

Predicting rights violations in Myanmar's sham elections

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Introduction

The military's 2025 general election is a strategic component of its war against the people of Myanmar, not a step towards democracy. A predictable blueprint of rights violations is already being perpetrated, based on the military's past conduct and its new repressive legal architecture. The enactment of draconian laws like the “Law Protecting Against the Obstruction, Hindrance, and Destruction of Multiparty Democratic General Elections” (Law No. 48/2025) and the arrests that followed confirm this. This report investigates the human rights violations already underway and those that are still to come in the election cycle.

Before the election: violations of foundational rights

The first phase of the military's strategy involves the systematic violation of the foundational rights necessary for any democratic contest to occur. International law is clear that genuine elections require an environment of freedom and fairness, which the military's actions are designed to prevent.

The military is actively violating the right to political participation (ICCPR Article 25) and the right to freedom of association (ICCPR Article 22). Through its 2023 Political Parties Registration Law, the military has engineered a process to permanently remove genuine opponents from the political landscape. By dissolving the National League for Democracy (NLD) and many other parties for refusing to register under its illegitimate authority, the military has already eliminated the victors of the 2020 election.

This is a direct repeat of its 2010 strategy, when electoral laws were engineered to bar anyone serving a prison sentence from party membership. The military is using these laws to disqualify any credible opposition figures, leveraging politically motivated convictions from its captive courts to legally bar them from public life. This denies people their right to be elected, which can only be restricted based on “objective and reasonable criteria,” not political persecution.

In parallel, the military is violating the right to seek and receive information, an essential component of freedom of expression (ICCPR Article 19) and a prerequisite for voters to form opinions independently. State media has been converted into a propaganda apparatus, while independent

outlets have been banned. The recent Cyber Security Law further tightens this control by stripping privacy safeguards, effectively punishing people for accessing independent news on social media.

The military is also violating the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly (ICCPR Article 21). These rights are deemed “essential conditions for the effective exercise of the right to vote.” The primary instrument for this violation is the new Law No. 48/2025. The military is weaponising this law’s vaguely defined prohibition against “disrupting” the electoral process to crush any form of dissent. The law is already being used to arrest and prosecute individuals for a wide range of protected activities, including organising election boycotts, publishing critical analysis, or holding peaceful protests.

This legal terror is being complemented by the military’s ongoing campaign of arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The military continues to target activists, journalists, and anyone suspected of opposition, using its vast surveillance apparatus to monitor and hunt down dissenters. These actions are creating a climate of pervasive fear and annihilating the fundamental freedoms that are the essential preconditions for any legitimate election.

During the election: Violations of the right to vote

During the election period itself, the military is likely to shift from eliminating opposition to manufacturing the appearance of public consent through the violation of voting rights.

There will likely be a widespread violation of the right to universal and equal suffrage (ICCPR Article 25). The election will almost certainly not be held in vast swathes of the country that are active conflict zones, immediately excluding millions of people from the process. Millions of internally displaced persons, who have fled the military’s violence, are likely to face insurmountable barriers to voting, contrary to the state’s obligation to ensure all persons entitled to vote can exercise that right.

The military is also likely to violate the right to a free and secret vote (ICCPR Article 25, UDHR Article 21). Drawing from its 2010 behaviour, the military is expected to engage in widespread voter intimidation and coercion. In areas under its control, security forces and pro-military militias will likely be deployed to pressure people into voting. It is also probable that inducements and the manipulation of humanitarian aid will be used to compel participation from vulnerable populations.

This will likely be combined with electoral fraud. The recent amendments to the electoral laws introduce a complex mix of voting systems and new technologies like electronic voting machines, which can be easily manipulated by a military-appointed and biased election commission that lacks the independence required by international standards. These actions fundamentally violate the principle that an election must guarantee the “free expression of the will of the electors.”

Specific violations in ethnic minority areas

The military’s tactics are likely to be particularly severe and distinct in ethnic minority areas, where it has lost significant territorial control and historically committed its worst atrocities.

First, the military is engaging in mass disenfranchisement as a political strategy. It is expected to cancel voting in numerous ethnic townships, citing “security concerns.” This tactic has been used in every past election to suppress the ethnic vote and weaken ethnic political parties. The military has already announced that many seats in the Upper House, representing ethnic minority areas, will be left vacant. This reduces ethnic representation and lowers the threshold needed for its proxy party to control the legislature and presidency. This constitutes a discriminatory violation of the right to vote.

Second, in ethnic areas where voting does proceed, the military is likely to use heightened levels of intimidation and violence. Decades of “scorched earth” campaigns, extrajudicial killings, and torture have created a unique climate of fear in these regions. The military is likely to leverage this history to coerce votes, in direct violation of the right to vote free from intimidation.

Third, the military will continue the systematic disenfranchisement of the Rohingya population through discriminatory citizenship laws, a long-standing violation of the principle of non-discrimination among people. This exclusion is a hallmark of the military's atrocity policies and renders any election in Rakhine State fundamentally illegitimate.

After the election: International complicity and continued repression

The final phase of rights violations will likely be enabled by the international community's response to the election's manufactured outcome.

The primary purpose of the election is to provide a political off-ramp for regional and other powers to re-engage with the military, under the guise of interacting with a “constitutionally formed” government. It is likely that some countries, prioritising perceived stability over human rights, will use the election as a justification to normalise relations and deepen engagement.

This re-engagement will likely occur even as the military continues its campaign of terror, using its new “legitimacy” as a shield against international criticism. The election thus becomes a tool to launder the military's international reputation, providing diplomatic cover that allows the violation of the right to life (ICCPR Article 6) and other fundamental rights to continue with diminished international scrutiny. This international acceptance, however tacit, would embolden the military and undermine efforts to hold it accountable for its atrocity crimes.

Conclusion

The military's 2025 election is a predictable tragedy, a pre-scripted exercise in repression designed to solidify military rule. It is not a democratic process but a violation of fundamental human rights from start to finish. Its outcome is predetermined, and its purpose is to create a political façade to justify the military's continued war on its own people.

Recommendations

- Unequivocally reject the election: Publicly and formally declare that the 2025 election is illegitimate and that its results will not be recognised. Any attempt to treat the outcome as credible would betray the people of Myanmar and reward a regime responsible for atrocity crimes.
- Withhold all electoral support: Refuse to provide any form of technical, financial, or political support for the electoral process. Do not send election observers, as their presence would be co-opted by the military to lend a false veneer of legitimacy to the sham.
- Document, don't validate: Be mindful of the military's electoral "tricks." Focus efforts on systematically documenting the human rights violations connected to the process, rather than observing the mechanics of a fraudulent vote.
- Expose the illegitimacy: Use the predictable blueprint of repression outlined here to expose the illegitimacy of the process at every stage. Highlight the voices of those who are being silenced, disenfranchised, and terrorised by the military's electoral charade.