecution, and surveillance of the media and civil society contribute to a tenuous electoral environment, as well as doubts over the independence of the election commission, the reliability of voter rolls, and early voting procedures. Buddhist nationalism features prominently in Burmese politics, and the country's citizenship and electoral laws disenfranchise many members of ethnic minorities, including the predominantly Muslim Rohingyas. Over 700,000 Rohingya refugees fled to neighboring Bangladesh in response to the military's [ethnic cleansing](#) campaign in 2017. Ongoing conflict between the military and various ethnic armed organizations remains a threat to peaceful election administration in several areas of the country. Internet penetration stands at approximately 35 percent, leaving many voters reliant on progovernment television and radio outlets for news and information and exacerbating the digital divide, particularly in rural areas.

Myanmar has a score of 35 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. Myanmar's score reflects limits on free expression and ongoing conflict and human rights abuses against religious and ethnic minorities. It is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 30 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and **Not Free** in *Freedom on the Net*, with an internet freedom score of 36 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Myanmar country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Hate speech and violence:** The internet is an important vector for violence and hatred against Myanmar's marginalized groups. Investigators concluded that false rumors and incendiary speech shared on social media, notably Facebook, played a role in the [atrocities](#) against the Rohingya. Political leaders, the military, and religious extremists may continue to stoke hatred and violence online in the lead-up to the election, heightening tensions in Myanmar.
- **Shutdowns:** A partial internet shutdown in villages in Rakhine and Chin states has been in place for over a year. The shutdown hinders residents' access to electoral resources, and may signal a willingness on the part of the government to extend similar shutdowns to other parts of the country during a political crisis.

- **Influence operations:** The military has a record of surreptitiously manipulating online discourses in Myanmar. An influence campaign by the military was reported around the 2018 by-elections, while nearly 700 military officers allegedly participated in a multi-year Facebook operation. The prevalence of information campaigns in past years suggests they are likely to occur during the 2020 election.
- **Censorship:** Having previously refrained from blocking online content, in March 2020 the government ordered service providers to restrict access to several independent and regional news outlets known for reporting on developments in conflict areas. The dramatic escalation in censorship in an election year demonstrates that the governing authorities may not be shy to enact more censorial tactics to secure the election.
- **Arrests and intimidation:** Activists, online journalists, and members of civil society face criminal charges for their online activities, particularly when criticizing the government, public officials, and the military. Violence and intimidation are especially common in relation to politically sensitive issues, such as the Rohingya crisis.