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# Running Elections under Stringent Covid-19 Measures in Myanmar

Case Study, 8 July 2021

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# Running Elections Under Stringent Covid-19 Measures in Myanmar

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Michael Lidauer and Gilles Saphy

Myanmar was among the first countries in Southeast Asia to organize elections under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The 8 November 2020 general elections were the third since the adoption of the 2008 Constitution, and the second following a broader political transition that started in 2011. Some 38 million voters were called to vote. Turnout was high at 71.84 per cent (GNLM 2020g), and the results announced on 15 November were a firm victory for the incumbent National League for Democracy (NLD).

However, the democratic process was brought to an abrupt end by a military coup d'état on 1 February 2021, as the new legislature was about to be inaugurated. The armed forces, which had not accepted the results of the elections, deposed the incumbent President and Government, detained NLD national and regional executives as well as a number of other actors, and seized power.

Myanmar's attempted transition from military rule to a more democratic form of governance up to the coup was constrained by a constitution that keeps the military beyond civilian control, maintains its domination over the security apparatus, and gives them a veto power on significant political reforms. While credible general elections were organized in 2015, the constitutional framework disallowed broader political change. The 2020 elections were expected to be a further step towards democratic consolidation and civilian rule.

As in many other countries (Asplund et al. 2021; James and Alihodzic 2020; International IDEA 2021; Quarcoo 2020; IFES 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic affected the electoral process in various ways, including voter registration, public information about the elections, opportunities for international and domestic observers to assess the process, and above all polling day procedures. Ahead of the elections, some political stakeholders expressed concerns about a diminished campaign and a low turnout, speculating that these could impact on the effectiveness and legitimacy of the elections. On this basis, they argued for delaying the polls. Ultimately, the election administration maintained the election date and adapted the voting arrangements.

The military coup aborted the electoral process and threw Myanmar's immediate future into uncertainty. The conduct of these elections nevertheless provides insights into how general Covid-19 restrictions and election-specific mitigation measures can have combined impacts, both technically and politically, and these lessons may be of interest in other country contexts.

## 1. Context of the elections

### Institutional context

The 8 November 2020 general elections in Myanmar were the third since the adoption of the 2008 Constitution. Some 38 million voters were called to vote for the House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw) and the House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw)—which together form the bicameral parliament at Union level (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw)—as well as the 14 State/Region Hluttaws. These included around five million first-time voters (see also International IDEA 2020).

Myanmar's transition to a more democratic form of government under the terms of the 2008 Constitution left the military in control of the Home Affairs, Defence and Border Affairs ministries. The Constitution also provides that 25 per cent of seats in all assemblies are reserved for the military, giving the armed forces a veto power over constitutional reforms which require 75 per cent approval in parliament.

Nevertheless, at another level the importance of general elections for the country's governance should not be underestimated. From these elections proceeds the election of the President through the parliamentary electoral college; the President then appoints the government as well as subnational executive functions, state institutions such as the Constitutional Tribunal, the Auditor General, the Attorney General, and the head of the Civil Service Board, among others. As a consequence, the whole governance of the country is at stake—in theory, at least—in one single electoral event taking place every five years (Lidauer and Saphy 2014).

The elections are governed by a set of five laws adopted in 2010, which leave many technical aspects of the process to be determined by the Union Election Commission (UEC). While this reduced predictability, it also allowed some flexibility in carrying out the process.

The Laws provide that elections are organized by the UEC and its subdivisions. Its commissioners are appointed by the President, and the UEC appoints election subcommissions at subnational levels. The UEC is vested with broad and essentially unchecked powers, including registering political parties, adopting electoral constituencies, preparing voter lists, certifying results, and deciding on election-related complaints, with no further appeal. In practice, however, the UEC relied heavily on the structures of the state at local level for the implementation of the electoral process, among others on the local branches of the General Administration Department (GAD) and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population (MoLIP) (see also Renshaw and Lidauer forthcoming).

### Political context

The 2020 general elections tested the election administration like no other elections previously. Following the adoption of the 2008 Constitution, the 2010 general elections were widely boycotted by the opposition, as the conditions under which these elections took place did not allow for genuine competition. Since at least the by-elections in 2012, in which the opposition participated and which brought Aung San Suu Kyi to parliament for the first time, the country was considered in a transition to democracy (Lidauer 2012).

The 2015 elections were widely seen as genuine and credible, and were followed by a peaceful handover of power from formerly military elites to an administration led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). Based on a newly introduced law, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi became State Counsellor and de facto head of state. The armed forces, however, continued to take part in the executive and legislative branches of power. During this parliamentary term political and administrative reforms remained limited, and civic space shrank, with notable backsliding on freedom of expression.

The national peace process with ethnic armed organizations, which the new administration had inherited from its predecessor, gradually came to a halt. New conflict erupted in the north of the country and in particular in Rakhine State. The Rohingya crisis of August 2017 brought Myanmar before the International Court of Justice for alleged crimes against humanity, and ultimately changed how the country was perceived internationally.

The advent of the global Covid-19 pandemic provided a new challenge to the government, which it responded to with increased public communications. As elections drew closer, the country was nearing an economic crisis due to the pandemic, with severe effects on the most vulnerable, putting more households at risk of entering poverty (World Bank 2020).

The elections were contested by over 90 political parties, with the NLD and Union Solidarity and Democracy Party (USDP) as key contestants and a number of ethnic parties—some of which had newly merged for this purpose—hopeful of electoral victories in specific constituencies. Before the official campaign period, opinion polls suggested a safe win for the NLD (PACE 2020a: 20).

The Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces commented on the electoral process on several occasions. Prior to the elections, in mid-August 2020, he met with the USDP and other military-aligned political parties to assure them of his attention to the process (Nyein Nyein 2020). Although the military at first accepted the election results rather than immediately support the USDP's rejection, it progressively questioned the validity of the elections in the run-up to the coup on 1 February 2021 (Lidauer 2021).

## 2. Covid-19 in the electoral process before election day

### Evolution of the pandemic

Myanmar was little affected by the first Covid-19 wave in the first quarter of 2020. The country reacted slowly to the advent of the crisis as compared to its neighbours, who quickly closed their borders. It was one of the last countries worldwide to confirm a case of Covid-19, announcing its first two positive tests on 23 March 2020 (International Crisis Group 2020: 1). President Win Myint declared precautionary measures and formed a Covid-19 Control and Emergency Response Committee, in addition to a National-level Central Committee for Covid-19 Prevention, Control and Treatment under the leadership of the State Counsellor (OCHA 2020: 4). The Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS) became the responsible line ministry.

On 18 April, the MoHS released a first set of stay-at-home orders for seven townships of Yangon Region. The government imposed in-country movement restrictions and forbade assemblies of more than five people. Governmental agencies could travel freely, but civil society could not, reminiscent of restrictions on movement under the previous military regime (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2020: 6). By 1 May, the MoHS reported a total of 151 Covid-19 confirmed cases and six deaths. Daily rates of contamination remained low, and on 1 July Myanmar counted only 299 confirmed cases and six deaths (MoHS 2020).

Movement restrictions were temporarily lifted during the month of June. There were no widespread concerns that the pandemic would overtake the country in uncontrollable ways, and uncertainties regarding the holding of elections remained limited to electoral stakeholders. Myanmar's small number of cases resembled the situation in other countries in mainland Southeast Asia and in Yunnan (southwestern China), but the disease could have been more prevalent than was publicly made known (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2020: 6). Numbers of cases only started to grow at the end of August, when the election process was already well underway. By 8 August 2020, the MoHS reported 359 cases; by 8 September, 1,610; by 8 October, 21,433; and by 8 November, 60,348 (MoHS 2020).

### Voter registration

Myanmar used a passive voter registration system based on existing population data. The process of voter registration had started already in the second half of 2019, at that time in anticipation of a potential constitutional referendum, with an initial compilation of preliminary voter lists. Voter lists were usually compiled by election subcommissions at ward/village tract level, on the basis of data provided by the General Administration Department (GAD) based on household population registers and township logbooks. This data was checked for citizenship criteria by the local branch of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population (MoLIP). Unlike in 2015, the UEC did not work towards a central, computerized register in 2020; the preliminary lists rather existed as digital spreadsheets in states and regions or townships only. The early phase of voter registration was little affected by the pandemic.

The UEC is required by law to publicly display the preliminary voter lists once, but since the 2015 general elections had adopted the practice of displaying the voter lists twice to allow voters to check their names and make corrections where necessary. A first public display of voter lists took place between 25 July and 14 August 2020; by 6 August, at least 6.6 million voters had checked their data, whether in person, on the UEC dedicated website, or on a UEC mobile phone application (GNLM 2020a). The range of errors, omissions and duplications in the lists which became apparent was followed by public criticism from the State Counsellor and other dignitaries (San Yamin Aung 2020b). The UEC subsequently undertook some corrective actions, including door-to-door visits to update the entries, and organized a second public display from 1 to 14 October. After the second voter list display, the lists contained 38.27 million voters registered to vote in the 2020 general elections (ANFREL 2021: 64).

It is difficult to assess the consequences that Covid-19 may have had for the voter registration process as a whole. The public display periods may have contributed to infections as voters went to scrutinize the lists (the window for submitting requests for correction at their local election subcommission was within 14 days from the start of the display period), but concrete figures are not available. The MoHS was still reporting relatively small numbers of Covid-19 cases in early August, predominantly in Yangon Region.

### Debating postponement

The advent of the pandemic in Myanmar prompted requests from political parties to postpone the elections (scheduled for early November). Speculation about a possible postponement could already be heard in the first half of the year, although the UEC regularly asserted that the elections would take place on schedule (San Yamin Aung 2020a). On 1 July, the UEC issued the official call for elections to take place on 8 November 2020.

In mid-September, as the number of Covid-19 cases began to grow rapidly, several political parties called upon the authorities to postpone the elections (Pyae Sone Win 2020). The USDP and 23 allies sent an open letter to the UEC, arguing that public health is more important than voting, raising concerns regarding the legitimacy of the election results in view of a potentially diminished turnout, and outlining limitations to the campaign. In case of a longer-term postponement, the USDP opted to involve the National Defence and Security Council. However, to avoid any vacuum in democratic institutions most parties did not want to postpone later than January 2021. At the same time, the ruling NLD and many ethnic parties were against postponing the elections. Their reasoning included the importance of the regularity of the polls, concerns about increased expenses in face of a prolonged electoral period, and fears of an institutional vacuum. A number of parties also refrained from taking part in this debate.

The Constitution does not stipulate the timing for holding general elections. However, provisions on the duration of elected terms give an indication. The parliament and the region/state assemblies have five-year terms starting from the first day of their first session. While nothing in the laws prevents changing the election date, there is no constitutional provision to extend the mandate of the incumbent legislature, which was to end on 31 January 2021. A newly elected parliament was due to convene as of 1 February 2021.

While elections could theoretically have been postponed by a few weeks, there was no indication that the Covid-19 situation would improve during that time. In this context, the UEC and government decided to go ahead as planned with elections on 8 November, counting on protective measures to prevent contagion and reassure voters and polling staff.

The UEC did, however, postpone elections locally in various conflict-affected areas (with Rakhine State most affected) in October, resulting in 22 vacant seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and the disenfranchisement of 1.2 to 1.3 million voters. Strongly contested in particular by ethnic political parties and a point of public controversy between civilian and military authorities, these cancellations were argued on the basis of security concerns, not Covid-19 (Lidauer 2021).

### 3. Restrictive measures affecting the electoral environment

Following the rise in cases in August, restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the virus were taken. These included stay-at-home orders affecting 72 out of the 330 townships of the country, rendering a genuine campaign impossible in these locations; this included 44 out of 45 townships of Yangon Region and all of Rakhine State. A ban on international flights was already put in place in April and suspension of national travel was renewed in late August.

The MoHS issued two Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in early September, dedicated to the campaign and to polling procedures, respectively. These regulations curtailed not only the capacity of political parties to reach out to voters, but also the scrutiny and information provided by civil society organizations and the media.

#### Campaign-specific measures

The official campaign period lasted 60 days, with a day of campaign silence before the polls. Election campaigns are not regulated in the electoral laws, but by a number of directives and guidelines to which Covid-specific regulations were added. UEC notification 173/2020 of 6 September referenced the existing regulations and added inter alia MoHS Covid-19 guidelines as well as orders and instructions by relevant subnational administrations to the set of rules, with noticeable local variations. MoHS SOP-1 of 7 September, specifically dedicated to the campaign, limited the number of persons allowed to attend rallies to 50 and door-to-door campaigns to 15 but did not mention requirements concerning personal protective equipment (PPE).

The onset of the campaign period coincided with an upsurge of infections, prompting further governmental interventions. Starting with Rakhine State on 26 August, stay-at-home orders were gradually issued for other townships—most notably in Yangon Region—extending to a total of 74 out of 330 townships by 19 October. Under these stay-at-home orders, rallies, indoor campaign activities, and door-to-door canvassing were not permitted, in effect preventing a genuine campaign. Some campaigns took place nevertheless, and various opposition parties expressed dissatisfaction about unclear rules on campaign venue and billboard allocation as well as disproportionate NLD campaign appearances, pointing to an unlevel playing field.



### Impact on campaigning

The MoHS regulations adversely affected the ability of political parties and candidates to campaign freely (Carter Center 2020: 11f). The measures reduced travel to a minimum and made it difficult to reach voters in remote areas without Internet access. In townships without stay-at-home orders, fewer campaign activities took place than foreseen. However, ongoing violations of Covid-19 and campaign rules were reported in the media, at times with thousands of rally attendees. This was not systematically policed or sanctioned, as the UEC relied primarily on self-enforcement by parties and candidates. Only two weeks before the end of the campaign period, the UEC stated that election campaigns were failing to observe Covid-19 rules, prompting parties and supporters to follow the MoHS guidelines more carefully (ANFREL 2021: 71ff).

Online campaigning on Facebook and other social media platforms remained the smaller part of campaign activities (PACE 2020b: 21) and how far it was a response to the public health environment is unclear. Of the 92 parties that registered candidates to contest the elections, 63 had a Facebook account, and the platform verified the authenticity of 42 parties' accounts. With a concerted social media strategy, the NLD outnumbered all other contestants with nearly three million followers on Facebook ahead of the elections. The online campaign, however, reached far beyond the parties' official accounts, involving a number of 'third party' fan pages and disinformation campaigns.

Various political leaders and candidates took part in Covid-19 relief efforts. While the law explicitly prohibits vote buying and the provision of goods or services free of charge, political parties and candidates donated household items, masks and sanitizer, in particular to Covid-19 quarantine centres and communities jeopardized by the increasing economic standstill (Kaung Hset Naing 2020). Candidates may also have associated themselves with private donors, without organizing donations themselves.

Unlike in previous electoral cycles, several instances of electoral violence occurred, but were not directly related to the pandemic (see NMF 2020; CDNH 2020). This included the destruction of campaign materials, threats against candidates and clashes between supporters (predominantly of NLD and USDP in hotly contested constituencies), the placement of explosives outside two UEC locations, the abduction of three NLD candidates by an armed group in Rakhine State, and the blockage of access for political parties by armed groups or militia to certain areas in Shan State. Instances of hate speech occurred offline and online, but with less ferocity and fewer religious connotations (particularly anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya content) than in the past.

### Impact on election scrutiny and information

Covid-19 restrictions on assembly and movement hindered civil society organizations' (CSOs) ability to contribute to voter education, scrutiny and transparency, all of which were much needed in this context. Nevertheless, 13 domestic CSOs and networks were accredited to observe the elections. The largest—the People's Alliance for Credible Elections (PACE)—faced a delay in its accreditation by the UEC for several months, but its observers had good access to polling procedures on election day.

Employees of 'essential businesses' were permitted to travel beyond township boundaries, but this did not include the news media. Hence, in areas under stay-at-home orders, first-hand reporting was markedly curtailed and printing of newspapers had to be stopped. This reduced the scope of information available to voters and facilitated the spread of rumours (relating to both the election and Covid-19), including on social media. However, CSOs monitoring social media did not report any disinformation campaigns of a scale to impact on turnout or election day proceedings.

A notable consequence of the global conditions of the pandemic and international travel restrictions, in conjunction with national Covid-19 measures, was the limited presence of international election observers and foreign journalists. International election observation missions were deployed by the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) and The Carter Center, but with smaller numbers of international observers than would usually be the case, and the European Union sent only a small election assessment team. Hardly any international journalists received visas to enter the country as international travel was largely suspended. This reduced not only scrutiny of the process, but also expressions of international support and recognition that might otherwise have been forthcoming.

#### 4. Voting procedures

In the light of genuine concerns about the elections becoming a major source of infections, the UEC considered several strategies aimed at protecting and reassuring polling staff and the electorate.

In mid-June, the UEC organized the test-run of a polling station in collaboration with MoHS. The mock polling station applied social distancing between polling staff as well as the use of face masks, gloves and sanitizer. This exercise led to discussions about the required size and carrying capacity of polling stations. As a result, the numbers of polling stations and personnel staffing them were re-assessed (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2020: 26).

The UEC envisaged a substantial increase of polling stations, from some 40,000 to 50,000 (Bangkok Post 2020), but one week before election day, the number was still a matter of speculation. The UEC announced after election day that the final number was 39,962 (GNLM 2020f). While there had been suggestions that the maximum number of voters per polling station would be reduced to 1,500, it remained at 3,000.

A substantial increase in the number of polling stations would have required additional human and material resources and these may not have been available. Against this background, two parallel strategies were pursued: that of decreasing the number of voters at polling stations on election day, especially the most vulnerable, by enhancing advance voting mechanisms; and introducing protective measures for voters and staff at polling sites.

##### Advance voting

Covid-19 created specific risks of disenfranchisement, in particular for the elderly and numbers of citizens away from their home constituency and unable to return due to travel restrictions, in particular migrant workers. In this situation, the UEC and government made use of already existing mechanisms of advance voting. The fact that the electoral legal framework leaves many technical aspects of the process to be regulated by secondary legislation made it possible to adopt Covid-related adjustments without having to change the laws.

The election legislation of Myanmar provides for several advance voting mechanisms for citizens who cannot vote at their polling station on election day. There were essentially two types of advance voting: in-constituency and out-of-constituency (the legislation also provides for advance out-of-country voting in embassies).

Voters who were in their constituency but could not come to their polling station on election day could vote in advance, either at the local election commission or via a mobile ballot box at their home. Their votes were stored at the local election commission and counted at their polling station together with the regular votes on election day. According to the usual procedure, some elderly persons, persons with leprosy or the seriously ill, pregnant women at home, persons with a disability, persons in custody, patients in hospitals, or voters who are occupied elsewhere with state duties, could vote within 10 days before election day, some via mobile ballot box or at a place designated by the local election commission.

This procedure was extended to enfranchise voters affected by Covid-19. On 10 October the UEC decided that: (a) in townships under a stay-at-home order or with a high population density (namely 29 townships in Yangon Region and 5 townships in Mandalay Region), voters over the age of 60 would vote via a mobile ballot box between 29 October and 5 November; and (b) in other areas, voters over the age of 60 could use this procedure or come to vote in advance at places designated by their local election commission during the same period (GNLM 2020c). Voters in quarantine in their constituency could participate via mobile ballot box (GNLM 2020d). At the time there were just over 55,000 people in quarantine in 5,878 facilities across the country (MoHS figures as of 27 October 2020).

In-constituency advance voting was originally designed to be deployed on a relatively limited scale. It is unclear how many voters used this channel, but there are an estimated 5.1 million people aged over 60 in Myanmar (Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population 2020). Candidates and observers could follow advance voting, but some political parties complained of lacking sufficient information to do so. Concerns were also expressed regarding ballot secrecy for the elderly voting at home.

For these elections, out-of-constituency advance voting was essentially a postal ballot system for special categories of voters who were outside their constituency (defence personnel, students, trainees, in-patients, detainees), but the actual act of casting a ballot was organized by the institution. While voters applied for a ballot corresponding to their constituency of origin, the voting procedure was conducted by the military commander/university rector/head of service/head of the place of detention, a system long criticized as opaque and undermining of electoral integrity, especially at military bases. Voters cast their ballot in a sealed envelope in a voting place organized by the institution, which then collects the envelopes, and dispatches them to the constituencies of origin. For these elections, advance voting was to be organized between 8 and 21 October, at the convenience of the respective institutions.

About a month before election day, the UEC decided to extend this procedure in order to enfranchise voters stranded outside their home constituencies, and announced on 9 October that applications could be made before 25 October (GNLM 2020b). Out-of-constituency votes would have to be cast at the local election commission and received by the constituency of origin by 7 November.

In total, the UEC reported 5,884,420 advance votes (without distinguishing between the two kinds), representing 21.4 per cent of ballots cast (GNLM 2020h). This was a sharp increase from 6 per cent in 2015.

#### Covid mitigation measures on election day

Voting usually took place from 06:00 to 16:00; voters waiting in line at the time of closing could vote. Even under usual circumstances, the casting of votes for at least three ballots—for the Pyithu Hluttaw, Amyotha Hluttaw, and State/Region Hluttaw—takes time, and some voters were eligible to vote for ethnic affairs minister seats too. Polling stations had a minimum of three ballot boxes, and voters repeated the entire operation of identity checking, ballot issuing, ballot marking and ballot casting three or more times.

The Covid-19 health protocols had an impact on poll worker trainings (Carter Center 2020: 8) which took place in a cascade training manner, supplemented by self-training materials. Polling staff numbered at least 10 (or 20 in larger polling stations), and there was concern about sustained Covid-19 exposure during election day.

On 2 September, the MoHS issued SOPs for the conduct of the elections setting forth guidelines for election preparations and for voting. The SOPs established Healthcare Support Committees for Elections from central to local level, headed centrally by the Deputy Minister, and essentially comprising officials of the MoHS at all levels. The aim was to

ensure coordination in the implementation of the rules, to raise awareness among voters, polling staff and election contestants, and to provide recommendations to the UEC.

The SOPs' stipulations were precise. Polling stations should be set up in a large space and have good ventilation; they should have two different routes for entrance and exit, and markings on the floor should regulate social distancing to a six-foot minimum and hand washing facilities should be arranged within the polling centre, as well as Covid-19 awareness posters and waste bins with covers. Polling staff had to wear masks, face shields and gloves at all times. The SOPs prescribed that frequent contact surfaces should be cleaned with 1:50 hypochlorite solution (1000 ppm) at least twice before opening and after closing the polling station.

Outside polling stations, arrangements were to be made for thermal screening of voters with non-contact thermometers, and keeping record of the voters' temperature; for posting voter lists in such a way as to avoid crowding when voters checked their names; and for queuing areas (marked with plastic tape or bamboo sticks) to be managed by designated staff.

Figure 1. Polling station instructional poster (MERIN)



Source: Myanmar Election Resource and Information Network (MERIN), 2020 Polling Station Poster, 29 September 2020, <<https://merin.org.mm/en/publication/2020-polling-station-layout-poster>>, accessed 16 April 2021.

All voters were to be provided with masks free of charge and there was to be hand sanitizer in at least five places in the polling station. Voters had to use hand sanitizer at least twice at the entrance of the polling station and once at the exit. The MoHS guidelines were not always consistently applied (ANFREL 2021: 107ff).

For the elections, Myanmar purchased PPE from China: 35 million KN95 masks; 10 million vinyl gloves; 9 million face shields; 2.5 million surgical gowns; 2 million surgical caps; and 500,000 each of protective face masks, goggles, surgical gloves, boots and boot covers. The equipment was delivered via some 120 special flights from China landing in Yangon and Mandalay between 21 October and 5 November (GNLM 2020e).

The election by-laws provide that voters have indelible ink applied on the finger as a safeguard against multiple voting. In order to prevent this from being a source of infection, the SOPs prescribed a 70 per cent alcohol mix with the ink. Small plastic bags were to be provided for holding voters' identity cards and avoiding the need for election officials to touch them directly. Finally, voters used stamps to mark their ballots in each polling booth. The risk of contamination was to be mitigated by the comprehensive use of hand sanitizer.

According to the SOPs (and see ANFREL 2021: 107–8), voters with a temperature above 38°C would be asked to wait for 15 minutes, have their temperature re-measured, and should it again be higher than 38°C, were to vote in a separate room. Local medical and public health officials were to be informed, and patients referred to a designated hospital. In practice however, only a few polling stations (7 per cent) had a separate room or space for voters with Covid-19 symptoms (PACE 2020c). Theoretically, checking all voters on the same day for temperature could have amounted to a nationwide screening campaign for Covid-19 symptoms; however, no data was released by the MoHS or the UEC on the number of voters affected.

Domestic election observer groups reported that election day had proceeded in orderly fashion, with voters patiently waiting in long queues to cast their ballots. PACE issued preliminary findings on the day following the elections, reporting that Covid-19 prevention guidelines were mostly followed (apart from facilities for symptomatic voters, as mentioned) and no major incident was reported. Specifically, PACE reported that almost all polling stations (98 per cent) provided hand sanitizing gel; 93 per cent provided masks; 87 per cent conducted temperature tests; 84 per cent displayed marks on the floor to encourage social distancing; and 23 per cent provided gloves (PACE 2020c).

### Post-election Covid-19 developments

Numbers of Covid-19 cases released by the MoHS in the weeks following the elections show an increase in prevalence but without a major spike (MoHS 2020). The government had warned that an increase would be inevitable (Zaw Zaw Htwe 2020). Several media reported cases among election officials and the population (Khin Su Wai and Kyaw Ko Ko 2020; Phyo Wai Kyaw 2020). Post-election victory celebrations could also have contributed to contagion, as well as a common disregard for Covid-19 restrictions (John Zaw 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

The elections, held under severe Covid-19 conditions with extensive protective measures around voting arrangements, were an operational success. Despite the pandemic, turnout had increased from 69 per cent in 2015 to 71.84 per cent, indicating that voters felt safe to exercise their newly acquired 'civic duty' (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2020). Some voters shared anecdotally that their motivation to participate in the elections was triggered by the Commander-in-Chief's comments on the electoral process in the run-up to election day, leading them to vote against the military.

The election administration extended an already existing mechanism of advance voting in order to reduce the number of voters at polling stations on election day and protect the most vulnerable. Long-standing gaps and under-regulated aspects in the election legislation (see Lidauer and Saphy 2014), brought flexibility and allowed the adoption of measures without having to amend the laws. The governance of the process was also affected, with



governmental authorities, in particular the MoHS, getting involved in matters of election management.

Yet, the general anti-Covid measures adopted by Myanmar were drastic, even when compared to countries with a much higher prevalence of cases. Various governmental orders to prevent a public health crisis had intermittently restricted the freedoms of movement and assembly since April 2020. The onset of the campaign period coincided with an upsurge of infections, responded to with more governmental interventions. Strict stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions, in particular, deeply affected the electoral environment.

Specifically, these restrictive measures tilted the playing field between political parties, prevented a genuine campaign in substantial parts of the country, limited campaigning elsewhere, and diminished the capacity of civil society and the media to scrutinize the process and provide information to voters. Finally, by limiting the presence of international observers and foreign journalists, these measures also affected expressions of international support and recognition that might otherwise have been forthcoming.

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## About International IDEA

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