

Given the blatant bias by authorities and the Union Election Commission towards the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), critics say that the result of the elections is already known generally. The USDP and the National Unity Party are the main rivals in most of the constituencies with little challenge by the National Democratic Force and other parties.

So, what about ethnic parties? Some optimists predict that there is a great potential for ethnic parties in their respective areas due to racial tendencies of ethnic people to vote for their fellows. We must look at that prediction based on the available facts.

In seven states where ethnic people reside, there are 123 and 84 constituencies for the People's and National parliament respectively, with 257 seats for their state's parliaments. Twenty-two ethnic parties out of 37 parties in total will contest for these 464 seats plus some areas in regions where ethnic people live.

The largest ethnic party is the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP), which will contest in 157 constituencies, mostly in Shan State and its adjacent areas in Kachin and Kayah states. There are 176 seats in total for Shan State with 55 and 12 seats for the People's parliament and National Parliament respectively, and 109 seats for the state parliament.

The SNDP has faced harassment and threats from the UEC and the USDP. It has found it difficult to canvass in some places and faced coercion by local authorities to support the USDP. The hope for SNDP to win even in Shan State is still faint in the face of the USDP hegemony.

The second largest ethnic party in Shan State is Taang (Palaung) National Party which will contest in six townships for both National and Regional parliaments.

The two "Wa" parties have only two townships in which to field their candidates since four townships in the Wa Self-administrative Division have been declared "areas where elections will not be held." The United Wa State Army has already refused requests from these two parties to campaign in areas under their control.

Other ethnic-based parties such as the Kokang Democracy and Unity Party, Pa-O National Organization, Inn National Development Party, Lahu National Development Party and Kayan National Party, will also field candidates in their respective stronghold areas.

Other small ethnic groups in Shan State such as Danu, Taungyo, Gurkha and Kachin have no political party to represent them. They are minority groups in Shan State, and they generally view Shan nationals the way the Shan see Burmans.

The second largest state is Kachin, with 70 seats for all parliaments. Unfortunately, the Kachin State Progressive Party was not allowed to form as political party. The Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State will fill its place as only ethnic party in Kachin State. In fact, it is just an arm of the USDP. As a result, no ethnic party truly represent the Kachin, and other ethnics in Kachin State.

Rakhine State is the third largest state with 64 seats for all parliaments. The largest ethnic party

is the Rakhine Nationals Progressive Party, which fielded 45 candidates both in national and regional parliaments. Other parties such as Rakhine State National Force of Myanmar, Kaman National Progressive Party, Mro or Khami National Solidarity Organization and Khami National Development Party are not significant in terms of the number of candidates.

There are 45 seats for all parliaments in Mon State, which is the fourth largest with only one ethnic party, the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP). The party will contest for 25 seats in Mon and Karen state. Activities of the AMRDP are closely watched by military intelligence and the Election Sub-commission.

Smaller states such as Chin, Karen and Kayah (Karenni) have 39, 36 and 34 constituencies respectively for People, National and Region's parliaments. Among Chin ethnic parties contesting in Chin State, the Chin Progressive Party (CPP) is relatively large and it has fielded 39 candidates in Chin State and the Sagaing Region. Leaders of CPP are mostly retired civil servants who have no political background comparable to candidates in the All Mon Region Democracy Party.

Another Chin party, the Chin National Party, also fielded 23 candidates for different parliaments. The third ethnic party in Chin State is the Ethnic National Development Party, which represents the Mara people of the Chin tribe that reside in Thantlang, Matupi and Paletwa townships. Chin nationals make up of about 50 small ethnic groups among a 1.5 million population.

Three ethnic Karen Parties, the Karen People's Party (KPP), the Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party and the Kayin State Democracy and Development Party, will represent Karen people.

The Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party is the most successful party in Karen State, whereas the Karen People's Party has focused only on Rangoon, Irrawaddy, the Pegu region and Mon State where there is a Karen population. The Kayin State Democracy and Development Party was set up by former leaders of Karen cease-fire groups including DKBA.

There are a lot of villages and village tracts where elections will not be held in Karen State, especially in Papun, Thandaunggyi and Kya-in-seik-kyi townships. Given the situation, representation in Karen state is quite doubtful.

In Kayah State, there is only one ethnic party contesting, the Kayan National Party (KNP). In fact, the KNP fielded candidates only in Dimawso Township and the rest of its candidates are in Phekho in Shan State South, Thandaung in Karen State and Pyinmana in the Pegu region.

A KNP leader said in an interview that the party's was banned from campaigning in DiMawso and there are not many supporters in Pyinmana and Thandaung since many people have fled from forced relocation.

In brief, the USDP, NUP and their ethnic proxy parties will easily reap most seats in many ethnic areas such as Kachin, Karen, Kayah and Mon states, where there is no strong opposition party to compete. For ethnic areas such as Shan, Rakhine and Chin, the state-backed parties will use all possible means to win as many seats as possible.

Optimists who hope ethnic party candidates can win a significant number of seats in regional parliaments may have their doubts increased, in light of the above numbers.

*The number of constituencies in various parliaments in ethnic areas:*

-

People's Parliament
National Parliament
State Parliament
Total

Kachin

18
12
40
70

Kayah

7
12
15
34

Karen

7
12
17
36

Chin

9
12
18
39

Mon

10
12
23
45

Rakhine

17
----

12
35
64

Shan
55
12
109
176

Total
123
84
257
464