

Burma

Myanmar's NLD [And Ethnic Political Parties] Rejects Military's Call for Proportional Representation Election System

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YANGON—The National League for Democracy (NLD) and ethnic political parties that won seats in the 2020 general election said they are against the proportional representation (PR) system proposed by Myanmar's military regime, which seized power in a coup last month.

Central Executive Committee member Daw Khin San Hlaing of the NLD, which won over 83 percent of votes in the Nov. 8 election, said: "People are not ready to exercise PR. As long as the military is in the Parliament and the Constitution remains unchanged, we don't support switching to PR."

The military-appointed Union Election Commission (UEC) has asked the political parties to provide their input on ways to replace the First Past the Post System (FPTP) with the PR system, citing the calls for a switch to PR at a recent meeting of 51 political parties. The meeting was boycotted by major parties including the NLD.

"Myanmar is not yet ready for PR. It was proposed at the first Parliament under [the U Thein Sein government] to switch to PR. The Parliament turned down the proposal," said Daw Khin San Hlaing.

Major Shan State-based party the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), which won 15 seats in the Union Parliament and 27 seats in the Shan State Parliament, said it would not reply to the UEC's request for input on PR.

"We didn't attend the UEC meeting as we don't recognize the military council. And we have no reason to reply to their PR proposal," said general secretary Sai Leik of the SNLD.

The Ta'ang National Party (TNP), a popular party among ethnic Ta'ang people, said it would not accept PR, though it has not received the UEC's invitation for input on a PR system.

"The PR system is not yet appropriate in ethnic regions. There are many illiterate voters in Myanmar. If PR is to be practiced, it is important that correct choices are made. As they can't even read the names, there can be many mistakes," said TNP chairman Aik Mone.

The representation of ethnic parties in the Parliament could be affected by a move to PR, said Aik Mone.

There are over 20 democracies that exercise PR around the world, but the system is different from one country to another.

In FPTP, which is practiced in Myanmar, the candidates who win a majority of votes are elected lawmakers. Under the PR, parties receive Parliamentary seats proportional to the percentage of votes they win in an election. Though PR can prevent the one-party authoritarianism which is otherwise allowed by FPTP, it has its own disadvantages, such as negative impacts on representation of ethnicity-based political parties in the Parliament, as Parliamentary seats are shared according to percentage of total votes.

Myanmar's military holds 25 percent of the seats in national and sub-national legislatures under the 2008 Constitution, and only 75 percent are elected seats. Political analysts say democratic forces will lose strength in Parliament under PR, as around 30 political parties out of some 90 political parties in Myanmar are believed to be the military's allies.

A politician who contested the 2020 general election said on condition of anonymity: "They originally have 25 percent. If PR is practiced, for example, the Union Solidarity and Development Party [USDP], due to the support of the military and military sympathizers, may win the second largest number of seats after the NLD. Even if people don't vote for the party, it will still have seats in the Parliament because of the percentage of votes it wins in the election. And PR is very complicated. There are problems even in the current [FPTP] system. I view [the plan to switch to PR] as a political trick."

The Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP), which won five seats in the Union Parliament and three seats in Kayah State said PR is not appropriate for Myanmar. KySDP general secretary Theh Reh said, "We have not received the UEC letter. I don't think PR will work as there are problems with ethnic majority and minorities."

The idea was proposed in Parliament in 2014 under President U Thein Sein's government. The Upper House approved the switch, but the Lower House voted it down. The NLD at the time also opposed the PR, and all the NLD representatives resigned from a Parliamentary PR preparation commission.

Detained NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has also said that PR is not appropriate for Myanmar given her situation. The NLD has also explained the pros and cons of PR to citizens in some regions and states.

A total of 51 parties including the military's proxy USDP, its allies and ethnic parties attended the meeting with the military-appointed UEC, and 38 major parties including the NLD and SNLD boycotted the meeting.

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