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Myanmar's 2020 General Elections: A Vote with No Confidence for Many Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Mass disenfranchisement a hallmark of 2020 elections

[26 October, 2020] Systemic racism, egregious human rights abuses, and the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities pose major challenges in carrying out a free and fair elections in Myanmar, Progressive Voice said in a briefing paper released today.

“The current electoral process legitimizes and further entrenches the grievous discrimination and systemic racism experienced by ethnic and religious minorities for decades,” said Nang Zun Moe, Executive Director of Progressive Voice. “This is not just another election; it is an election in a country that has committed grave international crimes, including genocide. The international community must ensure that Myanmar’s elections meet international standards and that they are conducted in accordance with democratic standards. This includes not supporting or endorsing Myanmar election activities, materials or tools that legitimize and entrench discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities and incite hate,” she continued.

The new briefing paper titled “A Vote with No Confidence: Myanmar’s 2020 General Elections and the Rights of Ethnic and Religious Minorities” outlines grave flaws within the current electoral process and several overriding, interconnected human rights challenges that undermine international standards required for democratic elections to take place. These problems include, ultranationalism and a discriminatory tiered citizenship framework and laws that prohibit the participation of Rohingya and other ethnic and religious minorities from voting or running in the elections; ongoing armed conflict and displacement in ethnic areas; continuing crackdown on freedom of expression; and the military-drafted 2008 Constitution which allows the military to reserve 25% of parliamentary seats. Moreover, concerns remain over the role of the Myanmar military in influencing the vote through means such as advance voting, moving battalions to swing constituencies, causing insecurity as a tactic to cancel polling, or intimidate voters. Meanwhile, on 16 October, the Union Election Committee (UEC) unilaterally decided to partially or totally cancel elections in 56 townships in ethnic areas citing ongoing conflict and unrest. These conditions fail fundamentally to meet international standards for democratic elections and severely undermine the integrity of the UEC and the electoral process.

Despite these issues, the 2020 elections will take place on 8 November, but it will be a vote with no confidence for the large portion of Myanmar’s disenfranchised and marginalized ethnic and religious minorities.

International standards, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, require that every citizen, on a universal and equal basis without discrimination, has the right to vote.

However, pervasive hate speech, anti-minority attitudes and pressure from Bamar Buddhist ultranationalists, the ethnicity-fixated 1982 Citizenship Law, and its implementation through the discriminatory and arbitrary issuance or non-issuance of various forms of citizenship documentation are resulting in the violation of civil and political rights for Myanmar's ethnic and religious minorities. Almost the entire Rohingya population, including more than a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and large numbers of other ethnic and religious minorities will be unable to vote in the coming general elections.

"The election results will not reflect the will of the people when so many people have been disenfranchised and denied their right to vote based on their ethnicity and religion," stated Rin Fujimatsu, Advocacy Director at Progressive Voice. "The racist laws and policies arbitrarily exclude certain ethnic and religious groups from Myanmar, while oppressing others. This is a system that favors the Bamar-Buddhist status quo built and supported by successive military regimes that have inserted discrimination into all functions of the State apparatus and psyche. This must be meaningfully dismantled and rejected."

Further compounding this mass disenfranchisement and marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities is the ongoing conflict that continues unabated in ethnic areas, particularly in Rakhine State where fierce fighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military has led to over 220,000 displacements since the fighting began. Hundreds of thousands more are displaced in Shan, Kachin, Karen, Mon and Karenni States and Tanintharyi Region and in refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border who will also unlikely be able to vote. Such displacement as a result of conflict will impact voting demographics and election results, further undermining the 2020 general elections.

"Disenfranchisement and marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities was a feature in the 2015 elections, and the government has made no efforts to facilitate their participation and inclusion in the 2020 elections. Mass voter disenfranchisement due to systemic racism and conflict-related displacement will become the hallmark of this election. Further restricting the political space of ethnic people is antithetical to national reconciliation and peace building and will only lead to further conflict," said Nang Zun Moe.

The briefing paper makes several calls, including for the UEC to immediately revoke the announcement of cancelled polling in constituencies in Bago Region, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan States and to ensure persons in conflict affected areas entitled to vote are able to exercise that right freely and safely. It calls on the Myanmar government to repeal or amend the 1982 Citizenship Law, as well as 2010 Election Laws to genuinely reflect international laws and standards and the diversity of Myanmar's ethnic and religious communities. In addition, it calls on the international community to support ongoing international justice mechanisms to ensure justice and accountability for all human rights violations committed against ethnic and religious minorities by members of the Myanmar military and security forces.

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