

Rakhine State
The Weekly Report
November 8-13

Finding hope in the elections results:
**What Did the Elections Leave
for Rakhine People?**



Arakan Humanitarian Coordination Team

Key takeaways

- The November 8 polls were not considered free and fair because of restrictions on campaigning, limited flow and access to information because of internet shutdown and mass disenfranchisement caused by discriminatory citizenship laws, cancellation of the polls in 13 townships in whole or in part and lack of mechanisms, that guarantee IDPs' rights to vote.
- There were incidents of ballot rigging in advanced voting process. Although people in quarantine centres could vote, secrecy of ballots was compromised because volunteers from the centres stamped the ballots in their stead.
- Although a Rakhine party won the majority in 8 townships where the polls were not cancelled, the 2020 general elections are not considered free, fair. Also, the results are not representative of the whole state, leaving many people in despair with no representatives to voice out their needs and problems.
- People in Rakhine State are concerned that there will be more war after the elections and, more restrictions will be imposed.
- Political parties and election monitoring group may want to call for the by-elections as soon as possible so that disenfranchised population, which makes up two-thirds of the State population, can exercise their voting rights and elect a representative to speak out on their behalf.
- Meanwhile, organisations, working on humanitarian issues, can continue advocating the government to be committed to ensuring the safety and human security of people displaced by war.

Content

1. Limitations during the pre-election period	4
2. Ballot rigging	7
3. Polling Day	8
4. Election Results and Post-election Landscape	9

Finding hope in the elections results:

What did the elections leave for Rakhine People?

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, people in Myanmar went to the polls on November 8 to choose more than 1,100 representatives out of around 7,000 candidates from over 90 political parties including independent candidates. Though official data on the total voter turnout is not available yet, the Union Election Commission (UEC) estimated that [more than 70 percent](#) of the country's 37 million-plus eligible voters cast ballots in the general elections. In Rakhine State, the elections were partially held – the Union Election Commission cancelled elections in 9 townships and some ward/village tracts in 4 other townships of 17 townships in Rakhine State, citing security reasons. There was a total of 164 candidates, including independent candidates, from 11 political parties vying for 27 seats in Pyihtaungsu Hluttaws and in Rakhine State Hluttaw. Despite lack of official figures to be consulted, the voter turnout was [reported to be low](#) and voter apathy was widespread across the state.

Limitations during the pre-election period

Pre-election period in Rakhine State was marked by restraints in canvassing because of Covid-19 prevention restrictions and the armed-conflicts between the Tamadaw and the Arakan Army (AA). The Rakhine state has been one of Myanmar's COVID-19 hotspots during the resurgence of pandemic in the country since mid-August. The armed-conflicts in Rakhine State caused disruptions to canvassing in run-up to the elections. On October 14, three NLD candidates from Taungup township [were abducted](#) by the Arakan Army while they were canvassing. Later, a statement was released that the three would not be released until the government releases all ethnic Rakhine politicians and civilians arrested for affiliation with the AA, along with the students arrested for holding protests and demonstrations against the Tamadaw attacks and demanding peace.

Voter apathy was reported to be widespread in Rakhine State due to the COVID-19 outbreak and armed conflicts. This pattern was signified by the fact that not many people were the voter lists on display. The announcement of election cancellation in Rakhine exacerbated the problems as they seem to lose faith in the democracy, which is supposed to allow them to choose representatives. Also, they lost interest in whether they were on the voter list and those, who were not on lists, did not bother to check again because of the cancellation of polls in parts of Rakhine State. For example, in Ohdan quarter of Sittwe, although people came to check their names on the voter lists, they do not bother to check properly and went back home after the first glance even though some of them were on the voter lists.¹



Photo Source: Western News

While questions were raised about the efficacy of conducting the polls amid the pandemic, serious doubts were cast over the credibility of the polls in Rakhine State because of the UEC's cancellation of the polls in 11 townships in whole or in part. The UEC's notification, dated October 16, 2020, resulted in [cancelation of polls](#) in the whole townships of Pauktaw, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Buthidaung, Maungtaw, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Myebon, and MraukU, 2 quarters and 52 village-tracts in Kyaukphyu Township, 3 quarters

¹ Interview with Arakan Election Monitoring and Observation Consortium, November 9, 2020.

and 29 village- tracts in An Township, 4 village-tracts in Sittway Township, and 10 quarters and 52 village-tracts in Taungup Township. The announcement was received with criticisms from the political parties.

Having been questioned over the rationale behind the selected cancellation of the polls, the [UEC removed](#) three village tracts in Kyaukphyu township and four village tracts in Ann township of Rakhine state from the list of no-voting areas and added 94 village tracts in Paletwa township of Chin State to the list of no-voting areas on October 27. The UEC's cancellation of the polls in Rakhine State further deteriorated the situations, skewing level playing field between the political parties and disenfranchising over one million voters in Rakhine State. A volunteer from a quarantine centre in Sittwe contend that the elections would not be free because there are no representative in the places where the polls were cancelled. He further noted, *"You can imagine whether the elections were fair not given that the polls were cancelled in townships where there were no battles so far."*

The election monitoring groups noted that [the pre-election period has not been free and fair](#) for a number of reasons – the canvassing in Rakhine State was limited by the internet shutdown and Covid-19 restrictions; voters had very limited access to electoral information; voter awareness of elections is very low and lack of voter education activities. Also, Muslims in Rakhine State, many of who self-identified as Rohingya, have been disenfranchised based on the discriminatory citizenship laws. Human Rights Watch contend that with disenfranchisement of Muslims, unequal access to media, arrests of critics, the 2020 elections are [fundamentally flawed](#).

The disenfranchisement is not limited to Muslims in Rakhine State only. Residents in the areas where the polls were cancelled lost their rights to vote. It is reported that the cancelled voting would bring the total number of disenfranchised in Rakhine state to [more than 1.1 million eligible voters](#) from the elections. Also, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) were not able to exercise their voting rights because there were no mechanisms in place to ensure that the IDIPs can exercise their voting rights although they could have been registered on the voter lists as temporary residents. The number of people displaced by violence has increased sharply in Rakhine since the end of 2018. Before the UEC's announcement to cancel polls, Rakhine

Ethnics Congress, a Rakhine civil society organization, estimated that possibly [more than 100,000 IDPs](#) could lose their rights to vote.

The mounting conflicts in the run-up to the polling day indicate little chance of decrease in the conflicts in the post-election and the elections and the conflicts are independent of each other. It was reported that around [more than 700 villagers](#) from Zaichaung have fled to downtown Kyaukphyu. Around 1,000 displaced people from 9 villages – Zaing Chaung, Thaing Chaung, Pyar Kyoin, Thapyu Taung, Thaphan Khar, Achoon, TanhtarOo, Kyaung Khoe, Chaung Phyar – have fled their villages and taken refuge in Kyauk Phyu Township. Eligible voters, who are on voter registration list of their villages except Thaing Chaung, lost their voting rights because they fled their villages in fear of being arrested and interrogated by the Tatmadaw troops.² The IDPs did not know of any arrangements in place by the election commission for their rights to vote for people who are not on the list of village tracts barred from voting. A volunteer working in an IDP camp in Kyauk Phyu said, *“They have no right to vote because their names are not included on the voter lists in Kyauk Phyu Township. Their names are only included on the voter lists in their villages.”*

Ballot rigging

Because of Covid-19, the UEC allowed those in quarantine centres and elderly, who are over 60, to cast advance votes. The election officials went to the quarantine centres to collect the names of all the people in the centres to register on voter list. People on the list can vote. However, as our people have less voter education awareness, they did not know that they have to be registered on the lists for voting. Some discrepancy was reported – as those in quarantined were not allowed to touch the ballots, volunteers at the quarantine centres cast votes for the voters’ behalf by asking them.³ This compromise the secrecy of ballots and risk chances of the volunteers’ discretion to vote for the candidates or party of their choice instead of the real voters’ in quarantine.

² Interview with CSO in Kyauk Phyu, November 11, 2020.

³ Interview with a volunteer at a Basic Education High School in Sittwe , November 9, 2020



In addition, there were reported cases of ballot rigging in advance voting process in Sittwe constituencies. A voter in Sittwe township's Amyint Kyun village brought the pre-printed check marks next to the name of Arakan Front Party (AFP) to election officials and members of the state election sub-commission and local political parties decided to [cancel all the ballots](#) in the village's ballot box and allow voters to complete new forms. They also agreed on firing the chairman and secretary of the village's administrative committee. In Sittwe township has more than 101,000 registered voters and 108 polling stations, with [14,800 voters who are 60 years old or above](#) allowed to cast early votes.

Polling Day

In Taungup township, the armed-conflicts did not disrupt the voting process in the elections. However, it was reported that there were some polling stations, where the station chiefs were unhelpful in a way that make the appear bossy.⁴

⁴ Interview with a youth civil society organisation in Taungup, November 9, 2020.

Election Results and Post-election Landscape

Although the finalized results are yet to be announced, the National League for Democracy (NLD) has achieved a repeat of 2015 victory – initial counts at polling stations showed that NLD secured [nearly 400 seats](#) in the Union Parliament. In Rakhine State, the Arakan National Party (ANP) secured the majority, 7 out of 14 seats, followed by the NLD with 4 seats, Arakan Front Party (AFP) 2 seats and Union Solidarity Development Party 1 seat.

In general, community members, civil society organisations and political parties in both the voting areas and no-voting areas anticipate an escalation of armed-conflicts across the state and an increase in the number of IDPs. Also, Rakhine State would be prone to deeper political discrimination. The polls results make a step further away from peace in Rakhine State. Despite the obvious possibility of more battles, hope for peace and security for the people in Rakhine State is illusive. More war and tighter control of the military will damage the economic life of the people and many aspects of human security in Rakhine State.

Communities in Minbya and Maruk-U has shared their reflections on the elections results and how it can impact the communities in Rakhine State. A community member from Minbya township stated her anticipation of more intensified armed-conflicts and subsequent increase in the number of displaced persons. Despite the obvious possibility of disruptions in business and livelihood, people from Minbya township would have no one to represent and voice out their problems. During the night of November 8, she heard gunshot from the Tatmadaw, targeting the mountains on the other side of the Ramaung River in Minbya township, but no causality or damage was reported.⁵

Likewise, a member of civil society organisation in Mrauk-U expressed despair because Mrauk-U was among the townships, where the polls were cancelled. Conflicts and internet shutdown will remain and security concerns will not be addressed because the Tatmadaw are still making arbitrary arrests and interrogation of villagers. The armed-conflicts are expected to get worse. Yet, there will not be a government that can voice

⁵ Interview with a member of civil society organization in Minbya , November 11, 2020

out those sufferings. The military rule will come in their stead. As a result, there would be more IDPs and they would be in a worse situation than now and there would be less security for the people.

A party member from Ramree township asserted that the elections were held partially on purpose and the union government and the military are on the same side in this deed. More battles are expected as the polls did not turn out in their favour as the ruling party may have expected. Given the fact that union government will appoint the Rakhine State cabinet regardless of the majority of seats secured by the Rakhine parties, there is little possibility for peace in Rakhine State. Thus, it is important the MP-elects understand the peace process and the fact that they do not have any control over the actions of Tamadaw or Arakan Army. This would result in less security for the people in Rakhine. In contrast, a community member in Sittwe seem to have some reservations in drawing any conclusion from the election results, suggesting that seeing how the incoming cabinets will be formed would give a better sense of what the situation would be like for the people in Rakhine State. A candidate from Kyauk Taw, who lost the opportunity to be elected because of UEC's cancellation of the polls, noted: *"In my point of view, the armed-conflicts will be worse than before because elections were not held all over the Rakhine. In the townships where there were no elections, there are no representatives to go to the front line to represent and negotiate. That's why I think the situations will get worse after elections."*

About AHCT

Arakan Humanitarian Coordination Team (AHCT) was established in the middle of March, 2020 by the six Sittwe-based organizations, providing humanitarian and development assistance in Rakhine State: Rakhine Ethnic Congress (REC), Won Lurk Foundation (Rakine State), Peace and Development Initiative (PDi-Kintha), People for People (PFP), Rakhine Youth New Generation Network (RYNG) and Community Empowerment and Resilience (CERA).

The objective of coordination is to provide overall humanitarian assistance and contribute to the protection efforts for the civilians displaced by the domestic conflicts in Rakhine in a timely and efficient manner.

Contact

Kyaw Hsan Hlaing
Secretary
executive_director@kintha-pdi.org

Zaw Zaw Htun
Secretary
khaingkyawmrat@gmail.com

