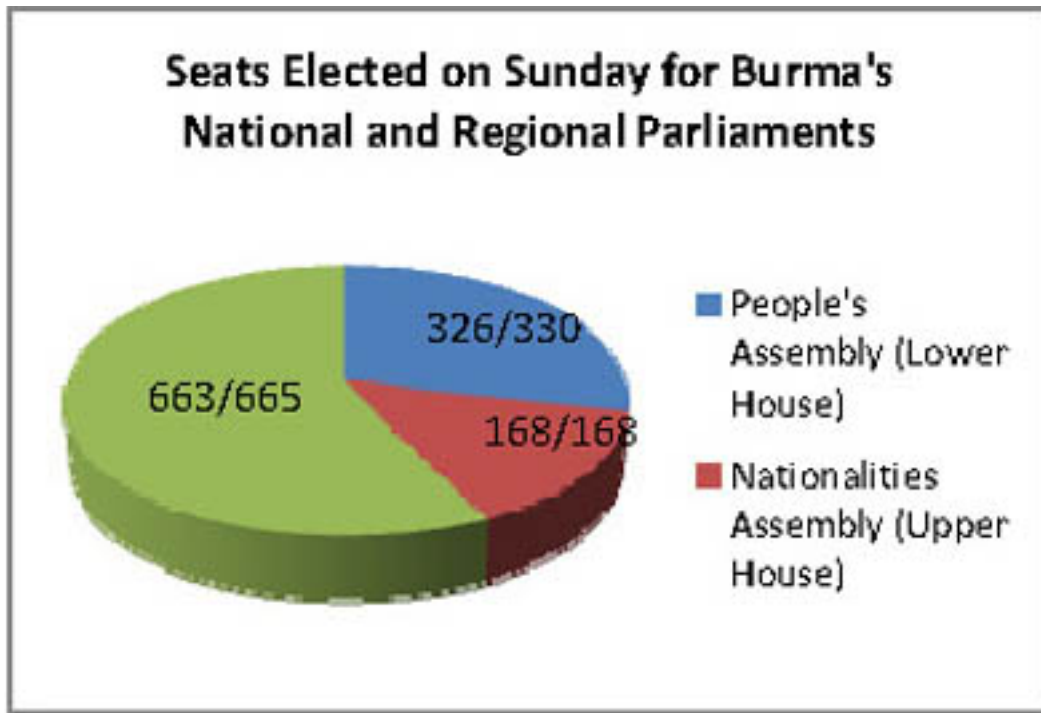


RANGOON — Voters in Burma's first election in 20 years cast their ballots Sunday amid both a barrage of criticism that the balloting was rigged in favor of the ruling military and hope that some change toward democratic reform might nonetheless follow.



About 40,000 polling stations across the Southeast Asian country opened at 6 a.m. (2330 GMT) and were to close 10 hours later. The regime left everyone guessing as to when results would be announced, saying only they could come "in time."

However, it was almost certain that through pre-election engineering the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party would emerge as the victor despite widespread popular opposition to 48 years of military rule.

The streets of Burma's largest city were unusually quiet and early voter attendance appeared light at many polling stations. Some residents said they were staying home as rumors circulated that bombs would explode.

Riot police were deployed at some road junctions, but no soldiers were seen near the balloting sites.

Voters variously expressed fear and defiance.

The USDP is fielding 1,112 candidates for the 1,159 seats in the two-house national parliament and 14 regional parliaments. Its closest rival, the National Unity Party with 995 candidates, is backed by supporters of Myanmar's previous military ruler.

The largest opposition party, the National Democratic Force, is contesting just 164 spots.

Election rules were clearly written to benefit the USDP, and hundreds of potential opposition

candidates—including pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party won a landslide victory in the last election in 1990 but was barred from taking office—are under house arrest or in prison. Several parties have complained that voters have been strong-armed into voting for the junta's proxy party.

Whatever the results, the constitution sets aside 25 percent of parliamentary seats for military appointees.

"I cannot stay home and do nothing," said Yi Yi, a 45-year-old computer technician. "I have to go out and vote against USDP. That's how I will defy them (the junta)."

Others said they had abstained from voting because that would legitimize the election.

"I voted for the (democracy party) in 1990. This is my second time to vote," said a 60-year-old man, Tin Aung, when asked which party he had voted for.

He then looked around and added, "I am really scared."

The election was immediately slammed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who called it a reflection of "heartbreaking" repressive conditions in the country.

But in a speech Sunday to university students in Melbourne, Australia, Clinton also said she hoped the elections might produce a few new leaders who could change the country's direction.

"It's heartbreaking because the people of Burma deserve so much better," she said.

Rangoon-based diplomats from the European Union—British, French, German, Italian—as well as the United States turned down an invitation from the government to take "exploratory tours" Sunday due to rules applying to the visits. The regime earlier banned foreign journalists and international poll monitors from the election.

"These elections are going to be neither free, nor fair, or inclusive. There is nothing in these elections that could give us grounds for optimism," British Ambassador Andrew Heyn told The Associated Press on the eve of the balloting, which he described as a "badly missed opportunity" for democratic change.

Despite the storm of criticism, some voters and experts on Burma, also known as Myanmar, said the election could herald a modicum of change from the decades of iron-fisted rule and gross economic mismanagement of the resource-rich nation.

"The elections, for all their farcical elements, have already achieved something: Burmese people are listening and talking more about politics than they have for a long time," said Monique Skidmore of the Australian National University. "It seems likely that the very small public political space will be widened and this is probably the best outcome we can hope for from the election."

Democracy advocates are also hopeful that Suu Kyi will be freed from house arrest sometime after the election, perhaps as early as Nov. 13. Although among the country's 29 million eligible voters, the Noble Peace Prize laureate said she would not cast a ballot Sunday.

Suu Kyi has been locked up in her Rangoon villa on-and-off ever since the ruling generals ignored the 1990 poll results. They also hold some 2,200 political prisoners in what has been dubbed the "Burmese gulag."

The regime has also been criticized for its brutal treatment of ethnic minorities seeking greater autonomy.

In the wake of rising tension before the election, the junta canceled voting in 3,400 villages in ethnic minority areas and has increased its military presence in the countryside. About 1.5 million of the country's 59 million people have thus been disenfranchised.

Some ethnic minority groups, like the Karen, have been fighting the government since the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. Others, including the powerful Wa and Kachin, had forged cease-fire agreements that now appear in jeopardy amid fears that the constitution activated by the elections would quash their hopes for a federal system.

With ethnic minorities making up about 40 percent of the population, the outbreak of a full-scale civil war would have disastrous economic, political and humanitarian consequences. Some 600,000 ethnic minority people have already sought refuge in neighboring countries.

"We fear an increase in violence in many parts of Burma after the election and more refugees fleeing to the border with Thailand. There will be no change, no end to suffering, for the people on the ground," said Charm Tong, an exiled activist from the Shan minority.

Facts and Figures about Burma's Election
By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Facts and figures about Burma's general election on Sunday:

VOTING: There are more than 29 million eligible voters and 40,000 polling stations. Some 3,071 candidates from 37 political parties, along with 82 independent candidates, will contest 1,159 seats: 494 in the two-chamber Union Parliament and 665 spread among 14 regional parliaments. Cancellation of voting in areas where ethnic rebels are active will disenfranchise an estimated 1.5 million people.

PARTIES: Two parties dominate the field, the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, and the National Unity Party, an outgrowth of the political machine of the late strongman Gen Ne Win now associated with big business interests.

With 1,112 candidates, the USDP is almost certain to win the most seats, since it has substantial funding, nationwide organization and state power behind it.

The NUP is running 995 candidates, including 443 in the combined national parliament. The NUP is not especially popular because of its association with the late dictator but may win votes as the only alternative to the USDP in many places.

The third biggest party, the National Democratic Force, formed by breakaway members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, will field just 164 candidates, including 141 in the national parliament. Its attraction is as the main standard-bearer for the broadly defined pro-democracy movement.

Suu Kyi's NLD was disbanded because it declined to run, claiming the contest was unfair and undemocratic. It remains intact as an organization and a powerful influence and has reminded people that they need not vote—amounting to a veiled call for an election boycott.

ISSUES: The election amounts to a referendum on the junta's democratization plans. All parties pay at least lip service to democracy, while debate of the issues is restricted by law and intimidation. Opponents of the junta must choose between voting for any party but the USDP and not voting at all.

PROBLEMS: Critics—including many Western nations and international human rights groups—claim the polls are unfair and undemocratic. Many of the country's most dynamic opposition politicians, including Suu Kyi, are in detention. Requirements for candidates to pay a hefty deposit, restrictive rules on campaigning, and a tightly controlled media, with all daily newspapers and electronic media directly controlled by the government, pose serious difficulties for challengers. Foreign journalists and independent election observers from other countries are barred from entering the country.