



# VOICES OF FEMALE CANDIDATES

OF THE 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our thanks to all the people who participated in this research and shared their experiences and recommendations.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

**This project has four objectives:**

- i) To analyze the challenges faced by female candidates contesting the 2020 general elections;
- ii) To develop coordination strategies between women's organizations and political parties;
- iii) To analyze the possibility of adopting a 30 percent quota system and other mechanisms in political parties and
- iv) To develop advocacy strategies to encourage political parties to adopt the 30 percent quota.

## AREAS OF DISCUSSION

The main focus of the study is to evaluate the impact of political parties, electoral institutions, and of women's organizations on female candidates' electoral success in Myanmar. The study selected and discussed three areas – campaigning, constituency selection and election administration in order to do so. As the election coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the report also briefly discusses how COVID-19 indirectly impacted on the electoral success of female candidates.

## DISCLAIMER

This study was conducted from November 2020 to January 2021 and its discussion and recommendations reflect the context and political institutions that existed before the military coup on 1 February 2021. The findings of this study are still relevant for increasing women's political leadership and representation in Myanmar in all situations in which democratic institutions are being built or rebuilt.

# CONTENTS

## PART I: VOICES OF FEMALE CANDIDATES OF THE 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS

- 1 INTRODUCTION
- 3 RESEARCH METHOD
- 5 WOMEN CANDIDATES AND THE SELECTION OF CONSTITUENCIES
- 9 FEMALE CANDIDATES AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNING
- 13 FEMALE CANDIDATES AND ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION
- 15 FEMALE CANDIDATES AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION
- 17 FEMALE CANDIDATES AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS
- 19 RECOMMENDATIONS
  - 19** 1. Electoral Institutions
  - 21** 2. Political Parties
  - 22** 3. Programs to assist female candidates
- 25 ANNEX I. FEMALE CANDIDATES FROM PARTIES
- 25 ANNEX II. REPRESENTATIVES FROM PARTIES

## PART II: VOICES OF FEMALE 2020 ELECTION CANDIDATES FOLLOWING THE 2021 MILITARY COUP

- 27 INTRODUCTION
  - Opinions of Female 2020 Election Candidates on the 2021 Military Coup*
- 32 FINDINGS
- 41 CONCLUSION



## ABOUT THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF BURMA

The Women's League of Burma (WLB) is an umbrella organisation comprising 13 women's organisations of different ethnic backgrounds from Burma. WLB was founded on 9th December, 1999. Its mission is to work for women's empowerment and advancement of the status of women, and to work for the increased participation of women in all spheres of society in the democracy movement, and in peace and national reconciliation processes through capacity building, advocacy, research and documentation.

### AIMS

- To work for the empowerment and advancement of the status of women
- To work for the rights of women and gender equality
- To work for the Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women
- To work for the increased participation of women in every level of decision making in all spheres of society
- To participate effectively in the movement for peace, democracy and national reconciliation

# PART I

## VOICES OF FEMALE CANDIDATES OF THE 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS



# INTRODUCTION

The third elections to be held under the 2008 military constitution took place in November 2020 and featured factors that conditioned and constrained the chances of women's electoral success. After a decade of electoral democracy, youth and women were optimistic about potential electoral representation. Compared to previous elections, women from diverse backgrounds with different ethnicities, religions, ages, qualifications, careers, and political ideologies contested the 2020 general elections. Lawyers, journalists, doctors, teachers, human rights defenders, businesswomen and women from non-governmental organizations participated in the elections. The majority of them competed in the elections with an aim of increasing women's participation in politics. A total of 1,109 female candidates registered to compete in the elections, a four percent increase on the 2015 general elections.

However, only a total of 907 were able to contest the elections, and of them, 191 were elected to the parliament. Twenty three candidates made it to the Upper House (Pyithu Hluttaw), 52 made it to the Lower House (Amyotha Hluttaw) and 116 made it to the state and region parliaments. As a result, 72 female candidates (15 percent of the total) were elected to the Union parliament's bicameral legislature, failing to meet the minimum 20 percent required to table a motion for constitutional amendment. Female candidates faced challenges stemming from the electoral system, laws and by-laws stipulated in the 2008 military constitution, in addition to challenges from rigorous party politics and competition, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 election was vibrant and highly competitive. A total of 5,359 candidates from 91 political parties, in addition to another 280 independent candidates, contested the elections. There were between 7-15 contestants in each constituency and there were no constituencies without competition (though some constituencies had their elections cancelled). Debates on the possibility of forming a coalition government pushed rigorous competition between the ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and opposition parties. The NLD wanted to form a majority government and opposition parties wanted to win more seats in parliament. After failing to amend the 2008 military constitution to allow for the nomination and appointment of chief ministers of the states and regions through parliament rather than the President, state-based parties also tried hard to win more seats in both Union and state-level parliaments. Ethnic parties claiming to represent Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon and Wa communities merged into more electorally competitive unions. In the country's regions, there was fierce

competition between the NLD and the military proxy opposition party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and in the ethnic states, there was fierce competition between these two parties and the respective ethnic parties.

In addition, there were tensions ahead of the 2020 general elections between opposition parties and the Union Election Commission (UEC) due to a reduction in dialogues and engagement. For example, 26 opposition parties, led by the USDP, protested against the UEC by refusing to sign the political parties code of conduct over disputes on some articles. Later and separately, 34 opposition political parties, again led by the USDP, met the commander-in-chief of the military to state they would take action against the UEC if there was any electoral fraud. Further, COVID-19 restrictions in the campaign period included stay-at-home orders in 74 townships and restrictions on movement.<sup>1</sup> There was a division of opinion among political parties on whether the elections should be postponed or not.<sup>2</sup> Opposition parties led by the USDP favored election postponement, but the UEC, consisting of political appointees by the incumbent NLD, strongly rejected this and went ahead with the elections as planned.

The 2020 general elections were held successfully during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, compared to the 2015 elections, electoral violence, disputes and online and offline misinformation and hate speech increased, according to election observers.<sup>3</sup> Female candidates contesting in this political and electoral context experienced attacks and discrimination in addition to minimized electoral financing. However, when compared to the 2015 general elections, the news media aired introduction programs of at least some female candidates promptly. Due to COVID-19 related restrictions, the voter education programs on the ground were weak. But digital campaigns raising voter education and public awareness were effective to some extent. The moral support and electoral campaign materials provided to candidates by women's organizations also benefited them.

However, a majority of female candidates were not able to contest the elections freely due to their political parties, electoral institutions (the UEC, electoral laws and by-laws, voting procedures, and election management), and discrimination in mainstream culture and society. The following section discusses the impact of political parties, electoral institutions and discrimination on female candidates' selections of constituencies, on their campaigning and on the elections themselves. The final section discusses areas for reform, coordination and activities that women's organizations can use to give effective support.

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1 The Ministry of Health and Sports issued the stay-at-home order in all townships in Yangon except Cocokyun.

2 The Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMRef), "Democracy, Humanitarian and Paradox of Election Postponement", 10 September 2021.

3 The Carter Center, "Interim Statement 2 on Myanmar General Elections", 30 October 2020.



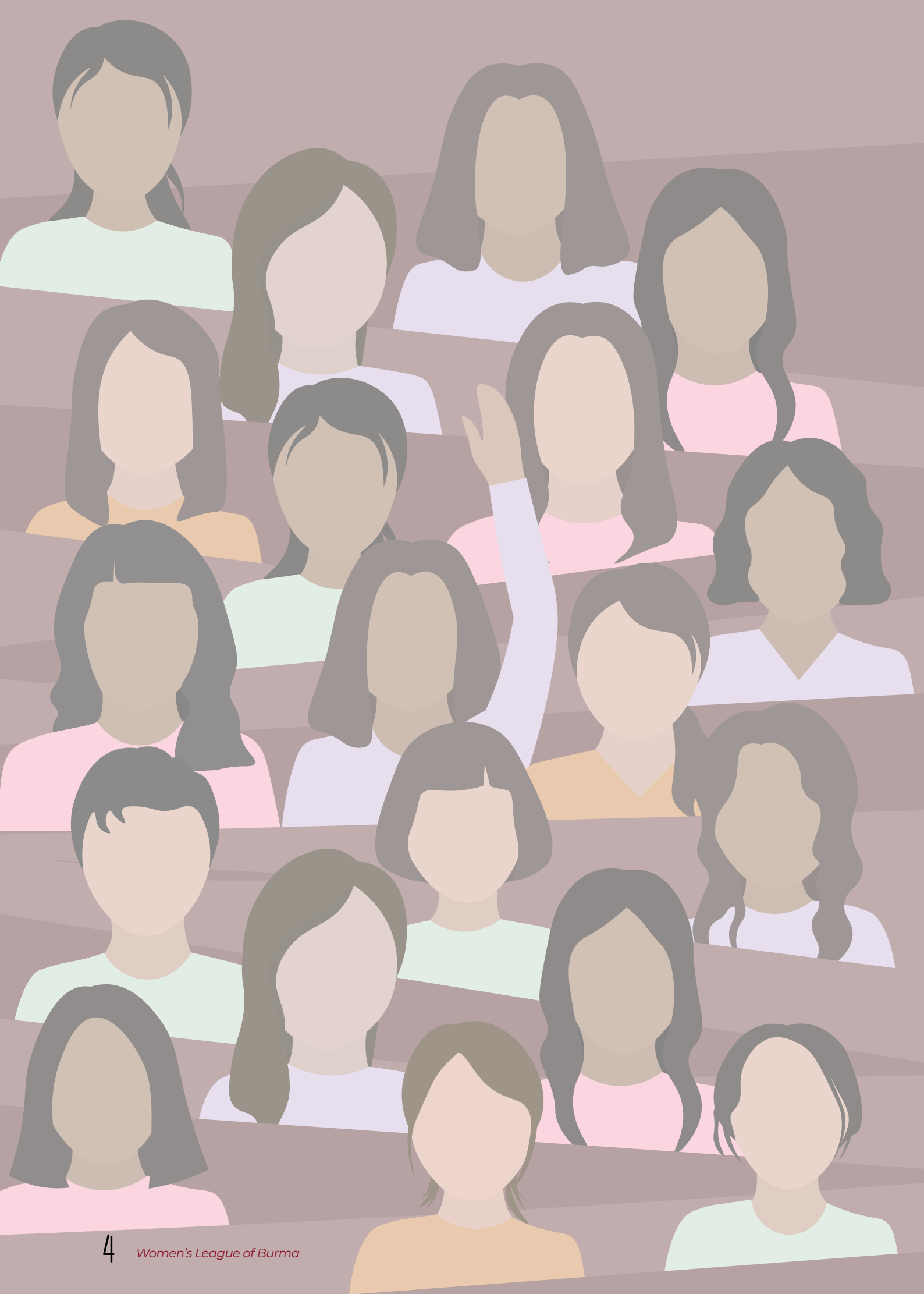
# RESEARCH METHOD

In order to formulate short- and long-term strategies to provide effective assistance to female candidates in the next elections, a number of the female candidates of the 2020 general elections were selected for interview. A total of 58 representatives – female election candidates, representatives from women’s organizations, and party representatives participated in this study. The representatives were selected from five categories – i) female candidates who represent parties; ii) independent female candidates; iii) those representing ethnic and religious minorities; iv) those who experienced electoral incidents such as electoral violence; and v) those who represent women’s organizations.

**Table 1.1. List of research participant candidates from stratified sampling**

Number of female candidates from parties that won the 2020 general elections	18
Number of female candidates from parties that did not win the 2020 general elections (and/or) from parties that won the previous elections	19
Independent female candidates	7
Female candidates that faced electoral incidents	5
Representatives from minorities (ethnic and religious)	5
Representatives from women’s organizations	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>58</b>

Participants were from all states and regions except Ayeyarwady Region. Representatives from the five categories were chosen to balance variables such as age and the parliaments contested which resulted in no female candidates contesting a constituency in Ayeyarwady Region participating in the study. Four participants contested seats in the Upper House, 16 contested seats in the Lower House, 26 contested seats in the state/region parliaments and five contested for the position of ethnic affairs minister. Fifteen percent of all participants were under 35 and 72 percent of participants were first-time candidates.



# WOMEN CANDIDATES AND THE SELECTION OF CONSTITUENCIES

The selection of a constituency can impact the electoral chances of a candidate. Female candidates selected their constituencies based on their political party's assignment, as the electoral institution allowed, or because it was convenient. In only a few cases was the decision strategic. Selecting a constituency strategically means considering the electoral system, electoral districts, and geographies when choosing an electoral constituency.

At the national level, the legislature is bicameral; one member from each of the 330 townships is elected to the Lower House and twelve from each of the 14 states and regions are elected to the Upper House. At the state level, two from each of the 330 townships are elected to the state/region parliaments. Ideally, this makes for a total of 1,158 constituencies contested in a general election – 330 seats for the Lower House, 168 seats for the Upper House and 660 seats for the states and regions.<sup>4</sup> As electoral constituencies were drawn based on township, i.e., geography, rather than population, this creates uneven voting power and inequalities. For instance, the number of eligible voters for the Bago township constituency is 412,631 while in the Cocokyun township constituency it is 1,466. This means that female candidates contesting a seat in Bago required potentially over a hundred thousand votes to be elected but for those contesting in Cocokyun, only a thousand votes or less. Two female candidates contested Bago constituency but no female candidate contested the Cocokyun constituency.

The geographical conditions and demographics are different in each township, affecting the constituencies and the challenges for candidates. For example, Chin State is remote and transportation is

<sup>4</sup> Due to the cancellation of elections in some constituencies on security grounds, there were only 1,104 seats up for grabs in 2020. In the states and regions, there are reserved seats for 'national races' with a population of 0.1 percent and above (n=55,000), according to article 161 of the 2008 military constitution. Despite the changes in demographics over the years, the same 29 ethnic affairs minister positions (or reserved seats) were elected to the state/region parliaments in both the 2015 and 2020 general elections.

particularly difficult during the raining season, and thus it is not possible for a candidate to cover the whole constituency when campaigning by road. The same applies for Shan and Rakhine states as it is costly to cover the whole constituency due to geographical distance and conditions. Furthermore, it is challenging for a female candidate to contest an election along ethnic lines. A Lisu female candidate in the 2020 election stated that she reached the southern part of her constituency but did not have enough time to go to the northern part, and she needed support from the whole community in south and north of the constituency.

Despite the malapportionment discussed above, female candidates selected constituencies that were convenient to them, or assigned by their parties, or allowed by the electoral institutions. The majority of female candidates interviewed decided to contest a seat in their native township, which brings the advantages of geographical familiarity, knowledge of what constituents want, and the ability to build trust with the community in a short time. However, there are disadvantages in selecting a native township constituency if it has a large population, if transportation is not easily accessible, or if the constituency has a mainstream relatively conservative society with a preference to elect male candidates, or it is a highly competitive constituency with a high-profile or popular incumbent, or if the ethnic population is spread across the township and candidates are contesting along ethnic lines, or if the selected constituency has a history of religious conflicts and candidates belong to a minority religious group. If female candidates opt for another constituency not native to them, they face different challenges in building trust.

Selecting a constituency involves selecting a parliament to contest. Female candidates who prefer to enact laws opt for the Union parliament and those who prefer regional development opt for the state/region parliaments. Due to the age limit prescribed in the constitutional and electoral laws, candidates under 30 are given no choice but to opt for either Lower House or state/region parliaments. Female candidates who seek experience and exposure prefer to go for state/region parliaments. With that said, constituency selection is mostly done by political parties and not by female candidates themselves. A participant of this study was a party auxiliary member and her constituency was reserved and assigned before she was even approved as a candidate.

Majority of parties has a candidate selection committee and those who interested to contest in elections have to submit applications for considerations. However, most candidate selection committee of political parties have no women member. Only a few parties have one or two women members in their candidate selection committees which range from 15 to 40 members. As a result, female candidates faced discrimination by the selection committee such as prioritizing male candidates over female candidates and assigning female candidates in

constituency that the party has lesser chance to win. In general, parties have stronghold and penetrating constituencies. The former has the party supporters, the party has won in previous elections, and the party has local offices and coordinators in community levels such as ward and village tracts. The latter is referred to the new constituencies that require party branding, linkage with community and party supporters to reach the conditions that the former has. Most female candidates are assigned to contest in parties' penetrating constituencies. A female candidate made a remark that, "party's senior male compete in only constituencies that are sure to win".<sup>5</sup>

The study showed there was a correlation between strategic selection of constituencies and women's electoral success. Strategic consideration involves choosing a constituency with a moderate and consolidated population or a constituency that has an ethnic population with a minimum threshold required to be elected if a candidate contest the elections along ethnic lines. Candidates also need to balance the following set of criteria in selecting a constituency: one that has strong party supporters, geographical familiarity, less racial and religious conflicts, where the community is open to elect female candidates, one that has stronger women networks in the constituency/ regions, and that is less competitive, or in other words, a constituency that has no high-profile rivals. Otherwise, the candidates will not have an electoral advantage and face several challenges.

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TO WIN.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, 24 November 2020.



# FEMALE CANDIDATES AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

Regarding the election campaign, female candidates faced challenges due to financial difficulties, lack of resources, lack of technical assistance, COVID-19 restrictions, and party and electoral rules and requirements. Candidates of the 2020 general elections were obliged to follow the Standard Operation Procedures (SOP) published by the Ministry of Health and Sport in addition to the campaign directives issued by the UEC. According to the SOP, public rallies of more than 50 attendees were not permitted and those who attended public meetings were required to keep six feet distance from one another. The amendments to the campaign directives just before the elections also prohibited public rallies in religious compounds. Due to these two conditions combined, female candidates were forced to organize multiple small meetings, further costing time and money and compromising their ability to cover whole constituencies within a 60 day time period. Some villages and wards adopted voluntary security measures to prevent COVID-19 and blocked others from entering the community, further limiting campaigning at the community level. A stay-at-home order was in place in 74 townships and at least 39 female candidates from affected townships contested the elections without holding a single public meeting.<sup>6</sup>

States and regions with more relaxed COVID-19 restrictions had offline electoral campaigns to some extent, and areas except Rakhine State and Paletwa Township, Chin State (which were blocked from internet connection) had online electoral campaigns to some extent. Most candidates used door-to-door campaigning, distributing pamphlets and talking to constituents, and used digital campaigns on social media platforms. Some parties supported candidates with campaign financing and human resources but most participants of this study had to use their own money with a small team for campaigning. Female candidates who contested constituencies with no party branch offices received no assistance from their political parties and this impacted

<sup>6</sup> In one incident, three candidates (one female) and all villagers who attended public meetings were forced into a 14-day quarantine because one of the attendees tested COVID-19 positive a day later. Candidates lost days for their election campaigns due to the quarantine.

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”

their chance of winning the elections. A female candidate said, “constituents are more impressed by those who came and canvassed with many party supporters.”<sup>7</sup>

There was also a gap in digital skills among female candidates. Some of them were popular and could use online platforms and traditional news media like broadcast interviews and panel discussions to convey their messages. Some candidates were incumbents and thus had the advantage of being already known to the public and could campaign by reporting their performance and activities online.<sup>8</sup> Only a few candidates conducted baseline survey data to know their constituents—age, career, and desires—in developing their electoral pledges. A few others used phone calls and postal services to reach their constituents directly, explaining how to vote and asking for their votes. However, most candidates could not use such tactics as they did not get voter information from the UEC—especially in ethnic minority constituencies.<sup>9</sup>

Two thirds of participants interviewed added women-related issues to their electoral pledges.<sup>10</sup> However, female candidates belonging to political parties prioritized party pledges, and party-directed pledges, over their own. For female candidates who contested in constituencies new to their party, they had to prioritize the introduction of the party and party branding over their own image and electoral pledges. Also, younger female candidates were influenced by older male party coordinators or campaign

7 Interview, 23 November 2020.

8 Some of their Facebook profiles have a blue tick (verification of authenticity by Facebook) and engagement with followers.

9 Female candidates who use demographic data for election campaigns referenced the census and other previously available data.

10 This claim is made by the interviewees' responds and not by analyzing their pamphlets and campaign speeches.



managers and thus female candidates often did not act independently but rather as advised. A female candidate suggested “if there were female campaign managers in the campaign team and female party coordinators in the ward and village tract level party offices, it would be supportive to female candidates”.<sup>11</sup> In the 2020 general elections, 510 candidates had either a campaign manager or party coordinator to lead the campaign team, but only 12 percent of them were women.<sup>12</sup>

Each political party was given 15 minutes of airtime to address constituents and announce party policies through state TV channels, Myanmar radio and television channels, Hluttaw channels, and MRTV social media platforms. A total of 70 political parties participated in the airtime program, of which only 15 parties, either alone or along with male fellows, have a women presence in addressing constituents. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) party and the Mon Unity Party (MUP) sent two representatives, male and female, to address the public in two languages – Bamar and their respective ethnic language. As independent candidates were not permitted to broadcast, 25 female independent candidates were prohibited from addressing the public through state-owned television and news channels.

The 2020 general elections were highly competitive. There was electoral violence between party supporters during the campaign period, there was campaigning on race and religion platforms and the use of misinformation, the obstructing of a convoy of candidates’ campaign vehicles, and tactics such as playing campaign music very loud to obstruct other contestants’ campaigns and destroying



IF THERE WERE FEMALE CAMPAIGN MANAGERS IN THE CAMPAIGN TEAM AND FEMALE PARTY COORDINATORS IN THE WARD AND VILLAGE TRACT LEVEL PARTY OFFICES, IT WOULD BE SUPPORTIVE TO FEMALE CANDIDATES.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, 1 December 2020.

<sup>12</sup> People’s Alliance for Credible Elections (PACE), Preliminary report on election campaign. This report interviewed 1,108 election candidates in total and covered the period from 28 September to 11 October.

party or candidate campaign boards. There were mutual accusations of violating COVID-19 prevention rules between parties and candidates. Some female contestants experienced obstruction and intimidation in their campaigns. The electoral commission was not able to prevent campaigns using race and religion or to guarantee the security of female candidates. Two female candidates contesting in Toungup Township, Rakhine State were abducted by an ethnic armed organization. Although the majority of female candidates were able to avoid confrontations during campaigning, some were targeted due to their associated parties and attacked with derogatory words. Although female independent candidates have no political party association, some of them who broke away from and competed against their previous party were targeted and attacked by rivals' supporters. Some female candidates received not only negative and derogatory comments but also were criticized and shamed for their appearance online.

# FEMALE CANDIDATES AND ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

On 8 November 2020, the general elections were held successfully amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the elections were cancelled in some areas a few weeks before the elections and female candidates and parties that registered to compete those constituencies lost their chance. On 17 October 2020, 20 days before the general election, the United Democratic Party aka the Rose Party, the second biggest contestant after the ruling NLD party, with a total of 1,130 candidates, was deregistered by the UEC. Thus, 196 female candidates representing that party lost the right to stand and be elected. In addition, on 16 October 2021, a total of 54 constituencies in Rakhine and Shan states were cancelled on the grounds of security, which further caused six registered female candidates to lose their opportunity. In Mon State and Bago Region, the UEC cancelled some constituencies partially which affected the potential votes that female candidates invested in and canvassed. The decision made by the UEC not only cost the time and money of affected female candidates but also revoked their right to stand and be elected as it was too late to switch political parties or constituencies.

There were weaknesses, ambiguities and inconsistencies across election management bodies from the pre-election period to the day of the election and thus the challenges that female candidates encountered differed from one other. Due to the weaknesses in electoral administration, candidates did not get access to voter information such as the number of eligible voters, polling stations locations and polling procedures that could be used for targeted election campaigns, particularly in states with internally displaced people camps. A lack of information on how many would vote in which polling stations in advance not only affected female voters but also female candidates. The rules regarding advance voting including when and where to collect advance votes were not informed to candidates early enough. Some candidates were campaigning while advance voting took place in the area while others were prohibited from canvassing when the advance voting took place. The UEC was not able to take action against those who obstructed the campaigns of some

female candidates and those who used derogatory terms against female candidates, but also it was not able to provide security measures. Although there was a clause to include women in the election security management committees (ESMC), there were questions about the effectiveness of those committees.<sup>13</sup>

On election day there were incidents with ballot papers. Polling officers in some polling stations issued wrong ballot papers mistakenly for the wrong parliaments. For instance, voters were given a ballot paper for the Lower House when voting for the Upper House.<sup>14</sup> Although it was impossible to gauge the actual impact on votes results, the majority of female candidates participating in this study faced such issues in their constituencies. While it did not pose a major problem for candidates representing the major parties (as they contested the majority of the constituencies), it had a huge impact on independent female candidates as they helped voters to recognize their names by the house of parliament.<sup>15</sup> Most female candidates did not have polling agents and thus they were not able to collect information about election day incidents to review for the next elections. For example, observing the number and nature of invalid votes they received in particular polling stations in order to help design voter education programs. Likewise, only if candidates' agents keep records of evidence on any electoral disputes, can they use these documents to file against rivals. Only two parties, the NLD and the USDP, had candidates' agents in every polling station.

For women to be elected in elections freely and fairly the independence of the electoral commission and polling officers is crucial. The composition of the electoral commission at various levels included representatives from the general administration department and other relevant ministries and was male dominated. Regardless of the presence of campaigns to vote for female candidates, administrators in some areas (majority male) organized/campaigned for people to vote for the candidates of the party of their preference. In addition, using their authority, they either were involved in (or sometimes led) campaigns of candidates from the party they supported or limited campaigns of candidates from other parties which they did not support. Some female candidates who faced such conditions mentioned that women will not be elected and electoral assistance will not be effective unless elections are fair.

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13 The Union Election Commission, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy and Action Plan (2019-2022).

14 Each voter has to give three votes for three parliaments: the Upper, Lower and state/region parliament. If a voter is eligible to vote for the ethnic affairs minister position and if she/he is on the voters' list, they have to give four votes. One extra vote is for the ethnic affairs minister position of respective states and regions.

15 Independent candidates were required to create a candidate logo in order to contest the elections but as they were relatively new compared to logos of political parties, they taught their supporters to find their names on the ballot paper and to associate their names with parliaments.

# FEMALE CANDIDATES AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Over half of the female candidates that participated in this study entered the elections with the aim to work for women's rights, and to represent and provide political leadership to female constituents. In communities that were more progressive, female candidates were welcomed and supported. However, in communities that were more traditional, constituents doubted the capability of female candidates. The public perceptions of political leadership were accompanied by auras of political legacy (i.e., the history or years of engagement in politics) and sacrifices. Voters preferred those who struggled in the democracy movements of the preceding decades and saw them as politicians they were willing to accept as leaders.

Some female candidates of the 2020 general elections were measured against these public perceptions and criticized for not having a political activism background, disregarding their other experience and qualifications. A female candidate with an NGO background was called "a person who work for dollars or a dollar taker" behind her back and was discriminated against, implying she lacked a capacity for political sacrifice. Electoral results show that males with political activism backgrounds were elected more than qualified female candidates without political activism backgrounds. The public perceptions of what makes a politician also extended to age. A young female candidate was told that she was five years too young to be voted for. The 2020 election results showed older males were elected more than younger female candidates.

In Myanmar, political parties are also mechanisms that reinforce hierarchical relations and patriarchal systems. Most political parties made the promise to 'protect' women in their policy platforms and reinstated women's social roles as the safeguard of race and religion. Some parties had a policy to prioritize women in candidate selections, but in practice only a few parties implemented the policy. One reason why there were many independent candidates in the 2020 general

elections related to the parties' preferences for male candidates. A female candidate said, "although our qualifications and working years for the party are the same, the party chose a male counterpart over me", which led her to quit the party and contest as an independent.<sup>16</sup> Another female candidate said, "she was not selected because the (male) party vice-chair applied for the same constituency she applied for".<sup>17</sup> According to the candidate lists participated of the 2020 general elections, there was only 20 percent women's participation in the NLD and only 10 percent women's participation in the USDP. A party representative said, "the region that her party has a base is traditional and discriminates against women in general, special measures are necessary to increase women's representation".<sup>18</sup>

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PARTY ARE THE  
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OVER ME.

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SHE WAS NOT  
SELECTED  
BECAUSE THE  
MALE PARTY  
VICE-CHAIR  
APPLIED FOR  
THE SAME  
CONSTITUENCY  
SHE APPLIED FOR.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, 5 December 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, 19 December 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, 15 December 2020.

# FEMALE CANDIDATES AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Compared to the 2015 general elections, female candidates in the 2020 general elections received more electoral assistance opportunities. Through traditional media and social media, they can convey messages to their constituents. Some female candidates were popular and well known due to their participation in interviews, candidate introduction programs, regular discussions with candidate programs and panel discussions. On the other hand, women's organizations provided effective messages to the public through entertainment and cartoon characters. There was also direct assistance such as providing t-shirts, hand gels and covering candidate registration fees. A few female candidates had volunteers helping them for campaigning and office support.

The majority of female candidates participating in the study were not alien to politics. They attended political trainings and were encouraged to participate in the elections. Contesting in elections with the aim to focus on women's issues is the result of long-term efforts by women's organizations that invested in capacity building, gender equality and women empowerment. Despite the stressful competition, the moral support of women's organizations benefitted some female candidates. In addition to the direct and indirect assistance from women's organizations, some female candidates earned respect and political integrity due to the endorsement of women's organizations.

However, there were some female candidates who did not receive any assistance or support from local organizations or women's organizations due to a lack of strong women's organizations or no women's organization at all in their areas. In other cases, women's organizations supported candidates of political parties they were close to regardless of gender of candidates. On the other hand, women organizations had a set of criteria to support some women out of all candidates, no matter what. Female candidates who received support from women's organizations were found to have an established relationship with the organizations achieved through participating in organized trainings, discussions, and

forums. One women's organization only gave assistance to female candidates with high chances of winning.

In order to increase women's political representation, female candidates, elected or non-elected, need to continue to work with women's organizations. A female candidate who won in the election said, "female MPs need assistance for post-election legal and parliamentary affairs".<sup>19</sup> In addition, as discussed in part (F), because female candidates did not gain the trust, respect and support from communities in some areas and were discriminated against because of their age and years of involvement in politics, candidates believe that capacity building for women on gender equality and women empowerment is still required.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, 18 December 2020.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS

### The UEC

According to the 2008 military constitution, the President forms the UEC with at least five members including the chairman, which is later expanded by appointing more members as necessary. There were 15 members in the UEC for the 2015 – 2020 term and all were male. The qualifications requirement for the chairman and commissioners include: to have attained 50 years of age; or have served as the Chief Justice of the Union or Judge of the supreme court or the high court of a region or state or a similar rank for a minimum of five years; to have served at the rank of judicial officer or law officer not lower the rank of the region or state level for a minimum of 10 years; or have practiced as an advocate for a minimum of 20 years; or are considered eminent by the President.<sup>20</sup> These criteria limit the participation of young women and those belonging to ethnic and religious minorities in the central electoral management body. It is rare to meet the criteria of both age and legal experience given the systematic discrimination against women and minorities. The appointment of the UEC is structurally associated with the ruling party and raises the question of impartiality. In states and region levels and below, representatives from general administration and other ministries are incorporated in the formation of the election commission and are overly male dominated. In order to increase women's political representation, the UEC must not only be an independent body but also be reviewed and reformed to be a gender-balanced institution.

### The UEC Gender Policy

The UEC drafted and adopted a gender policy in its strategic plan. However, the policy does not push for a quota system or a mandatory requirement for minimum women's participation in party or electoral institutions. The UEC only took an approach of: i) increasing the number of women; ii) providing gender awareness training; iii) raising awareness for women's participation in voting and in all the stages of the electoral

<sup>20</sup> The Union Election Commission Law, Chapter 2, paragraph 5.

process. The policy commits to a review process with relevant organizations to amend laws and by-laws, but it does not indicate a timeframe for review and implementation. For example, in its current policy, it lay outs measures for preventing hate speech against women and to include women in ESMCs for election disputes, however, most female candidates were not aware of their existence nor used any of those measures to solve electoral disputes in the 2020 general elections. Despite the policy, the amendment to by-laws made by the UEC in 2019 did not include articles that could benefit female candidates. In order to increase women's political representation, the UEC must revise its gender policy.

### Electoral system

The electoral system in practice is a winner-takes-all single majority system, simply known as the “first past the post” (FPTP) system. Also, electoral districts are divided based on township boundaries rather than on the population, creating malapportionment. When the FPTP electoral system is combined with malapportionment, structural barriers limit the chances of ethnic minorities to be elected, particularly smaller ethnic parties comprised along the ethnic lines. For instance, a female candidate trying to represent the Mro ethnic group would require over ten thousand votes to win in her constituency for a Lower House seat, however the total number of Mro ethnic people in her constituency is less than 3,000. In the case of female ethnic candidates with a moderate population, there is a limited chance of winning consolidated votes as constituents are spread across constituencies.

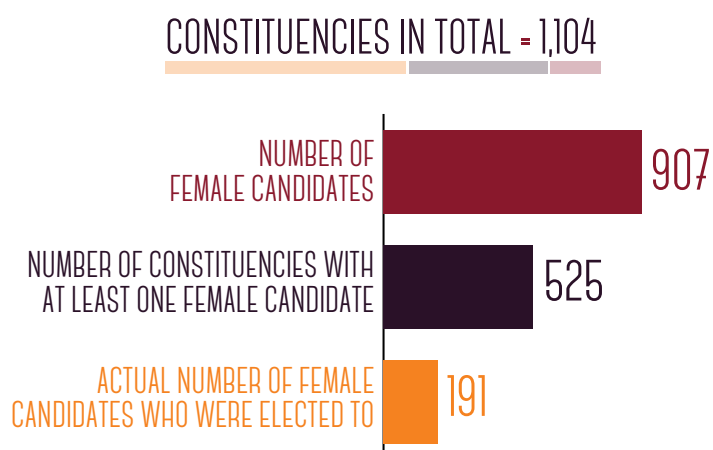
A female candidate belonging to an ethnic minority community said, “if we can only win the election by joining a major party, we will gradually lose trust in this process” in regards to the electoral system.<sup>21</sup> One disadvantage of FPTP is wasted or unused votes. If constituencies overlap, there will be wasted votes regardless of how many female candidates enter the election and have fewer chances to increase women's political representation. For example, there were four female candidates in Kayah Sate constituency No. 2 for the Upper House, but only one of them can win the election and the votes the three other female candidates received are wasted votes.

Hence, although there was a total of 907 female candidates in the 2020 general elections, two or more female candidates contested in more than 200 constituencies. There were only 525 constituencies with a female candidate, making a positive ceiling of 47 percent of women's participation in the parliament.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, 29 December 2020.

**Graph 1. The highest number of seats female candidates could win in 2020 under the current electoral system**



In order to increase women’s participation, the electoral system should be revised and/or special measures should be adopted, such as a minimum requirement for female candidates in political parties, and/or a reservation of a certain number of seats in the parliaments. The Women’s League of Burma constantly proposes to use a proportional representation (PR) system and to adopt a 30 percent quota for women as a temporary measure.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. POLITICAL PARTIES

At present, there had no affirmative actions or compulsory measures in place for increasing women candidates and only some political parties took voluntary measures. In 2020 general elections, the SNLD forwarded 30 percent female candidates and the People’s Pioneer Party (PPP) forwarded 40 percent female candidates, followed by the NLD (20 percent) and the USDP (10 percent) respectively. The percentage of female candidates of the rest 87 parties were below 10 percent. Majority of political parties do not have women wings/committees and women participation in the candidate selection was also minimal. The study showed there was a correlation between high women participation and women leadership in political parties.

Political parties can help female candidates more visible and in building their profile by selecting women member for candidature in advance for necessary preparation, providing them opportunities for political trainings, a space to represent and associate with their party in the eyes of the constituents, a chance to work not only with communities but also with respective election commissions, women organizations, local and international organizations and finally a platform to report their political activities back to constituencies. The study showed that female

<sup>22</sup> Women’s League of Burma, standpoint on gender equality.

candidates who won the elections received the support from their political parties including finance, human resources and technical advice. Female candidates from political parties with a linkage to communities found less challenging and more success in the 2020 general elections. In order to ensure female candidates are elected, political parties organize and train members in advance to provide female candidates as campaign manager, coordinators, candidates' agents or polling agents. Political parties can reserve the fund for cost of those activities or work with women organizations.

More importantly, political parties with a commitment to increased women participation in politics should be willing to amend constitutional and electoral laws that limit their meaningful participation. Political parties should also lay out in their policy platforms to amend laws that are discriminating against women and gender equality.

### 3. PROGRAMS TO ASSIST FEMALE CANDIDATES

In order to provide effective assistance to female candidates, women's organizations should approach elections in two periods – pre-and post-elections systematically. The pre-election period requires profile building, coalition building with political parties and providing technical assistance. Post-election requires reviewing for electoral reform, developing advocacy strategies to amend laws and providing gender and women trainings.

#### **Building profile for female candidates**

This study showed that there was a correlation between female candidates' chances of winning and their preparation. Although there was not a common agreement among female candidates on how long would be necessary, many mentioned 3 to 5 years would be a good amount of time to invest to connect with constituencies in which they want to compete. A candidate said, "we should not come to constituencies to ask for votes only when there are elections".<sup>23</sup> As female candidates need public speaking skills in addition to political knowledge, some candidates believe programs such as a "candidates academy" to train future candidates would be helpful. An academy that provides theories and literature is also an opportunity for future candidates to go to the ground and work with communities, which later helps the academy to provide electoral assistance. According to the experiences of the female candidates in the 2020 general elections, capacity building programs are not adequate as they need digital skills, research and campaign methods and skillful campaign managers in their teams.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, 24 November 2020.

## Providing electoral assistance

Some women's organizations provided candidate registration fees, COVID-19-prevention materials, campaign shirts etc. to female candidates. However, most female candidates required advice on electoral procedures, research and voter education materials. For example, female candidates knew little about the procedures and the need for documents and evidence to file a complaint against rivals in the case of electoral disputes. Female candidates had to campaign and educate voters on voting procedures simultaneously and they did not have enough materials. According to the experiences of female candidates, public awareness campaigns to vote for female candidates were insufficient and the public needed education on voting procedures, political and the electoral system. There was disinformation such as that votes would be invalid if voters do not vote for the same party in all three ballots, votes for independent candidates are useless as they cannot form government, and confusion among the public over how to vote and what is a valid or invalid vote.<sup>24</sup> In addition, women candidates needed data, techniques, and resources to explore the needs of their constituencies. In order to provide effective electoral assistance, programs that would provide information to candidates will also be required.

## Cooperating with political parties

A female candidate suggested that women's organizations should work with political parties ahead of the elections. There was a moral dilemma for women's organizations who committed to support their partner political parties when the parties' male candidates competed with female candidates in the same constituency. This experience suggests that women's organizations need to have a strong policy. For example, to support a party that fielded a certain percentage of female candidates (in other words, do not support any party that does not meet the minimum requirement), to support parties that have women committees/women wings, to support parties that have women-related policies in their policy platform or electoral pledges, etc.). If there are many political parties that have women's participation at more or less the same quantity, women's organizations can select parties that are close in policy to cooperate with. For example, selecting a party that commits to amending the military constitution and electoral rules that limit women's participation. In such a case, women's organizations can also coordinate with those parties in reviewing the legal framework and developing advocacy strategies.

<sup>24</sup> According to the election results, there were multiple invalid votes in the 2020 general elections. Polling officers or voters noticed that some incorrect ballots were allocated for wrong parliaments only after 50 ballots were already distributed in some polling stations.

## **Hluttaw and enacting laws**

In the post-election period, it is important for female candidates to implement electoral pledges, to amend laws that are discriminating against women, to draft gender budgets and review the legal framework that is limiting increased women representation. Although political parties provided over 3,000 amendments to the constitution in 2019, none of the parties made amendments to stipulations from which electoral laws are drawn in order to ensure free and fair elections, an independent electoral commission, and more women's representation. In addition, the amendments to electoral laws by the parliamentarians do not include any improving women's political representation. The WLB's statement on gender equality constantly stressed using PR and the need to coordinate with female candidates to carry out the necessary amendments for increasing women political leadership. This would also include advocacy for signing International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that would ensure the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

## **Forming women's organizations, networking and representation**

Another strategy in order to effectively assist female candidates is to strengthen women's organizations, build networks and gain more representation. In regions where women's organizations are not strong (for instance, Chin State), female candidates faced more challenges in the 2020 general elections as there was no effective electoral assistance available for them. Likewise, in conservative societies where traditional beliefs are strong, women's empowerment programs must be targeted and provided. Women's organizations should partner and work with community-based organizations, electoral assistance organizations and local women's organizations for effective electoral assistance for female candidates. Women's organizations will also need to gain and expand their representation by representing minorities (ethnic, religious, ableness) in respective local communities and achieving local women's participation.

## ANNEX. I

### Female Candidates from Parties

Arakan Front Party (AFP)  
Arakan League for Democracy Party (ALD)  
Arakan National Party (ANP)  
Chin National League for Democracy Party (CNLD)  
Danu National Democracy Party  
Danu National Organization Party  
Democratic Party (Myanmar)  
Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS)  
Inn National League Party  
Kachin National Congress (KNC)  
Kachin State People's Party (KSPP)  
Karen National Democratic Party (KNDP)  
Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP)  
Kayan National Party (KNP)  
Kayin People's Party (KPP)  
Kokang Democracy and Unity Party  
Lhaovo National Unity and Development Party  
Lisu National Development Party (LNDP)  
Mon Unity Party (MUP)  
Mro National Development Party  
National Democratic Force (NDF)  
National Development Party  
National League for Democracy (NLD)  
National Unity Party (NUP)  
Pao National Organization (PNO)  
People's Party (PP)  
People's Pioneer Party (PPP)  
Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP)  
Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)  
Ta-Arng (Palaung) National Party (TNP)  
Tai-Leng Nationalities Development Party (TNDP)  
Union Betterment Party (UBP)  
Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)  
United Nationalities Democracy Party  
Wa National Party (WNP)  
Wun Tha Nu Democratic Party  
Zomi Congress Democracy

## ANNEX. II

### Representatives from Parties

Akha National Development Party  
Daingnet National Development Party  
Ka Man National Development party  
Kachin National Party (KNP)  
Zo National Region Development Party





# PART II

## VOICES OF FEMALE 2020 ELECTION CANDIDATES FOLLOWING THE 2021 MILITARY COUP

# KEY FINDINGS

- Female candidates of the 2020 general elections hold their own independent views about the 2021 military coup, however; candidates which belong to political parties are holding the party line and following party positions and decisions.
- All the female candidates interviewed hold an unfavorable opinion of the 2021 military coup.
- The ways in which female candidates reacted to and consider the military coup depends on their opinion about the causes of the coup and their previous electoral and political experiences.
- Female candidates of the 2020 elections suffer economic, social, political, health and security crises like all women. Despite these challenges, all female candidates interviewed provided assistance to those in need in their individual capacities.
- Regarding women's participation in politics, female candidates currently see two separate fronts: formal politics and revolution. They all agreed that party politics has completely halted and thus women's participation in formal politics has reached zero.
- Female candidates doubt the possibility of renewed elections technically and politically and hesitate to participate in them unless they are the outcome of a political solution.
- Some female candidates strongly object to electoral system changes from the fast-past-the-post (FPTP) system to a proportional representation (PR) system. But a few others are hopeful that the PR system could be an opportunity for increased women's participation in politics.
- The challenge of women's organizations including the Women League of Burma (WLB) is to develop a linkage strategy that would connect women from party politics and revolutionary politics and improve the role of women in politics, or a parallel strategy that would improve women's role in politics in both fronts simultaneously.

# ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is the second part of the “Voices of Women Candidates of the 2020 General Elections” series of reports. The first part discussed the experiences, challenges and recommendations of female candidates who participated in the 2020 general elections before the coup. This second part provides the views, challenges and suggestions of female candidates after the military coup on February 1, 2021. In the first report, a total of 58 female candidates, consisting of independents and members of 37 political parties, participated in the study.<sup>1</sup> Of those, 14 were able to participate in the second part of the study. Due to communication and security challenges, many were not able to participate.

This study discusses how the 2021 military coup impacted female candidates in general, in their political lives and women’s changing role in politics. In addition, it also discusses their current activities, related challenges and recommendations for increased women’s participation in politics. This study will use “female candidates” hereinafter to refer to female candidates who participated or won seats in the 2020 general elections, both independents and members of political parties.

<sup>1</sup> See the annex for a list of political parties with female representatives that participated in the first study. For security concerns, this study will not disclose information about the interviewees and their related political parties.

## RECAP OF THE FIRST REPORT:

### “Voices of Women Candidates in the 2020 elections”

Female candidates from diverse backgrounds with different religions, ethnicities, ages, qualifications, careers and political beliefs participated in the 2020 general elections. A total of 907 female candidates, independent and from political parties, participated in the elections. Of them, 191 female candidates were elected.

There were structural and political factors that constrained and conditioned the chances of female candidates winning in the 2020 general elections including the electoral system and electoral districts, electoral management, internal policies of political parties, gender discrimination, restrictions on election campaigns and rigorous competitions among political parties.

At all stages, from candidate registration to the announcement of the electoral results, female candidates faced discrimination and challenges. Most of them faced online and offline attacks due to associating with political parties. They also had to prioritize their political parties' agendas over their own individual electoral pledges on issues such as women's rights.

Recommendations for reform and to create an enabling environment for female candidates include reviewing the electoral system (in place since 2010), revising electoral districts, and adopting and practicing gender policies in political parties' policies and platforms.

In order to ensure effective electoral assistance to female candidates, women's organizations are also suggested to extend women's networks and to work with political parties with strong commitments to increase the representation of women in politics.

# OPINIONS OF FEMALE 2020 ELECTION CANDIDATES ON THE 2021 MILITARY COUP

## INTRODUCTION

The 1 February military coup, after a decade of electoral democracy, is reinforcing military rule, signaling that human rights violations and violence against women, long committed by the military over many years, will only continue. After the coup, the military junta not only abolished political institutions – the government, the parliament and the Union Election Commission (UEC), they also annulled the 2020 election results.<sup>2</sup> This revoked the rights of female candidates who were legitimately elected to represent their constituencies in parliament overnight. The junta then continued its divide and rule tactics; persecuting democratic forces they consider their enemies and cooperating with those they consider to be ‘enemies of their enemy’ in order to reshape ‘civilian’ political institutions in their favor.

The military junta formed the State Administration Council (SAC) and invited some political parties to send representatives to the SAC’s national and state level military administrations, dividing political parties. The SAC also appointed a new UEC and attempted to implement its roadmap – which would lead to holding new elections.<sup>3</sup> The military-appointed UEC scrutinized party finances and threatened to reduce the number of political parties. They announced their intention to switch the electoral system from FPTP to PR, further dividing political parties over the issue. In parallel, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the National Unity Government (NUG) were formed with elected members of the 2020 elections, mainly from the National League for Democracy (NLD) party and a few other parties, to provide alternative political leadership for the country that closer reflects the will of the people.

On the other hand, in response to the military coup, women from different ages, social classes, ethnicities and religions including female political candidates joined the peaceful protests against military rule. These peaceful protests were met with violence and murder by the military. Women from all walks of life such as activists, journalists, strike leaders, student union members, civil servants participating in the civil disobedience movement, artists and celebrities have been continuously

<sup>2</sup> Annulled in July, 2021 by the military-appointed UEC.

<sup>3</sup> Five steps roadmap by the State Administration Council.

targeted for arrest, torture and murder.<sup>4</sup> According to Burma Women's Union, a total of 1,627 men were arrested, 57 were sentenced and 78 were killed from February 1 to September 30.<sup>5</sup> Those who are associated with the CRPH or the NUG and their family members, or suspects thereof, are targeted by the junta. In such a context, this study tried to explore the views and standpoints of female candidates on the military coup, how the coup has impacted their lives and their role in politics and current activities.

# FINDINGS

**1. Female candidates of the 2020 general elections hold their own independent views about the 2021 military coup, however; candidates which belong to political parties are holding the party line and following party positions and decisions.**

After the military coup on 1 February, the junta approached some political parties and offered seats on the SAC. Out of the 91 political parties that participated in the 2020 elections, only four political parties that won seats, and two which did not win any seats, agreed to participate in the military council.<sup>6</sup> On the invitation of the junta, non-elected individuals and party representatives took seats in the national and state level military administration council and in ministries.<sup>7</sup> Other political parties fell into two groups; either total non-cooperation with the junta or those who maintained a status-quo of avoiding identifying as pro- or anti-junta. A few parties were very vocal against the military coup and refused to cooperate with the SAC and its new UEC. Some parties stayed quiet and observed the situation while making sure they were not deregistered. There were also internal divisions in parties, resulting in some members deserting their parties.<sup>8</sup>

4 On 9 February 2021, 19-year-old Mya Thwe Thwe Khine was shot in the head and killed in Nay Pyi Taw at a peaceful protest - the first of many women to be killed by the military after the coup.

5 Burma Women's Union, three-months analysis from July to September 2021, 07/10/2021.

6 The two political parties that joined the SAC without winning any seats were the National Democratic Force and the New National Democracy Party.

7 Daw Thet Thet Khine from the People's Pioneer Party received just 7,712 votes and lost to her rival, NLD candidate Daw May Win Myint, who received 83,384 votes in total. Despite these results, she joined the SAC Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement as the union minister.

8 စစ်ကောင်စီနှင့်ပူးပေါင်းသဖြင့် ANP မှ လွှတ်တော်ကိုယ်စားလှယ်ဟောင်းတစ်ဦး ထပ်မံနှုတ်ထွက် [One more member of ANP party deserts the party as they cooperate with the military council], The Voice Journal, 4 March 2021, [Accessed on 10 December 2021]. အာဏာသိမ်းစစ်ကောင်စီ၏ကော်မရှင်နှင့် တွေ့ပြီးနောက် ပြည်သူ့ပါတီမှ နုတ်ထွက်သူများလာ [more members deserting the PP as the party met with the military-appointed UEC], Myanmar Now, 22 May 2021 [Accessed on 10 December 2021].

In the case of female candidates belong to political parties, they held their own views but decided to stand with their parties and follow the decisions of the party. A female candidate from a party that participated in the SAC elaborated that “Nobody likes the military coup if I am honest. [They] have bullied us with arms since the foundation of the third Burma country. The coup did not work for any of us”.<sup>9</sup> As ethnic states have been suffering armed conflicts for years, locals there strongly desired to overturn the military administration. A woman candidate from an ethnic state mentioned that “we, ethnic people, have never liked military rule. It is even worse now”.<sup>10</sup> Yet, most female candidates did not oppose their parties and acted in accordance with their party’s policies.

**2. All the female candidates interviewed hold an unfavorable opinion of the 2021 military coup. The ways in which female candidates reacted to and consider the military coup depends on their opinion about the causes of the coup and their previous electoral and political experiences.**

Although female candidates generally do not support the military coup, their understanding of its cause is related to their electoral experiences, as they recently competed in the elections and thus some of them believe the military’s narratives they used to justify the coup. Some female candidates believe the coup could have been avoided if electoral disputes were addressed and if political leaders were able to negotiate. Other candidates who witnessed vote fraud in their constituencies believed that any doubts on election integrity could have been cleared and the NLD would still have won the majority if the electoral fraud accusations were handled in a transparent way, with evidence. A female candidate said, “the UEC should have shown the figures as the other side [the military and pro-military parties] demanded”.<sup>11</sup> A woman candidate reiterated that the 2020 general elections were not 100 percent free and fair, but she does not think it was to the extent that the electoral results should have been annulled.<sup>12</sup>

Another interpretation of the military coup by female candidates is also related to their political experiences. As female candidates from minority parties or ethnic groups never had meaningful participation in the political process previously, they believe that prioritizing ethnic rights over any competing issues is the wisest thing to do. A woman candidate stated, “ethnic people suffer whether they [the military and the NLD] are getting along or not. Both sides bully us. The only

9 Interview, 10 October 2021.

10 Interview, 10 November 2021.

11 Interview, 27 November 2021.

12 Interview, 06 November 2021.

difference is in a soft or hard way”.<sup>13</sup> Another candidate said, “they [the military and the NLD] are the same. So, we chose the best option for our states. Now our state is relatively peaceful compared to others”.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, some female candidates believe that the military coup is a deliberate act planned long in advance, turning the country back from democracy. Referring to her political experiences, a woman candidate said, “it is very obvious that the coup was a deliberate act. They took advantage of all the weaknesses in management under the civilian government”.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of different understandings of the cause of the problem, some female candidates decided to respond to the coup. Militarization is associated with forced labor, extrajudicial killings, property destruction, extortion, displacement, torture, child labor and sexual violence, systematically targeting women and young children. A woman candidate said, “How much like outlaws and barbarians the military is, how big the crises are... we will continue to do the right thing”.<sup>16</sup>

Currently, armed conflicts are widespread across the states and regions and both urban and rural and female candidates are concerned about the future of the country. A desire for negotiation and dialogue can be seen among female candidates to get the country out of crisis. A woman candidate frankly stated, “I do not think that armed resistance will be enough to ask for our rights. We need many people who understand the fundamental problem and who can negotiate like women”.<sup>17</sup> Another woman candidate said, “it is impossible for both sides to completely crash each other. Politicians should find solutions so that the country will not suffer much”.<sup>18</sup> A woman candidate participating in the anti-coup movement said, “we need to fight against military rule by using various tactics but at one point, there may be a time to talk. It is important that we have an advantage”.<sup>19</sup>

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13 Interview, 24 September 2021.

14 Interview, 1 October 2021.

15 Interview, 24 September 2021.

16 Interview, 19 November 2021.

17 Interview, 24 September 2021.

18 Interview, 27 November 2021.

19 Interview, 24 September 2021.



**3. Female candidates of the 2020 elections suffer economic, social, political, health and security crises like all women. Despite these challenges, all female candidates interviewed provided assistance to those in need in their individual capacities.**

The military coup has impacted on women's lives politically, socially, and economically and on their health and security. Women became political targets in cutting off the anti-coup movement. There were cases of female candidates being targeted for attacks in association with their mother political parties in the 2020 elections.<sup>20</sup> Since the beginning of the crackdown on the anti-coup movement, female candidates were being watched or arrested, especially those who were NLD members and/or candidates. The military junta took the action against them by arresting, killing and taking control of their property such as houses. Female candidates from parties who have been publicly vocal against the military coup were also forced to hide. A woman candidate said, "Our party is like the second most targeted party by the military after the NLD. They broke into our party office and searched my house twice already".<sup>21</sup> Whether female candidates are involved in the anti-coup movement or not, those with a history of political activism can also be an easy political target. A woman candidate was on her way to a market when a bomb exploded; she immediately turned around and went home as she concerned that she would be accused of being involved.<sup>22</sup> Women candidates feel they are being watched all the time due to the military's random searches.<sup>23</sup>

Depending on how their political parties responded to the military coup, female candidates also suffered socially. They suffered pressure and social punishments, avoidance and disengagement from groups who no longer share the same view with them. A woman candidate said that the military coup caused a social divide – as there were now many groups that take sides, further losing trust in each other.<sup>24</sup> Another woman candidate said for her security, "I am trying to get along with both sides [anti and pro-military coup groups] and smile at both sides".<sup>25</sup> Likewise, a woman candidate felt sandwiched between social punishment and the functions of her political party and said "I have to lockdown my mind".<sup>26</sup> Security concerns, social punishments and the policies of respective political parties combined make female candidates discouraged to express their own opinions and abide by their party line. A candidate said, "I do not dare to express my views".<sup>27</sup>

20 Voices of female candidates of the 2020 general elections, the WLB report part I.

21 Interview, 24 September 2021.

22 Interview, 24 September 2021.

23 Interview, 4 November 2021.

24 Interview, 4 November 2021.

25 Interview, 16 November 2021.

26 Interview, 1 October 2021.

27 Interview, 16 November 2021,

This might relate to the fact that female candidates have disappeared from the public sphere since the military coup.

Women candidates faced several challenges in the 2020 general elections.<sup>28</sup> They invested time and money to compete and win the elections. However, that hard work did not pay off but pushed them away from their constituencies, causing them to suffer mentally. A woman candidate who won in the 2020 elections shared that she felt small and ashamed that she cannot do anything for her constituency when they needed her most after all the promises she made.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, female candidates with a background of political activism moaned that they can no longer defend human rights although violations are happening in front of their eyes.<sup>30</sup> The military coup broke the confidence, interests, beliefs and capabilities of women politicians.<sup>31</sup> As a woman candidate put it, “it took five to ten years to finally talk about women’s issues and the quota system for women’s participation; now all is shattered”.<sup>32</sup> As economic development is one of the enabling factors for women to participate in public sphere, the economic consequences of the military coup limit the mobility and capacity of women to participate in politics even more. A woman candidate recalled that one of the reasons for the lower female participation in the 2020 elections was a lack of financial assistance as they had to cover election-related costs on their own.<sup>33</sup> Even today, some female candidates struggle to pay back their election expenses from the 2020 elections.

Despite the challenges above, female candidates interviewed have been assisting those who need food, shelter, legal advice, and other services such as education in their individual capacities. This includes providing legal advice and legal support for anti-coup activists who were arrested, helping those dealing with different layers of the military administration, providing shelter to youths and women who can no longer afford their rent, providing assistance to IDPs and providing education services halted due to COVID-19 and the political crisis, and raising awareness of domestic and sexual violence. Some elected female candidates are involved in state-based consultative councils and/or work with their counterparts to provide collective leadership to people. Candidates from political parties that have taken seats in the state and national level military council are involved in peace-related discussions in advisory roles.

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28 Voices of female candidates of the 2020 general elections, the WLB report part I.

29 Interview, 24 November 2021.

30 Interview, 24 September 2021.

31 Interview, 19 November 2021.

32 Interview, 24 November 2021.

33 Interview, 27 November 2021.

**4. *Regarding women's participation in politics, female candidates currently see two separate fronts: formal politics and revolution. They all agreed that party politics has completely halted and thus women's participation in formal politics has reached zero.***

Some female candidates see the current political context as revolutionary politics separate to formal politics. They refer to the latter as “urban politics” and associated with party and electoral politics. In that sense, they define political parties as political organizations registered to compete in elections and represent selected constituencies. Related to this, female candidates see women's participation in politics as being in two separate roles – politicians and activists; activists transform and mobilize until they get their political demands without compromising and politicians enter elections based on a political agenda or an ideology and opt for negotiations and compromise. According to these views, female candidates think that women are involved in leading roles in revolutionary politics however they all agreed that women's participation has reached to zero in the party politics.

Most political party functions are completely stopped at the moment and women's issues have been fading away as there is no collective voice to fight for it. As most political parties do not have a strong women component such as women wings or party funds, any topics/issues related to women are no longer pursued. A woman candidate pointed out the lack of chances and opportunities despite her active role in her party, saying “as long as we rely on this government and this party, the women issues are so over. There is nothing more to do. What we can do is zero”.<sup>34</sup> Most female candidates agreed that political violence against women and economic crises will only create fear and apathy and their political participation and representation will only decrease in a post-coup society.

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34 Interview, 1 October 2021.

**5. Female candidates doubt the possibility of renewed elections technically and politically and hesitate to participate in them unless they are the outcome of a political solution. Some female candidates strongly object to electoral system changes from the fast-past-the-post (FPTP) system to a proportional representation (PR) system. But a few others are hopeful that the PR system could be an opportunity for increased women's participation in politics.**

Following the military junta's coup, justified by claims of electoral fraud, the SAC promised to hold a new election within a year, later postponed to within two years. On 15 May 2021, the military-appointed UEC announced that they will switch the electoral system from the FPTP to the PR system and also invited some political parties to discuss about the PR electoral system. Female candidates were doubtful about the possibility of new elections and the electoral system change technically and politically.

In order to change the electoral system, related stipulations of the 2008 military constitution must be amended. This raises technical questions about how the constitution would be amended in the absence of the parliament and elected members. To some, the eligibility of the new UEC also raises questions as it was appointed by the military, thus how can they have a mandate and the power to switch electoral systems? There is a divide of opinions among political parties about the benefits of adopting the PR system. Some ethnic- and state-based parties object to the PR system, including those who took seats in the SAC.<sup>35</sup> To them, switching to the PR system will only result in Burmanization [Bama political hegemony], as if the 25 percent of reserved seats for the military in the parliament and the pro-military proxy parties combined it would not benefit smaller ethnic parties.<sup>36</sup> A few female candidates are willing to explore the PR system in the hope of increasing women's representation in politics.<sup>37</sup>

Most female candidates do not believe in the possibility of new elections politically and hesitate to participate in them. Holding elections in the midst of armed conflict across the country raises the question of legitimacy and security. They doubt about public participation in elections as there is no mandatory voting procedure prescribed in electoral or constitutional laws. This also raises security concerns for female candidates participating in elections. A woman candidate said,

<sup>35</sup> The Mon Unity Party stated that the preference of minorities should be respected and other parties such as Shan Nationalities League for Democracy and the Arakan National Party did not attend the meeting. Available at <https://www.bnionline.net/mm/news-86105>, <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2021/05/21/242096.html>, accessed 10 December 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, 1 October 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, 2 November 2021. However, it is unclear whether women can attend the meeting on behalf of their party and to which extent they can discuss about the PR for the increased women participation.

“will it be possible to hold elections? Will candidates participate in an election in a situation in which bombs can explode anytime, anywhere?”.<sup>38</sup> Another candidate said that it will be difficult for democratic forces to participate in new elections organized by the military junta unless it is the result of tripartite (ethnic leaders, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military) negotiations.<sup>39</sup> A few female candidates are willing to continue their involvement in future elections but most candidates are willing to quit.

**6. *The challenge of women’s organizations including the Women League of Burma (WLB) is to develop a linkage strategy that would connect women from party politics and revolutionary politics and improve the role of women in politics, or a parallel strategy that would improve women’s role in politics in both fronts simultaneously.***

The coup not only increased militarization but also reinforced patriarchy in regions with heavy military presence. As the junta spread misinformation and propaganda using race and religion to justify military rule, the tactic also reinforces patriarchy. Raising public awareness about domestic violence and topics around sexual health were completely unspeakable, according to a woman candidate who was working in concerned areas.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, domestic and sexual violence were not paid attention to as they were before and have been overtaken by pressing issues such as military suppression of the anti-coup movement and the consequences of a deteriorating economy. A woman candidate with a legal background was aware that there are more and more requests for help on social media platforms about domestic violence.<sup>41</sup>

Women of different classes, ethnicities and religions, both urban and rural are participating in the anti-coup movement – whether peacefully protesting or resisting with arms. In their democracy movements, women incorporated social and women’s movements by raising public awareness on discriminatory traditions and beliefs and on sexual violence and women rights. For example, women held a longyi strike to counter the traditional belief that it could lose men’s power, to highlight women’s participation in politics they held them and chanted, “revolution can’t be successful without women”, and to educate women rights and sexual violence, women held a protest themed, “it is a dress and not an invitation”. However, these movements are happening separately from the political party front. There are advantages for women’s organizations to act autonomously for their objectives. There

<sup>38</sup> Interview, 27 November 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, 6 November 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, 4 November 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, 16 November 2021.

can also be disadvantages formulating policies and laws as these women's organizations are not connected to and separated from political organizations.

It is fair to say that there were no political parties in Myanmar formed from women's movements or political parties that women's activists on the ground are merging in. This could impact the role of women in political leadership and their representation in the longer term. On the political front, party and electoral politics died with the military coup and the role of party women is fading. A challenge for women's organizations including WLB might be to develop a linkage strategy that could transform women's movements into party and electoral politics to ensure women's political leadership and representation, or to develop a parallel strategy that can promote women's participation in both political and revolutionary fronts simultaneously.

# CONCLUSION

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The 2021 military coup has impacted the lives of women from all walks of life politically, socially, economically, and has affected their health and security. Women candidates suppressed their own views and opinions for the sake of their party. With the military coup, prioritizing women's affairs drowned at the bottom of the sea. In the absence of strategies and action plans, women's role in politics will decrease in post-coup society is and likely to disappear from the public sphere due to the SAC targeting women, the decline of economy and living hardships. Women-focused programs and activities are required more than ever to counter the patriarchy and militarization. Strategies to link women from revolutionary and political fronts together or to improve the participation of women from both fronts simultaneously are key to increasing women's participation in politics in a post-coup society.





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