Elections as Spectacle: Myanmar's Manufactured Legitimacy

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/12/22/elections-as-spectacle-myanmars-manufactured-legitimacy/

FEDERICA CIDALE, DEC 22 2025

More than four years after seizing power in the February 2021 coup, Myanmar's military junta set 28 December 2025 as the date for a nationwide general election: less a commitment to democratic transition than an attempt to manufacture legitimacy. After nearly half a century of military dictatorship, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won consecutive landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 elections. In response to the 2020 general election results, the military baselessly claimed voter fraud as justification for its coup, with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing asserting that "there was terrible fraud in the voter list during the democratic general election." However, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) affirmed that the 2020 results reflected the genuine will of the people and found no evidence of widespread fraud. Although Min Aung Hlaing pledged to 'restore democracy', in July 2023 the junta once again postponed the elections, extending the state of emergency and claiming it needed more time to prepare. Although the junta did not announce the long-awaited election date until August 2025, the repeated delay was unsurprising given its deteriorating control over Myanmar.

Soon after the coup, people resisted through nationwide protests and a civil disobedience movement, followed by an armed resistance to defend themselves against junta atrocities. Throughout 2023, the military suffered major territorial and manpower losses, particularly after Operation 1027, launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which dealt a severe blow to junta forces. By 2024, the military controlled only about 21% of the country, while the People's Defence Forces (PDF) and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) held roughly 42%.

Meanwhile, the junta intensified its campaign of violence. As stated in the September 2025 ANFREL report, between 1 April 2022 and 9 September 2025, there were 32,267 conflict-related deaths, including 8,001 civilians, along with over 2,500 airstrikes and more than 4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) since the coup. This is not counting the devastation of the 7.7-magnitude earthquake that struck on 28 March 2025 with its epicentre in Sagaing, near Mandalay, which claimed 3,800 lives and left 5,100 injured (as of April 2025). In the aftermath, the junta worsened the crisis by selectively accepting humanitarian aid only from its allies while continuing airstrikes against its own population, even as rescue operations were underway. Most recently, in early October 2025, an army paraglider attack on a Buddhist festival killed 24 people.

Given these circumstances—where the military has illegally seized power and subsequently unleashed violence against its own people—it cannot realistically be expected to hold a peaceful, free, and fair election. The central question, then, is what purpose the election truly serves. Is it an attempt to restore democratic legitimacy or a staged performance designed to justify continued authoritarian rule? In light of these conditions, can the election be considered legitimate at all?

Having elections is not the determining factor for democracy; rather, it is its ability to guarantee fundamental rights, uphold an independent judiciary, protect freedom of expression, and ensure political equality. A functioning democracy is built on strong institutions. Its most essential political institutions are (1) elected officials, (2) free, fair, and frequent elections, (3) freedom of expression, (4) access to alternative sources of information, (5) right of association, and (6) inclusive citizenship. Democracy flourishes where institutions foster a shared distribution of power and enable citizens' active participation in political life. The rule of law, ensured by "an independent, capable,

and constitutionally authoritative judiciary," is conducive to this process. On the other hand, countries holding elections but characterised by weaker institutions often struggle to establish a fully functioning democracy.

This is evident in Myanmar, when the country transitioned to a "disciplined democracy" in 2011 and held elections, albeit flawed, in 2015 and 2020. Despite these developments, horizontal and vertical accountability institutions remained weak, with the military retaining significant control. The junta crafted the 2008 constitution to reserve 25% of the seats in the bicameral parliament for themselves, and the judiciary system is yet to be fully independent. Establishing these institutions in such conditions poses significant challenges, particularly in the context of post-colonial states such as Myanmar. The pre-existing institutions were extractive in nature, designed to exploit the territory's resources rather than participatory governance. Recognizing that elections alone do not make a democracy, but that pluralistic institutions and systems of vertical and horizontal accountability do, one must ask whether elections in Myanmar, and the power derived from them, can even be considered legitimate.

David Beetham (1991) challenges the Weberian idea that legitimacy rests merely on a population's belief in legitimacy. He proposes a normative model with three criteria for assessing the legitimacy of power. First, power must be acquired and exercised according to established rules. Under Beetham's framework, the 2021 military coup d'état clearly represents an act of illegitimacy. A coup, while preserving state sovereignty, constitutes an illegal seizure of power that breaches constitutional order. Such violations cast doubt on the legal validity of all subsequent government actions. Myanmar's 2021 coup continues a long pattern of unconstitutional seizures of power—first in 1962, when Ne Win installed a socialist military regime, and again after the nationwide 8888 Uprising in 1988. These episodes illustrate that state authority has repeatedly been taken without popular consent and in defiance of established rules. After each coup, the junta promised elections as a signal of a return to democracy.

Second, the rules of power must be justified by shared beliefs of both the dominant and the subordinate.Legitimate power requires that those in authority be competent to rule and that the political structure serve the common good rather than the narrow interests of an elite. Neither of these conditions is met in Myanmar. The modern state requires its authority to be anchored in its people. If the junta manipulates the electoral process, it violates the principle of popular authority on which legitimacy rests. The military's elections, whether in 2010 or the upcoming 2025 ones, are an attempt to apply a democratic façade while violating this core principle. A government's legitimacy also depends on its ability to provide public goods, like protecting its people's economic and social security. Yet the junta controls around 20% of Myanmar's territory and is actively waging war against its citizens, further exacerbating the Myanmar people's economic situation. This not only undermines the state's primary task in protecting its citizens but also exposes a government failing its most basic purpose: sovereignty over its territory.

Third, legitimacy involves a demonstrable expression of consent. Consent is manifested through acts of participation like voting in elections. If elections are controlled, limited to certain pre-approved candidates (2025 new electoral law), or manipulated in a way to secure an expected outcome (2008 constitution), they lose their legitimacy and result in a "semi-legitimate, or incompletely legitimated, government." Beetham emphasizes that military regimes, by definition, are "non-legitimated" precisely because they exclude the people from political participation. The military's attempt to hold elections in 2025 can be considered an effort to secure legitimation without meeting the necessary conditions, just like the 2010 elections, which were used by the regime to transition to a civilian façade without a real transfer of power. The ongoing civil war is a perfect example of delegitimation: the population's withdrawal of consent is expressed through armed resistance and civil disobedience. It is not only from ethnic minorities, who have long had grievances against the military, but also from ethnic Bamars in Myanmar's heartland. Moreover, just a few weeks before the election is supposed to take place, opponents of the military staged a Silent Strike, calling on people to stay indoors to boycott the elections. Streets in Yangon and elsewhere were shown to be nearly empty—yet another show of defiance against the regime.

According to Beetham's analysis of how regimes attempt to cultivate the appearance of consent, the 2025 elections function as a staged performance rather than a genuine transfer of power, resulting in an "incompletely legitimated" power structure. Far from stabilizing the state, such staged performances of democracy deepen the crisis of authority by showing the world the dissonance between the junta's claims to rule and the evident people's refusal to consent, exemplified by their continuous resistance.

The military junta has stated that it will conduct the 2025 election in phases, showing a cautious approach. This gradual rollout is a clear testament to the Myanmar junta not fully controlling its territory, as many townships are affected by active conflicts and are under martial law. This situation makes nationwide elections impossible in one single instance. According to ANFREL, the first phase is scheduled for 28 December in 102 townships, with two additional phases planned for January, though few details have been released. In total, elections are expected in 267 townships—a decline from the 325 townships that participated in the previous general elections—while 121 constituencies will hold votes even if some are under martial law.

To make matters worse in an already messy electoral process, the junta enacted a new electoral law in January 2023, imposing stricter requirements on party registration. Under this law, anyone leading a party who has previously been convicted of a crime is barred from participating, effectively excluding figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi, who was previously indicted for opposing the junta. With the judiciary lacking independence, the junta can weaponize this law to disqualify political opponents. Further tightening control, in July 2025, another law was introduced imposing severe penalties for disrupting elections. Obstruction of the electoral process carries prison sentences of three to ten years, while threats or attacks against election commission personnel can result in three years to life imprisonment. Any killing related to the election process carries the death penalty. Since they claim the 2020 elections were fraudulent, it appears that they want to ensure that no such problem will emerge again by enacting these laws.

As of September 2025, only nine of the 61 registered parties have been allowed to run, including the military-backed USDP, the National Unity Party (NUP), and the Democratic Party of National Politics (DNP), all led by former generals. Democratic activist Ko Ko Gyi leads the People's Party, one of the few non-military parties participating. This indicates that candidates must be pre-approved by the military to join the elections.

From past to present, elections have often served as staged performances of progress rather than genuine transfers of power. The 2010 election—and now the 2025 military-engineered vote—display only the façade of political reform, offering an illusion of advancement while leaving real authority firmly in the junta's hands. For the military, elections are a convenient narrative device: a way to give credence to their theatre of power and manufacture the smallest veneer of legitimacy even when much of the country is collapsing under conflict. This dynamic mirrors other authoritarian contexts, such as Russia or Belarus, where elections are held ceremonially to maintain the appearance of democracy.

The junta's authority is illegitimate from the outset: it was seized through a coup, undermining the very foundation of democratic rule. Those in power do not serve the common good, despite their claims to the contrary, since the majority of Myanmar's people continue to oppose military rule, endure poverty, and live with shattered and biased institutions. Finally, consent is absent: the population is collectively resisting the regime, and the electoral process itself is tightly controlled and openly manipulated. In this context, the 2025 election is not a step toward political change but another chapter in a long-running performance designed to mask the persistence of military domination, a repetition of Myanmar's post-war history.

About the author:

Federica Cidale is a PhD student in International Relations and Asian Studies at Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic and a CEIAS Research Fellow. Her main research delves into the growing influence of cybertechnologies on international politics and extends to Japan's domestic politics, East Asian security, the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN—particularly Myanmar—and non-Western state systems such as Mandala.