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Political Parties and Popular Representation in Myanmar's Democratisation Process

Kristian Stokke, Khine Win, and Soe Myint Aung

Abstract: The article examines the role of political parties in Myanmar's democratisation process. We argue that the substance of democratisation depends on popular representation through political parties but question their capacity to provide such representation. Examining capacity through the concept of party institutionalisation, we find that most parties have not been able to build effective organisational structures. However, we also find a degree of party institutionalisation in the form of rootedness in society. Political cleavages between those favouring authoritarian rule over democratic rule and Burman nationhood over ethnic notions of nationhood have produced divisions between state-centred parties associated with Myanmar's authoritarian legacy and society-centred pro-democracy and ethnic parties. Although being less dichotomous than in the past, we argue that these cleavages continue to provide a basis for party identity and rootedness in society. We conclude that further development of political parties and popular representation will be shaped by the relations between parties, the state, and society – where individual parties are shaped according to their tendencies towards state-centred cartel parties or society-centred mass parties.

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Keywords: Myanmar, democratisation, political parties, popular representation

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Introduction

Myanmar has been experiencing a democratic opening since the election of Thein Sein as president, which has created optimism about the possibilities for democratisation, peace, and development after decades of military rule, protracted intrastate conflicts, and persistent underdevelopment (Cheesman, Farrelly, and Wilson 2014; Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson 2012; Gravers and Ytzen 2014). The Thein Sein government has made a series of concessions, such as releasing political prisoners; relaxing media censorship; widening the space for unions and civil society organisations (CSOs); changing government discourse on peace, democracy, and federalism; holding by-elections, which saw pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) elected to parliament; signing ceasefire agreements with various Karen, Shan, Mon, Naga, and Chin ethnic armed groups; and liberalising the economy. In return, European Union member states, the United States, and other Western states have moved towards normalised diplomatic relations with Myanmar by lifting or suspending sanctions and increasing aid and investments, *inter alia*. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Japan have welcomed the reforms and have expanded their engagement with Myanmar. China, meanwhile, is continuing its economic engagement with Myanmar while keeping a close watch on the country's reforms and changing international relations (Egreteau 2010; Legêne and Ytzen 2014; Lintner 2014; McCarthy 2010; Min Zin 2010; Renshaw 2013; Rieffel 2010; Sun 2012).

Although Myanmar's democratic opening has been met with optimism, observers still have critical questions and concerns about the dynamics and substantive outcomes of the reform process. The ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is seemingly implementing limited reforms without giving up any structural levers of power (Bunte 2011, 2013; Croissant and Kamerling 2013). It may thus be argued that the reform process is primarily a calculated move to sustain economic and political power with increased domestic and international legitimacy, and that this strategy is possible due to the changing balance of power between China and the United States in Southeast Asia (Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson 2010; Holliday 2011; Lintner 2014; Steinberg and Fan 2012). Four years after the initial democratic opening, the reform process appears to have stalled. The political parties and CSOs that opposed military governance and championed democracy and federalism remain politically marginalised, which is evidenced by the lack of substantive negotiations on constitutional change and conflict resolution. Moreover, ordinary people are now experiencing changes that are

negatively affecting their livelihoods – for example, intensified resource grabbing, resumed armed hostilities, and the rise of ethno-religious violence. In stark contrast, oligarchic actors and networks in the private sector, government, and military are benefitting from the greater economic opportunities presented by economic liberalisation and lifted international sanctions (Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein 2015; Jones 2014). Myanmar's transition may thus be seen as a top-down process whereby limited democratic reform and increased economic opportunities (enabled by changing international relations) primarily benefit autocrats and oligarchs (Egretreau 2014; Gravers and Ytzen 2014; Pedersen 2014; Slater and Wong 2013; Sun 2012; Wilson 2014).

The current political opening in Myanmar challenges existing perspectives on democratisation since it cannot be adequately understood through structural approaches that emphasise economic development or mass mobilisation; nor is it being negotiated and agreed upon by the elite. Instead, it appears to be an imposed transition whereby the ruling elite is defining the pace and agenda of reform. This strategy is facilitated by the regime's position of relative strength in domestic politics combined with changing international relations that provide opportunities for a guided and sequenced transition to a hybrid form of rule. It is, however, also a process in which a broad diversity of political parties and popular movements are seeking to engage in order to promote substantive democracy and conflict resolution. It is this which makes the trajectory and outcome of democratisation open-ended and unknown. In this situation, the future of democracy in Myanmar is highly dependent on the capacity of different political actors to organise and represent popular interests and to promote institutional reforms and policies that make democracy real and meaningful to ordinary people (Bunte forthcoming).

The present article contributes to the understanding of current democratisation politics in Myanmar by examining the capacity of political parties to represent popular interests in society. Using data collected after the by-elections in 2012 but before the elections scheduled for November 2015, we conduct an exploratory analysis of emerging party–society relations in the context of Myanmar's democratic opening. Specifically, we look at the role of political parties, which are struggling to develop their strategies and capacities in an environment where the conditions for political representation are in flux. Given this state of continuous change and the fact that there are few studies of political parties in Myanmar in the current era, our analysis and conclusions should be read as preliminary.

This article is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants at the central level from the NLD and the parties organised within the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF) and the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) in 2014 and 2015. Extensive focus group discussions were held with selected NLD policy committees, key leaders within the NBF, and the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society. We also conducted a number of political training courses and workshops for political parties and CSOs. These training activities provide access to a broad diversity of leaders and activists in CSOs and political parties (including the ruling USDP), especially at the local level. Information on the organisational characteristics of political parties and the relations between parties and CSOs was gathered through numerous informal conversations and group discussions during such courses and workshops. The synthesising analysis presented here is based on these interviews, focus group discussions, and other informal discussions. Due to our interviewees' expressed concerns about anonymity and the informal nature of the data-gathering process, we summarise our findings without using direct quotes from our respondents.

In the next section we place our analysis within the literature on political parties and party systems in new democracies. In the subsequent sections, we examine the character and dynamics of Myanmar's party system and political parties, which includes a brief historical review of political parties. Given the elitist character of the current reform process, we argue that Myanmar is in a situation where the progress and substance of democratisation are critically dependent on popular representation through political parties; however, we question these parties' capacities to provide such representation. Examining capacity through the concept of party institutionalisation, we find that most parties have not been able to build effective organisational structures. Nevertheless, we also find a degree of party institutionalisation in the form of rootedness in society. We conclude that the further development of political parties and popular representation in Myanmar will be shaped by relations between parties, the state, and society – where individual parties are shaped according to their tendencies towards state-centred cartel parties or society-centred mass parties.

Political Parties in New Democracies

Recent decades have seen a global spread of democracy but also widespread concerns about the substance of democracy in post-transition societies. Although these transitions have produced the basic institutions

of electoral democracy, many new democracies are characterised by hybrid forms of governance and remain somewhere between authoritarian and democratic rule (Carothers 2002; Croissant and Bünte 2011; Levitsky and Way 2010; Ottaway 2003). In those cases where transitions have resulted in consolidated formal democracies, neo-liberal and depoliticised forms of governance hamper substantive political inclusion, conflict resolution, and inclusive development (Harriss, Stokke, and Törnquist 2004). It can thus be argued that recent transitions have tended to lead to semi-authoritarian and depoliticised governance rather than substantive democracy.

Critical assessments of democratic transitions have pointed to the character of such transitions as the key explanation behind the flawed outcomes. Elitist negotiations and pacts grant positions of power to autocrats, moderate reformers, and business interests while sidelining more genuine pro-democracy elites and popular movements (Harriss, Stokke, and Törnquist 2004). Weak popular representation has been a common trait in many democratic transitions and a determining factor behind the prevalence of minimalist rather than substantive democratic outcomes (Törnquist, Webster, and Stokke 2009). This makes the form and degree of political inclusion a primary concern both during and after democratic transitions and also raises critical questions about the mediating links between citizens and the state. While social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, interest groups, media, and traditional authorities may function as political intermediaries, political parties remain the primary channel for representation (Carothers 2006; Törnquist, Webster, and Stokke 2009). Historical and contemporary examples of successful transformations support this view and also demonstrate the importance of broad alliances between political parties and civil society (Sandbrook et al. 2007). It is through continuous transformative politics – whereby pro-democracy parties, popular mass movements, interest organisations, and local issue mobilisations use and transform political spaces – that minimalist democratic institutions are gradually moulded into substantive democratic ones (Carothers 2007; Stokke and Törnquist 2013). Therefore, it is critical to understand what political strategies and capacities pro-democracy parties and their allies have during and after transitions to formal democracy and how effective they are.

Recent years have seen increased critical attention given to the role of political parties in new democracies, which has revealed persistent and severe shortcomings in the performance of parties in democratic politics. Randall, for example, reviews the role of parties in democratic developmental states and finds that “parties do not, characteristically, add to the

overall legitimacy of the system, but may be one of its weakest links” (Randall 2007: 642). This negative assessment is echoed by Carothers (2006), who finds that there is a deep distrust and widespread criticism of political parties in many new democracies. Despite the prevalent understanding that political parties are indispensable to democracy (Lipset 2000), the implication of such research is that political parties’ actual contributions are limited or even have a negative effect.

Such critical assessments prompt the following question: What factors explain these observed and common shortcomings? In the literature it is commonly argued that parties in new democracies are poorly institutionalised (Carothers 2006; Mietzner 2013; Tomsa and Ufen 2013; Webb and White 2009). Unlike old democracies, which are characterised by political parties and ideologies that are rooted in structural cleavages in society (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), new democracies are typically characterised by electoral volatility, party fragmentation, weak party identification, and low voter turnout (Mietzner 2013; Webb and White 2009). Tomsa and Ufen (2013: 2) especially highlight the prominence of clientelism, which “stands in contrast to rule-based organisational procedures and the development of programmatic cleavage-based voter linkages.”

The notion of party institutionalisation is based on a broad sociological conceptualisation of institutions and includes both organisational stability and value infusion. The oft-cited framework proposed by Randall and Svåsand (2002) takes this dual meaning as its point of departure while also emphasising that institutionalisation involves both internal developments within a party and external relations with society. The stability dimension of institutionalisation thus refers to both internal “party organisation” and “roots in society.” A high level of “party organisation” indicates that a party has nationwide organisational presence, membership strength, regular party congresses, and material and human resources. Strong “roots in society” imply that the party has extensive, stable electoral support and active links to CSOs. The value dimension of institutionalisation refers to both internal “value coherence” and the external “decisional autonomy” of political parties. Internal “value coherence” means that a party acts as a unified organisation behind a shared set of values while also displaying tolerance of intra-party dissidence. “Decisional autonomy” means that a party can make decisions relatively independently of organisations and external interests. These core dimensions of institutionalisation have been studied empirically in a number of quantitative and comparative assessments, providing broad support for the thesis of weak party institutionalisation while also denot-

ing contextual diversity among new democracies (Croissant and Völkel 2012; Webb and White 2009).

Turning to the explanations for weak party institutionalisation, Carothers (2006) observes that there is a tendency to overemphasise the newness of parties while downplaying the effects of their political context. The most decisive factor, he argues, is that parties in many new democracies have to be electoralist from the start. This stands in contrast to parties in old democracies, which have evolved gradually from small cadre parties of socio-economic elites into cleavage-based mass parties (in the context of industrialised and class-divided society) to electoralist parties (in the context of post-industrial society, growing middle classes, and consumer culture) (Ufen 2013). Whereas mass-based parties are ideological organisations that stem from cleavages in society and represent the interests of their constituencies, electoralist parties focus on mobilising broad electoral support (Gunther and Diamond 2003). The rapid introduction of elections to new democracies means that new parties tend to mushroom with little time to develop internal capacity or build ideological programmes that reflect cleavages in society. Instead, parties take the form of issue- and personality-centred networks aimed at gaining power through elections (Tomsa and Ufen 2013).

The analytical lesson is that party institutionalisation must be understood within the respective political context. Mietzner (2013) broadens Carothers' focus on electoralism by highlighting the parallels between weak party institutionalisation in new democracies and deinstitutionalisation in old democracies, suggesting that both may be reflective of broad transformations that transcend the dichotomy between old and new democracies. Of particular relevance here is Katz and Mair's (1995) cartel party theory, in which they argue that contemporary parties are increasingly shaped by their relationships with the state and that cleavage structures and group interests in society become less important as parties turn their attention to the state. This has a clear impact on internal party organisation in the sense that mass parties are replaced by centralised professional parties, which act as brokers between social groups and the state. The centrality of state–party relations also affects inter-party competition in the sense that the tendency to form cartels reduces competition between parties. Even though this theory of cartel parties originates from Western European experiences and should not be transferred uncritically, the importance of state–society relations for party politics resonates with the contextual experiences and debates in many new democracies (Mietzner 2013; Tomsa and Ufen 2013; Webb and White 2009).

As such, it may also hold some relevance for the further development of political parties in Myanmar.

The Emerging Party System in Myanmar

The character and dynamics of individual political parties should be understood in the context of the party system in general (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Mair 2006; Siavelis 2006; Wolinetz 2006). Myanmar has a rudimentary party system that is evolving against the background of the democratic opening. Yet, it also contains relatively stable inter-party relations with roots in earlier periods of electoral party politics, especially the periods from independence in 1948 to the military coup in 1962 and the years before and after the 1990 election.

The first political parties in Myanmar have their origins in the mass-based organisations established in the early twentieth century. Inspired by the nationalist movements in India and Britain, they initially sought to protect religion and culture; in the 1920s, however, they began to make political demands (Cady 1946; Taylor 2009). The British introduced the first Legislative Council election in 1922 to implement the Dyarchy system of administration – dual rule with limited responsibilities for Burmese in government. This prompted the first splits to occur in the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), hitherto the largest mass organisation. While one faction formed a political party and won a significant number of seats, others chose to boycott electoral politics and refused to cooperate with the colonial state (Cady 1946; Steinberg 2006). Burmese parties – which were mostly small, urban, and elite-driven – continued to emerge at the 1925, 1928, and 1932 elections.

In 1930 Burmese nationalists founded the Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association) or the Thakin Party, the most important pre-war political organisation. Thakins, as its members were known, drew their inspirations from a panoply of ideologies popular at the time, ranging from Nazi fascism to revolutionary Marxism–Leninism to reformist Fabian socialism. When the Government of Burma Act 1935 separated Burma from British India and created a bicameral legislature, the Dobama Asiayone formed a branch party to compete in the 1936 general election. The party was further strengthened when youthful nationalist leaders joined its ranks between 1937 and 1938. The Marxist-inspired Thakins, however, were more interested in peasant rebellions, labour strikes, and student strikes than in legislative politics (Cady 1946). As the Thakin Party transformed itself into a Marxist ideology-based party, leftist tendencies of various shades began to emerge within the organisa-

tion (Furnivall 1949; Thompson 1948). This eventually saw communists pit against socialists and led to intra-party splits before the country had even gained independence.

The Second World War interrupted party-building with regard to electoral politics, which was engulfed by elite factionalism and popular movements. It did, however, give new parties the chance to emerge clandestinely and forge alliances. Both the Communist Party of Burma and the People's Revolutionary Party (the precursor of the Burma Socialist Party) were established in 1939. During the Japanese occupation, underground Burmese parties coalesced into a resistance movement. The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) was formed in 1944 as a national front of political parties and mass organisations, such as labour unions, peasant associations, women's and youth groups, and ethnic organisations. Three years later the AFPFL won the 1947 Constituent Assembly (the body tasked with drafting Burma's first constitution) elections almost unchallenged. Following their split into the Red Flag Communist Party and the White Flag Communist Party and the latter's expulsion from the AFPFL in 1946, the communists boycotted the polls, and so did the Karen National Union (Taylor 2009; Thompson 1948).

After independence, the country plunged into civil war between the government and communist and ethnic insurgents, and a myriad of non-state armies and non-electoral parties emerged. The AFPFL remained the ruling party until 1958, having won the 1951/52 and 1956 elections. The parliamentary opposition, led by the pro-communist National United Front, challenged the AFPFL government on both ideological and nationalist grounds by criticising the AFPFL's deviation from socialist ideology, the nature of Western aid and intervention, the relationship between religion and the state, and the status of ethno-linguistic states (Silverstein 1956; Taylor 2009). While the AFPFL was originally held together by Aung San and Nu, by the mid-1950s it had developed programmes and achieved a greater level of organisation (Silverstein 1956). AFPFL leaders were also heads of mass organisations, and the AFPFL itself was allied to minority parties in ethnic states. The alliance's leadership, however, was uncertain of the AFPFL's actual nationwide strength as local units belonged to both the league and the mass organisations (Silverstein 1956; Taylor 2009). In rural areas the organisational activities of political parties were tied to the aura of powerful headmen, who interceded for local needs with national parties (Nash 1963).

In 1958 the AFPFL split into the "Clean" and "Stable" factions, which had a devastating impact on all levels of organisational structure (Callahan 1998; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2008; Trager 1958). Vicious factional

hostilities culminated in Prime Minister Nu inviting General Ne Win to take over as interim prime minister and hold free and fair elections (Butwell 1960; Callahan 1998). Ne Win's interim government (1958–1960) curtailed party patronage networks and politicians' influence in the bureaucracy and unions. It was during this “dress rehearsal” phase that the military elite came to see parliamentary democracy as ineffectual and contentious and began to fancy their own role as state-builders who could engender stability and order (Charney 2009). Nu renamed the Clean AFPFL the Union Party, which went on to win the 1960 general election. However, the Union Party quickly found itself riddled by an internal dispute between three factions (Thakins, retired bureaucrats [U], and retired military officials [Bo]) and facing a soaring demand for federalism from ethnic states (Badgley 1962; Callahan 1998; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2008).

In March 1962 General Ne Win staged a military coup, ending Myanmar's parliamentary period. Besides aborting political pluralism, this coup would delay the development of parties in Myanmar for almost three decades. The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was established as the only legal party and was tasked with leading the state and the socialist revolution through the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” a mélange of socialism, Buddhism, and nationalism. Under the Law Protecting National Unity of 1964 all other political parties were abolished. There were, however, elections held for the unicameral People's Assembly (which was created by the 1974 constitution) in 1974, 1978, 1981, and 1985 (Nakanishi 2013). Unsurprisingly, BSPP representatives faced no competition, and voter turnout for each of the elections was over 90 per cent. Despite the personalised politics associated with Ne Win, there were a few instances of intra-party struggle within the BSPP. For instance, at the Third Congress of the BSPP in 1977, a group of cadres unsuccessfully tried to unseat Ne Win as chairman by using Central Committee electoral procedures. In 1983 personal rivalry between Ne Win's protégés led to the purge of the third-highest party official and his followers (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2008; Nakanishi 2013).

The nationwide popular uprisings of August 1988 abruptly terminated the BSPP's one-party rule. In May 1990 the military regime that took over power from the BSPP organised the country's first multiparty elections in 30 years. Having lost its state-party status, the BSPP relabelled itself the National Unity Party (NUP) and contested the polls. The National League for Democracy (NLD), born out of the pro-democracy movement, emerged as the principle mass-based party and won the elections by a landslide. Major ethnic-based parties such as the Shan Nation-

alities League for Democracy (SNLD) and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) performed well, receiving the second- and third-largest number of seats, respectively.

Nevertheless, the military regime never honoured the 1990 election results and instead announced that a new constitution was needed for the transfer of power. The regime subsequently convened the National Convention to draft the document and prolonged the process from 1993 to 2007. During this repressive military period, the NLD had little chance to organise itself. Aung San Suu Kyi, on whose charisma the party was centred, was under house arrest on and off for a total of 15 years, whereas virtually all party leaders were in prison or in exile. From its inception, the NLD leadership consisted of three groups: the intellectual group led by Aung San Suu Kyi and two groups of military veterans led by Aung Gyi and Tin Oo, respectively. However, Aung Gyi's group left soon after the party was founded (Guyot 1991).

In 1993 the military government established the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) – a state-sponsored mass organisation that morphed into the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in 2010 and served as the electoral vehicle for Myanmar's generals to enter civilian politics. In effect, only about 10 legal parties survived the regime's ruthless deregistration process between 1990 and 2009. A new legal framework for registering parties appeared with the ratification of the 2008 constitution and the election laws that followed in 2010. This gave birth to splinter parties from the NLD and from old ethnic parties. Focusing on electoral politics, these parties would later form inter-party alliances like the Federal Democratic Alliance (FDA), which includes Burman and ethnic-based parties, and the National Brotherhood Federation (NBF), which involves only ethnic-based parties.

Through the flawed 2010 election (which the NLD boycotted), the USDP became the governing party in the newly created parliament. After Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest, the NLD and ethnic parties of 1990 initially established a common ground and called for a second Panglong Conference. However, the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), the ethnic allies of the NLD, felt as if they had been left out of the discussions with the Thein Sein administration which saw the NLD reintegrated into electoral politics. The NLD eventually complied with party registration laws and competed in the 2012 by-elections.

Weak party institutionalisation and popular representation typified both the NLD and the USDP in the run-up to the general election in November 2015. Relying heavily on the personality of Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD failed to select candidates that were suitable for fostering inclu-

sive, pro-democracy alliances with other political groups. Within the USDP, the intra-elite power struggle led to the forced removal of the party's chairman and general secretary in August 2015.

The Main Political Parties

Myanmar has a large number of political parties that are legally registered with the Union Election Commission (91 at the time of writing in September 2015) (<<http://uecmyanmar.org>>). There is no simple way of measuring the relative strength of parties given the absence of free and fair elections, comprehensive opinion polls, and publicly available membership registers. The multiparty election in 1990 provided information about the relative strength of the parties at that time. However, after the military refused to relinquish power, two decades of authoritarian rule followed, and the winning parties of 1990 were weakened (Khin Kyaw Han 2000). The 2010 general election was only contested by those political parties that had accepted the military regime's 2008 constitution, which meant that the democratic and ethnic parties from the 1990 elections generally refused to take part (The Burma Fund UN Office 2011). Although the 2012 by-elections enjoyed much broader participation and were deemed relatively free and fair, they were only for a limited number of seats. Furthermore, the by-election in Kachin State was cancelled due to security reasons (Transnational Institute 2013). Therefore, although the elections in 1990, 2010, and 2012 can be used to identify the major parties (see Table 1), any evaluation of party strength will have to take into account additional qualitative assessments.

Analyses of Myanmar's political parties commonly distinguish between parties that originate from ruling parties from the authoritarian period, parties that originate from the pro-democracy movement during military rule, and ethnic parties (Kempel, Chan Myawe Aung Sun, and Aung Tun 2015; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010b). The ruling USDP was formed in 2010 and is based on the military regime's mass organisation, the USDA. The USDP, which continues to be dominated by the military, won three-quarters of the seats in the flawed 2010 election (The Burma Fund UN Office 2011). The NLD was established in 1988 on the basis of the pro-democracy movement in the late 1980s (Lintner 2011). Under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD won the 1990 election but many of its leaders were arrested or exiled and the party was banned and remained inactive until the democratic opening. The NLD boycotted the 2010 election but contested and secured a large victory in the 2012 by-elections.

Table 1. Distribution of Seats in Parliament, 1990, 2010, and 2012

| Political Parties | 1990 | After 2010 General | | After 2012 By- | |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Elections | Elections | | Elections | |
| | PA* Pyithu Hluttaw | HoR* Pyithu Hluttaw | HoN* Amyotha Hluttaw | HoR* Pyithu Hluttaw | HoN* Amyotha Hluttaw |
| Union Solidarity and Development Party | | 259 | 129 | 220 | 124 |
| Appointed from the military (Tatmadaw) | | 110 | 56 | 110 | 56 |
| National Unity Party | 10 | 12 | 5 | 12 | 5 |
| Shan Nationalities Democratic Party | | 18 | 3 | 18 | 4 |
| Rakhine Nationalities Development Party | | 9 | 7 | 8 | 7 |
| All Mon Region Democracy Party | | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| National Democratic Force | | 8 | 4 | 5 | 2 |
| Chin Progressive Party | | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| PaO National Organization | | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Chin National Party | | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party | | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Kayin People's Party | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Taaung (Palaung) National Party | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Wa Democratic Party | | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Inn-tha National Development Party | | 1 | | 1 | |
| Kayin State Democracy and Development Party | | | 1 | | 1 |
| New National Democracy Party | | | | 2 | 1 |
| National League for Democracy | 392 | | | 38 | 5 |
| Shan Nationalities League for Democracy | 23 | | | | |
| Arakan League for Democracy | 11 | | | | |
| Mon National Democratic Front | 5 | | | | |
| National Democratic Party for Human Rights | 4 | | | | |
| Party for National Democracy | 3 | | | | |
| Chin National League for Democracy | 3 | | | | |

| Political Parties | 1990 Elections | After 2010 General Elections | | After 2012 By-Elections | |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| | PA* Pyithu Hluttaw | HoR* Pyithu Hluttaw | HoN* Amyotha Hluttaw | HoR* Pyithu Hluttaw | HoN* Amyotha Hluttaw |
| Kachin State National Congress for Democracy | 3 | | | | |
| Union Pa oh National Organization | 3 | | | | |
| Zomi National Congress | 2 | | | | |
| Naga Hills Regional Progressive Party | 2 | | | | |
| Kayah State Nationalities League for Democracy | 2 | | | | |
| Ta-ang (Palaung) National League for Democracy | 2 | | | | |
| Democratic Organization for Kayan National Unity | 2 | | | | |
| Patriotic Old Comrades League | 1 | | | | |
| Democracy Party | 1 | | | | |
| Karen State National Organization | 1 | | | | |
| Graduates and Old Students Democratic Association | 1 | | | | |
| Shan State Kokang Democratic Party | 1 | | | | |
| Union Danu League for Democracy | 1 | | | | |
| Kamans National League for Democracy | 1 | | | | |
| Mara People's Party | 1 | | | | |
| Union Nationals Democracy Party | 1 | | | | |
| Mro (Khami) National Solidarity Organization | 1 | | | | |
| Lahu National Development Party | 1 | | | | |
| United Nationalities League for Democracy | 1 | | | | |
| Independent | 6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Others or vacant/ suspended | 7 | 5 | | 8 | |
| | 492 | 440 | 224 | 440 | 224 |

Source: <<http://uecmyanmar.org>>; Khin Kyaw Han 2000.

Note: * PA = People's Assembly, HoR = House of Representatives, HoN = House of Nationalities.

The USDP and the NLD can be considered union-wide and dominant parties based on their electoral support, membership, and organisational resources, including branch offices in most townships. The National Unity Party (NUP), which emerged from the BSPP after the military coup in 1988, also used to be a strong and well-organised party. It managed to nominate a large number of candidates for the 2010 election, but its electoral performance was relatively poor; according to our respondents, the party is not very active. Former members of the NLD founded the National Democratic Force (NDF) before the 2010 election in response to the NLD's refusal to register as required by the 2008 constitution. Although the NDF won parliamentary seats at the 2010 election, the NLD proved to be the more successful of the two when it re-entered electoral politics in the 2012 by-elections.

Myanmar has a large number of ethnic political parties, but only a few of these have won seats in the national parliament or can be considered strong in states or special administrative zones where their ethnic constituencies form a majority (Kempel, Chan Myawe Aung Sun, and Aung Tun 2015; Kramer 2010). Most of the ethnic parties are organised within two alliances, the UNA and the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF). The UNA includes parties that contested the 1990 election but not the 2010 election either due to boycott or as a result of being disbanded. The NBF primarily organises parties that were established and contested the 2010 election and has enjoyed some electoral success, especially in the states of Shan, Rakhine, Chin, and Mon. The Federal Democratic Alliance (FDA) is another, though somewhat smaller, alliance and consists of parties that represent the Bamar ethnic majority group. In terms of parliamentary seats, the NDF is the largest alliance partner within the FDA.

Despite winning a substantial number of parliamentary seats in 1990, UNA parties were denied access and subjected to authoritarian repression, which limited their ability to be politically active (Kramer 2010; South 2008b). They are, according to our respondents, seen as politically experienced and influential parties with strong roots and legitimacy in society. Originally, the alliance consisted of 12 members, including the NLD-affiliated ethnic parties (Keenan 2013). The UNA now includes the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), the Mon National Party (MND), the Zomi National Congress (ZNC), and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD). The NBF alliance originally consisted of five political parties – the All Mon Democracy Party (AMDP), the Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP), the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP), the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP),

and the Chin National Party (CNP) – but now includes 23 members. None of these alliances can be seen as ethnic congress parties; they may, however, develop in that direction in the future.

In addition to having a shared emphasis on identity politics in ethnic constituencies, the UNA and the NBF also contain parties that are competing for support within the same communities, especially in the states of Shan, Rakhine, and Mon. The two alliances have been divided over electoral strategy. The plurality of ethnic parties within a first-past-the-post electoral system poses a considerable risk of vote splitting and electoral defeat even in their core constituencies. Although many respondents thus expect the present plurality of parties to be reduced, how this process will unfold remains an open question; it is also likely to follow different trajectories in different ethnic constituencies. In Arakan State, for example, the RNDP and the ALD were merged and registered as the Arakan National Party (ANP). There are, however, members of parliament and political leaders who continue to identify with the RNDP. The split between the leaderships of the RNDP and the ALD is reportedly growing and is expected to become more visible after the election, when – according to respondents within these parties – certain RNDP leaders are likely to seek state- and union-level government positions. In contrast, in Shan State the SNLD and the SNDP are not likely to merge due to disagreements over the preferred model of federalism. However, a large number of SNDP members and a sizeable group of incumbent members of parliament have joined the SNLD according to an interviewed SNLD member of the Central Executive Committee. In Mon State the AMDP and the Mon Democracy Party (MDP) agreed to merge. To overcome party registration bureaucracy, the MDP became the Mon National Party (MNP). Nevertheless, some incumbent AMDP parliamentarians and party leaders have refused to join the new party. Within all three ethnic states – Shan, Rakhine, and Mon – there are contentious issues that stem from the social and historical background of different parties and the incumbent positions of parties that contested the 2010 election. The trajectory of the ethnic party constellation thus remains uncertain and contingent on contextual politics.

In the Kayin community, ethnic parties are not as strong as those in the states of Mon, Shan, and Rakhine – mainly due to fragmentation and rivalry between different competing parties. Among these parties, the Kayin People's Party (KPP) and the PSDP are the two dominant groups. The KPP mainly looks to mobilise Kayins who live outside of Kayin State (e.g. in the Ayeyarwady Delta and the Bago region), while the PSDP focuses its efforts within Kayin State. In Kachin and Kayah States,

applications to register from three ethnic parties were rejected by the military regime before the 2010 elections (Transnational Institute 2013). As of September 2015, there are three registered Kachin parties: the Kachin State Democratic Party (led by Manam Tu Ja, former vice chairman of the Kachin Independence Army), the Kachin National Congress, and the Kachin Democracy Party. In Kayah State the Kayan National Party, the Kayah Nationality Democracy Party, and the Nationalities Democracy Party (Kayah State) have recently been unified.

Cleavages and Clusters of Parties

This brief presentation of the number and strength of political parties means that Myanmar's party system prior to the 2015 election may be described as a multiparty system with two dominant parties. Focusing on the pattern of inter-party divisions and alliances, we argue that Myanmar's party system reflects two major cleavages: Burman (or union-wide) nationalism versus ethnic nationalism and authoritarian rule versus democratic rule. The history of party politics in Myanmar, as briefly summarised above, is characterised by distinctions between parties with historical legacies of authoritarian rule or pro-democracy mobilisation and parties that rely on a Burman construction of the nation or on ethnic notions of nationhood (Table 2). Distinctions between socialism and other ideologies (such as communism) have become largely irrelevant since the downfall of the BSPP (Taylor 2009). Many respondents across party divides report a general absence of clear ideological positions, comprehensive political programmes, and specific policies beyond general references to democracy and the rule of law by the NLD and others, self-determination and federalism among ethnic parties, and unity and development by the USDP and others (see also Kempel, Chan Myawe Aung Sun, and Aung Tun 2015). These general markers of party identity indicate that distinctions between authoritarian and democratic rule and between Burman and ethnic nationalism remain relevant even though the former has become less fixed during the regime-led democratic opening.

The divide between the legacies of authoritarian rule and pro-democracy mobilisation has created a distinction between the military-based, pro-democracy USDP, on the one hand, and the pro-democracy NLD and ethnic parties, on the other (Charney 2009). Although this cleavage is changing with the reformist reorientation of the USDP, the uncertainties about the outcome of the democratic opening mean that the divide between authoritarian and democratic legacies is likely to have a structuring effect on electoral politics, at least for some time.

Table 2. Clusters of Political Parties in Myanmar

| | Burman nationalism | Ethnic nationalism |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Authoritarian rule | Union-wide, democracy-oriented parties that are associated with the authoritarian legacy (e.g. USDP, NUP) | |
| Democratic rule | Union-wide, democracy-oriented parties that are associated with the pro-democracy movement (e.g. NLD) | Democracy-oriented ethnic parties (e.g. parties within the UNA, NBF and FDA alliances) |

Source: Authors' own compilation.

The Burman nationalism–ethnic nationalism cleavage has resulted in a divide between ethnic parties and parties that foreground Myanmar as a nation state (Charney 2009; Gravers 2007; Khin Zaw Win 2010; Kramer 2010; South 2008b). It also represents a centre–periphery cleavage between the Bamar majority regions in central Myanmar and the ethnic states along Myanmar’s borders. Ethno-territorial cleavages have also created a distinction between the union-wide parties (USDP, NUP, and NLD), on the one hand, and the many ethnic parties within the UNA and the NBF, on the other. It should be noted that in contrast to Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) original model, Myanmar has not developed a party structure where socio-economic, regional, or religious cleavages have become prominent features.

These cleavages and party identities imply a degree of rootedness in society. Although most of the parties are relatively new and lack coherent ideologies and programmes, they emanate from and reflect distinct societal constituencies and interests (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010b). However, the interaction between parties is also shaped by more contingent dynamics in the political field – most clearly seen in the party-building and alliance-formation strategies around elections, especially among ethnic parties. Myanmar’s ethnic parties have been fragmented according to participation in elections, alliance formation, and relations with the NLD and the USDP. Smaller parties’ futures also depend on their political relations to ruling parties (e.g. their chances of getting positions within government alliances) and possible changes to the electoral system (e.g. introduction of proportional representation) (Lemargie et al. 2014). Political opportunities that increase the visibility and influence of individual politicians and smaller parties may counter the tendency towards merging, which subsequently results in larger parties and alliances. The most likely scenario, according to many respondents, is that Myanmar will continue to have a multiparty system with two dominant parties and a reduced number of consolidated ethnic parties.

Institutionalisation of Political Parties

The above sections highlight that popular representation is important for substantial democratisation and that parties are indispensable links between citizens and government. They also reveal that parties' capacities to represent is contingent on their degree of institutionalisation. This section provides a general assessment of party institutionalisation in Myanmar.

Party Organisation and Rootedness

Many respondents acknowledge that political parties in Myanmar have a long way to go to before they become well-functioning channels for popular representation. Starting with the question of internal organisation, there is a perceived need for strengthening party organisation at both the national level and the local level. Most parties are either relatively young or were inactive during military rule and have thus been unable to build organisational structures based on a coherent party ideology, mass membership, and internal democracy. Opposition parties were not ready for the regime-initiated democratic opening in 2010 or to participate in elections and parliamentary politics. Even now, they are loose organisations that are centred on their leaders and focus on winning electoral seats (see also Kempel, Chan Myawe Aung Sun, and Aung Tun 2015).

There are, however, important nuances within this general picture of weak party organisations, which are linked to these parties' relations with the state and society. Two parties, the NLD and the USDP, have union-wide organisational structures and branch offices in almost all townships. While the NUP once had a similar structure, its presence at the township level has since been reduced; some respondents describe it as a "head without body." The level of organisation that is found in both the NLD and the USDP is closely related to their origins and party models. The NLD's union-wide structure and organisational capacity stems from the mass movement for democracy in 1988. This background means that the NLD can rely on the energy and loyalty of a large number of activists across social, ethnic, and territorial lines. Military repression in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, curtailed the NLD's organisational apparatus and severed the ties between the party's national leadership and its local party branches and communities. According to our respondents, this produced weak central–local links and open critique from local activists. Nonetheless, the NLD's association with the pro-democracy struggle remains a strong

source of legitimacy. In this sense, it can be said that the NLD was (during the period of military rule) and continues to be based more on value infusion than on organisational development.

The USDP originated from the military regime and its mass organisation (USDA) rather than any popular social movement (Callahan 2003; Win Min 2010). State resources and the military apparatus were decisive factors behind the construction of the party. The USDP's party-building activities have occurred through the transformation of the USDA, which had an extensive network of offices. The USDA's large membership base is itself a reflection of its link to state resources rather than any expression of popular support. On the contrary, the USDA was perceived to be widely unpopular, which means that its value for the USDP comes in the form of its organisational network rather than its recognition and legitimacy (Steinberg 2007). These origins are reflected in the USDP's organisational form. The USDP has leaders that were powerful generals under the former regime and a distinctly hierarchical command structure. The USDP has used its position as a ruling party to initiate policymaking on certain key issues. In a parallel move, the NLD has used its own organisational resources to form sector policy committees (e.g. on farming, the environment, and health). These different approaches to policy development are reflective of different party models, where the USDP represents a state-centred party, and the NLD represents a society-centred mass party (Gunther and Diamond 2003; Katz and Mair 1995).

According to our respondents, the other political parties are characterised by low levels of organisation and face major difficulties in opening and maintaining party offices. This holds true for both the older parties that originated from ethnic movements for self-determination and democracy and the newer ethnic parties that have developed in the context of the democratic opening. Regardless of whether they have been shaped primarily by mass mobilisation or pragmatic electoralism, most ethnic parties have not managed to build effective party organisations. This has a strong negative impact on their capacity to politically represent ethnic constituencies. Ethnic party respondents report that they are losing support because they cannot carry out organisational work effectively. The main explanations for weak organisational development include authoritarian repression, protracted intrastate conflicts, and the lack of party-building resources. Ethnic parties are also negatively affected by not having access to relevant political arenas or the policymaking process. Not having any members of parliament is seen as very problematic, but so is having key leaders based in Naypyidaw, since this poses the risk of a disconnect with local constituencies where there is no

party office to substitute for personal presence. This means that most ethnic parties are hard pressed to organise party activities, provide effective representation, and deliver on ethnic aspirations despite strong support from their ethnic constituencies.

Kempel, Chan Myawe Aung Sun, and Aung Tun (2015) find that none of the parties in Myanmar have developed strong relations with local communities. Local party activists do, however, support individuals and communities in their everyday lives, especially by referring land confiscation cases, service delivery and basic infrastructure issues, and human rights abuses to local authorities. Although this means that there are converging interests and opportunities for collaboration with a growing number of CSOs (People in Need 2013), respondents report a general lack of functional links between political parties and CSOs at the local level. While there are examples of joint campaigns, especially around resource exploitation projects in ethnic states, these appear to be exceptions rather than signs of emerging broad alliances (see also South 2008a). Party–civil society relations are a bit more complex at the national level: The USDP government has collaborated with selected NGOs on policymaking and implementation. The NLD has maintained lasting relations with the 88 Generation movement. And a number of NGOs have begun to engage in political activities (Lidauer 2012; People in Need 2013). There are a few notable examples of civil society activism apparently influencing the government, as demonstrated by the president's decision to stop the Myitsone dam project after mass protests, and CSOs engaging in policy and law reforms in the legislature (e.g. the amendment of the Associations Law). Nevertheless, the general pattern is one of relatively weak links between CSOs and organised politics.

The core explanation for these weak links is said to be the general lack of trust between CSOs and political parties. Several respondents state that parties often distrust CSOs and are concerned about their growing activism and influence. Within the NLD there is purportedly a sense that the party is being doubly marginalised, by both the USDP government and CSOs. Civil society actors, for their part, have expressed not only disappointment with the parties' lack of capacity or willingness to engage in cooperation, but also a fear of being co-opted or becoming targets for state repression. It can thus be observed that although there is a common ground for collaboration, political parties and CSOs tend to view each other with suspicion and find it difficult to develop fruitful collaboration.

Weak organisational structure, especially at the local level, is both a product of and a contributing factor to the common problem of internal

democracy that is found in all political parties. Local respondents identify the USDP and the NLD in particular as centralised organisations that grant too much power to the leadership. In the case of the USDP this is attributed to its military and USDA origins; in the case of the NLD, the iconic status of Aung San Suu Kyi and the authoritarian repression suffered over two decades. Local party activists acknowledge that the NLD has not done enough to build its local capacity and internal democracy and is thus marked by weak communication and coordination between the leader, members of the Central Executive Committee, the Central Committee, and local activists. Likewise, in the USDP there are reported disconnects between the executive, elected representatives, senior party leaders, and party members.

These problems of weak organisational development reinforce long-standing tendencies towards personalism in party politics. While the USDP relies on the personal popularity that President Thein Sein and Chairman Shwe Mann have acquired due to the government's reformism, the NLD depends on its charismatic leader Aung San Suu Kyi to mobilise resources and popular support (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010a; Lintner 2011). Some ethnic leaders such as Aye Tha Aung of the ALD and Khun Htun Oo of the SNLD also command great respect and can generate substantial popular support. Although many respondents emphasise the pivotal role of their party leaders in electoral success, arrangements consisting of weak party organisations and strong personalism pose major hurdles to the development of robust channels of popular representation.

Coherence and Autonomy

By shifting our attention from party organisation to value diffusion, we can observe that the NLD shows stronger signs of institutionalisation than the USDP in terms of value coherence and recognition. The NLD and the ethnic parties are seen as having relatively clear identities among the public. The NLD was born out of a mass movement for democracy and human rights, and its leaders, activists, and supporters emphasise values associated with human rights, dignity, and freedom. Several respondents argue that it is these ideals and commitments that enabled the NLD to withstand 20 years of military rulers' repression. The same logic applies to the older ethnic parties, which emerged out of mass struggles for self-determination and have a track record of articulating the grievances of ethnic nationalities amid majoritarianism and authoritarian repression.

In contrast, doubts have been expressed about the value coherence of the USDP. There is considerable uncertainty about what the party

actually stands for, and its public image has also been tarnished by its connection with past abuses by military rulers. Irrespective of any ideological positions it champions, the USDP is still associated with a discipline- and stability-promoting form of governance that carries negative connotations after decades of authoritarian rule.

In terms of decisional autonomy, all parties face external constraints, but of varying kinds and degrees. The USDP, as a ruling party originating from the previous military regime, has very strong decisional autonomy in regard to society. There is no well-functioning democratic mechanism that enables the people to hold the USDP accountable. There are, however, critical questions about the USDP's autonomy in regard to the military and its leaders. Interpretations vary from those who see the USDP as merely an extension of the military to those that argue that there are divergent interests between the USDP and the military to those that believe there are reformists within the USDP carefully negotiating and managing with a degree of autonomy (Callahan 2012). There are also limits to the USDP's decisional autonomy on party affairs, as demonstrated in August 2015 when the chairman and secretary general were removed from office by the military.

The situation for the NLD is very different. The party emerged from values and mass mobilisation in society that continue to be an important source of legitimacy while also defining the parameters for policymaking. Nevertheless, the NLD has proven itself capable of making decisions relatively freely, particularly its leader Aung San Suu Kyi. This was demonstrated by the Letpadaung Inquiry, where her participation and position were not popular among local communities or civil society activists. In contrast, her cautious statements on anti-Muslim agitation and violence demonstrate that there are limits to her autonomy, especially when it comes to questions of ethnic relations and nation-building. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Aung San Suu Kyi's legitimacy might be declining among ethnic groups due to her cautious stance on ethnic and religious issues. Further constraints on the NLD's decisional autonomy stem from its participation in parliamentary politics in accordance with the 2008 constitution, which has made the NLD leadership careful not to alienate the USDP and military leaders and thereby jeopardise democratisation and the national reconciliation process.

When it comes to the decisional autonomy of ethnic parties, they have to follow the "ethnic line" and make decisions within the goal of self-determination and a federal state (South 2008b). Among the ethnic parties, the question of whether it should be a federal country with 8 or 14 states is one among several contentious issues that requires careful

consideration of the positions of non-state armed groups that have been fighting against the central government for many years. Most of the ethnic parties have some links to armed groups and exiled ethnic civil society and thus have to take them into account when critical decisions are made. The old ethnic parties in particular seem to have close links to the broader ethnic movements. Such relations can be understood as external constraints, but also as fruitful alliances for political representation and transformation. A recent collaboration with the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) has, for instance, been a source of revitalisation for the ethnic parties within the UNA (Keenan 2013). This is an example of how collaboration with external organisations (something that could be construed as problematic in terms of decisional autonomy) may actually be vital to capacity-building and political representation.

Conclusion

Myanmar is now experiencing a democratic opening that has generated cautious optimism. There are, however, concerns that the reform process is more likely to benefit autocrats and oligarchs than ordinary people. Such apprehension draws critical attention to the roles and capacities of democratic political parties to represent popular interests and promote substantive democratisation. Our analysis supports the conclusion that the existing parties in Myanmar currently only have limited capacities to ensure popular representation. Using the concept of institutionalisation, we find that the present group of political parties and the party system in general are only in the process of becoming institutionalised. Most parties in Myanmar are weak in the sense that they have not been able to build effective organisational structures based on a coherent party ideology, mass membership, and internal democracy. Although there is a common ground for collaboration between political parties and CSOs, they have generally failed to overcome political and other obstacles to develop effective broad alliances.

Nevertheless, we also find that there is a degree of party institutionalisation in the form of rootedness in society. Although most parties have been influenced by the political opportunities and general participation and non-participation strategies of the 1990 and 2010 elections, they also reflect cleavages over questions of authoritarian or democratic rule and of Burman nationalism or ethnic nationalism. These have produced divisions between state-centred parties associated with the authoritarian legacy and society-centred pro-democracy and ethnic parties. Although less dichotomous than in the past, we find that this rootedness consti-

tutes a source of party system stability, party identity, and legitimacy and is likely to play a key role in electoral politics in the years to come. Our findings support the conclusion that the future development of parties will continue to be shaped by parties' relations with the state and society, which will create opposing tendencies towards state-centred cartel parties and society-centred mass parties. The influence of and balance between these party models are likely to have a decisive impact on the form and substance of popular representation and, subsequently, the open-ended future of substantive democratisation in Myanmar.

Epilogue

This article was completed and accepted for publication before Myanmar's parliamentary election on 8 November 2015. The election was generally assessed as free but not fair, due to the disenfranchisement of large groups of voters and a parliamentary system where 25 per cent of parliamentary seats and three key ministries are still reserved for the military. It returned a large victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD), an equally big defeat for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and the general marginalisation of most ethnic parties in parliamentary politics – with the exception of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) and the Arakan National Party (ANP) (Table 3).

While the magnitude of these general trends came as a surprise to most observers, we will argue that the election results do not contradict the main analytical findings or conclusions in our article. On the contrary, we maintain that the election campaigns and results demonstrate that political parties in Myanmar are poorly institutionalised in terms of organisational structures and political ideologies. The two partial exceptions, as we also argue in our article, are the union-wide NLD and USDP, which mobilised economic and human resources to run comprehensive campaigns but nevertheless relied on the mobilising effects of general slogans and the personal popularity of their leaders. The election also lends support to our contention about party rootedness in society. Although the background data is not yet available, voters seem to have rejected the USDP on the basis of its association with the country's authoritarian legacy. This stands in sharp contrast to the positive association of the NLD with the pro-democracy movement.

Table 3. Distribution of Seats in the Union Parliament, 2015

| Political parties | House of Representatives Pyithu Hluttaw | House of Nationalities Amyotha Hluttaw |
|--|--|---|
| National League for Democracy (NLD) | 255 | 135 |
| Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) | 30 | 11 |
| Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) | 12 | 3 |
| Arakan National Party (ANP) | 12 | 10 |
| Ta'Arng (Palaung) National Party (TNP) | 3 | 2 |
| Pao National Organization (PNO) | 3 | 1 |
| Zomi Congress for Democracy (ZCD) | 2 | 2 |
| Wa Democratic Party (WDP) | 1 | 0 |
| Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDP) | 1 | 0 |
| Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP) | 1 | 0 |
| Lisu National Development Party (LNDP) | 2 | 0 |
| Mon National Party (MNP) | 0 | 1 |
| National Unity Party (NUP) | 0 | 1 |
| Independent | 1 | 2 |
| Vacant/Election not held | 7 | 0 |
| Military | 110 | 56 |
| Sum | 440 | 224 |

Source: <<http://uecmyanmar.org>> (25 November 2015).

What has come as a surprise to many observers is that ethnic constituencies seem to have given weight to the authoritarianism–democracy cleavage, thus rendering ethnic parties relatively marginal actors in parliamentary politics rather than “kingmakers.” Vote splitting in the absence of well-functioning merged ethnic parties, except in Rakhine State, may be confirmed by detailed voting data as an additional explanation behind the election results. In the aftermath of the election, the foremost question among political observers in Myanmar is how and to what extent voter preferences will be translated into constitutional, institutional, and policy changes. We maintain our core conclusion that although the functioning of political parties will have a decisive impact on the democratisation process in Myanmar, these parties show worrisome weaknesses in terms of organisational and political capacities. As we contend in our article, the future development of political parties will be shaped by their

relationships with the state and society. However, the changing constellations of power that will follow the 2015 election are likely to produce quite different trajectories of development for the NLD, the USDP, and ethnic parties.

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