In the coming election, we can only hope that the final vote counts reflect the will of the people, and not numbers created by the generals who control the polling stations.

An election is a numbers game. You need to be skillful at counting numbers. You need to be careful about numbers, and play according to the rules of the game. Every vote counts. Every volunteer and candidate plays a role.

Burmese authorities use the single vote method, sometimes called the "first past the post" or "winner take all" system in which each voter cast a ballot for one candidate and the candidate who receives the largest number of votes wins. The candidate does not need to receive a majority of votes.

Burma has a history of unfair elections in which the ballots are tampered with or the vote count is altered.

In the first elections held in 1951 in the post-independence era, manipulation of votes was initiated by the ruling Anti-Fascist People' Freedom League by inserting ballots into the ballot boxes of AFPFL's candidates, according to U Aye Maung, who later became the Minister of Justice.

In the elections in 1956, the ruling party won in 144 seats with 1.7 million votes while the oppositions won only 60 seats out of 1.5 millions votes. About 200,000 votes were sufficient to win 84 seats due to the winner-takes-all system. Since these two elections, military officials and polling staff have begun to play a key role in the conduct, and ultimate fairness, of all elections.

The 1960 elections were called "free and fair" by most accounts, but even that election involved instances of manipulation by political parties, local authorities and the military.

In an interview, a former intelligence officer said that during the 1960 election: "We stole votes from [ballot] boxes. They were kept overnight in the police station, and we just moved all the votes into the Stable box. Of course, the Stable Party candidate won."
The Stable Party was short for the Stable-Anti-Fascist People' Freedom League backed by the army, which split from the Clean Anti-Fascist People' Freedom League led by U Nu.

The elections under the rule of the Burma Socialist Programme Party were not true elections of individual candidates. Two boxes, one for Yes and one for No, were placed inside the polling booth and voters had to cast a vote into one of the boxes. It was easy to switch the votes.

In 1990, the election was fairer but it still did not meet the international standards of freedom of movement, assembly, expression, equitable access to media and so on. Ballot sheets were used as the first time in a Burmese election. The National League for Democracy took 392 out of 485 constituencies.

Other types of election manipulation include misleading wording on a ballot, ballot stuffing, miscounting or misreporting of votes and misuse of proxy votes.

Often ballots for a candidate are destroyed, reducing their vote count. Another tactic is to deface or mar the ballot, or making it appear the voter cast more votes than they were entitled, which voids the ballot.

Disenfranchisement is another popular tactic. Sometimes members of religious or ethnic groups are singled out and may be disenfranchised by corrupt election officials who knowingly misinterpret registration rules.

In the constitutional referendum held in 2008 just after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis, the government issued temporary identification cards to some eligible voters in the hope that this would increase the number of voters in favor of the constitution. Also on the day of the referendum, in many polling stations people filled out ballots ahead of the referendum and voters were given a ballot already marked with a "Yes" symbol.

In some locations, officials coerced voters to cast "representative votes" in which one family member voted for other members of the family.

Some polling stations reached absurd levels. Sometimes no pen or pencil to mark ballots was available so voters returned their ballots without marking their vote. One election official told voters, "If you want to vote 'Yes,' vote here; if you want to vote 'No,' go inside the polling booth."

Each vote is a number, but the numbers can change a government. Generals in Burma understand very well the value of votes and how they can be manipulated. In the coming election, they will set the rules of the game and also determine its fairness.

In the 2008 referendum, the generals said 92.48 percent of the voters favored the constitution. Everyone knows that number was not the result of a fair vote count. It was a number created by the generals.

In the coming election, we can only hope that the final vote count reflects the will of the people, and not a number created by the generals who control the polling stations.