

Without inclusiveness, whatever the outcome of the election, it will not be beneficial to the people of Burma.



Burma's elections? I never believed in them. But ironically, I went to a polling station on May 27, 1990, and cast a ballot for first and last time in my life for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party.

Twenty years later, when the junta is planning to hold a second election, I sit in a newsroom in exile and ask myself the question: Why did I cast my vote so passionately, like the 15 million other voters across the country? What did we expect from the 1990 election?

I had zero expectations. The majority of ordinary voters probably didn't expect that the election would be free and fair, or that the result, if an opposition party won, would be honored.

Instead, I think we saw the election as a form of civic demonstration. It was a way to send a clear message to the junta: "We are against you!"

Since people were prevented from staging street demonstrations, voting was an opportunity to express anti-regime sentiments for activists, as well as the millions of ordinary people who took to the streets during the 1988 pro-democracy movement.

Most Burmese understood that nothing could be expected from the election under the oppressive military government. Surprisingly, the ballot-box demonstration was successful. The junta-backed National Unity Party was trounced, and the NLD won in a landslide.

As expected, the results were never honored, not even officially announced by the regime. But the big win served as a political stick for the NLD and pro-democracy forces to beat the ruling

generals with for the next 20 years. The international community and Western countries have since used that stick to urge the junta to talk to Suu Kyi to achieve national reconciliation.

But a stick isn't much use against guns.

Today, another election is coming under the same military government. What should we expect? This time it's much more complicated.

The generals in Naypyidaw are much smarter than people imagine. Their latest move came in early March when the regime issued its long-awaited election laws. Everyone expected the laws and regulations to be undemocratic, but no one expected such a sharp double-edged knife.

The knife has cut off the head and bloodied the body of the National League for Democracy.

The damage started immediately after the law was issued. Aung Shwe, the NLD chairman, came out in support of registering the party to contest in the election. Two camps—pro and anti-election—soon threatened to divide the party.

However, Suu Kyi then issued her powerful and authoritative statement, saying that she couldn't imagine the party registering under such a law. On March 29, 113 party representatives from across the country, following her lead, unanimously voted not to register as a party to contest the elections.

Two decades ago, Suu Kyi was the one who gave the final green light to the party to contest in the 1990 election, and the debate then was similar. But this time, the election laws are even more repressive.

More than 2,000 political prisoners, including Suu Kyi and prominent 88 Generation Student

leaders, have been barred from contesting in the election, being a member or leader of a political party or casting a vote, under the party registration law. If the NLD sought registration, the law required the party to expel Suu Kyi and other members in prison.

That was just the tip of the iceberg of the evil election laws. In responding, Suu Kyi said, “The people and political forces have to respond united to such an unjust law.”

She used a similar phrase, “defiance against unjust laws” in 1988, soon after she entered politics.

Several new parties have registered now, while many existing parties and ethnic groups say they will not take part in the election.

The coming months will write a new chapter in the history of the NLD and Burma. Without inclusiveness, whatever the outcome of the election, it will not be beneficial to the people of Burma. Instead, Burma will likely see more head-to-head confrontations, more defiance and more oppression.

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