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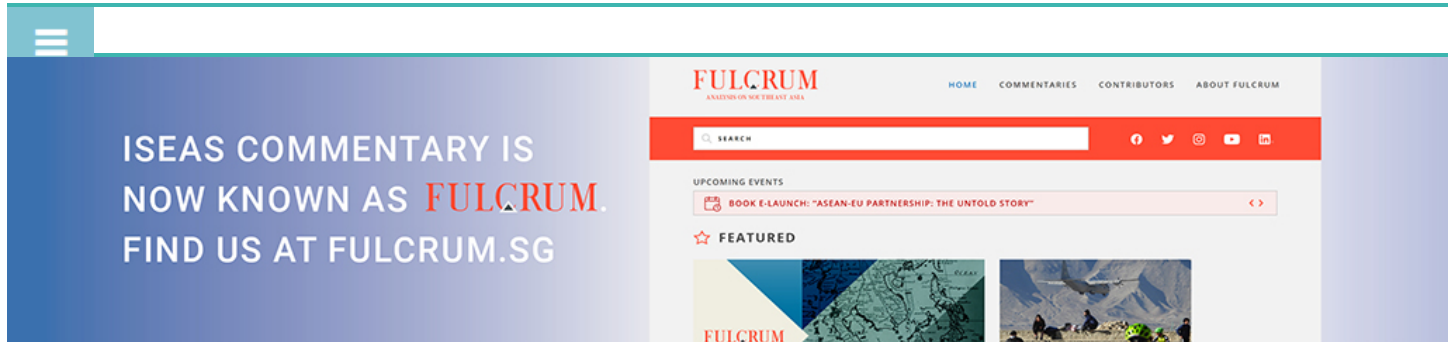
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Myanmar: Social Media Holds Little Sway on Voting Patterns

A recent pre-election survey has confirmed the conventional wisdom that voter attitudes are entrenched and will be influenced little by the barrage of social media campaigns.





Young supporters of Myanmar's ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party gesture as they ride in a motorcade during a campaign rally in Naypyidaw on 11 October 2020.

(Photo: Thet Aung, AFP)



Moe Thuzar

14 October 2020

With less than a month to Election Day on 8 November, voter sentiments are running high in Myanmar. The authorities are determined to **keep to the schedule** despite earlier calls by several political parties running against the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) to **postpone elections** in view of the Covid-19 resurgence across the country. Campaigns and shows of support have shifted online, thus driving more people to turn to social media for news and information on party promises. In October, overseas votes will be cast in advance at voting centres opened at Myanmar embassies and consulates around the world.

Political parties and their various supporters have staked out large swathes of "territory" in the social media space in the current **state of play**. Still, media experts estimate the [↑] er

attitudes and views remain largely entrenched and that social media messaging will do little to sway voters in Myanmar's present political climate.

Pre-election poll findings by the People's Alliance for Credible Elections (PACE) – an independent and non-government election observer group – seem to confirm this view. In 2015, PACE conducted election environment surveys and observed the general elections of that year. But the Union Election Commission (UEC) **rejected and then changed its mind** over PACE's accreditation as an election observer for the 2020 polls. In late August, PACE was still waiting for an **official accreditation letter**, after it had complied with the UEC's requirement to register under the Association Registration Law. In this atmosphere, PACE released its 2020 pre-election survey results on 7 October.

PACE's **poll findings** indicate that about two-thirds of the 2,577 respondents surveyed in August 2020 view the NLD positively. The findings also show high levels of trust among the respondents for the institutions of the State Counsellor and the President. Compared to 2019, the office of the State Counsellor also enjoyed a nine-percentage point gain in trust (79 per cent against 70 per cent); the office of the President saw its trust rating increase from 69 per cent to 73 per cent in the same period. The Ministry of Health and Sports came in third, this probably due to perceptions of the Ministry's updates and information regarding the Covid-19 spread. The media ranked lower in trust levels, particularly private media, and Facebook came in lowest.

“ A major finding from the PACE 2020 poll confirm that voters favour the incumbent and are willing to give the NLD a second chance at leading the country's democratic transition.

With regard to whose opinion mattered most in terms of determining whether the election was run well, trust was the highest for the government. The UEC and independent election observers ranked second and third, respectively.

Still, respondents ranked Facebook highest for their choice of social media. Facebook, at 38 per cent, was also in the top three sources of information on government and politics, lower than that of television (56 per cent) but higher than radio (29 per cent). Respondents

also expressed some concerns about misleading or false information related to the elections.

The survey found that fewer than half (45 per cent) of the respondents would “definitely vote”, although the combined percentage of those who would “probably vote” and “definitely vote” surpassed those who would not vote. About one-third (32 per cent) of the respondents cited Covid-19 as a concern or even a barrier to voting.

As for priority issues that the government should address at both the community and country levels, “government services and infrastructure” took the highest priority. The economy, followed by law and order issues, was next in order among issues for the government to address for the country as whole. Environmental issues ranked lower than conflict and peace.

A major finding from the PACE 2020 poll confirm that voters favour the incumbent and are willing to give the NLD a second chance at leading the country’s democratic transition. More than half of the respondents view the country as going “in the right direction”.

The PACE poll findings received mixed reviews in various media, including some observations on social media discussing the limitations of conducting paper-based surveys and polls. In this context, PACE’s pre-election poll merits some food for thought just weeks before the elections.

For one, accurate forecasting depends on many factors, including sampling techniques, the population surveyed and its representativeness, and the wording of survey questionnaires. Surveys are not censuses per se. And even censuses can have their shortcomings, especially in a country such as Myanmar with a “politically charged landscape”.

As PACE conceded in its 47-page report, it could not reach all areas of Myanmar due to security and Covid-19 pandemic concerns. This problem was especially evident in areas affected by ongoing conflict, such as Kachin, Shan and Rakhine States. Views and attitudes from these states might have afforded more insight into centre-periphery tensions.

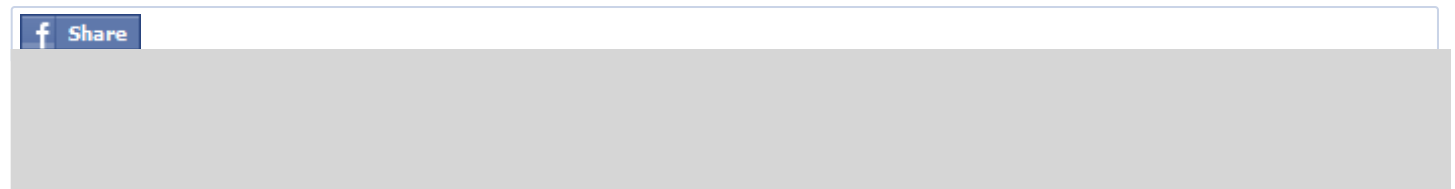


As elections and their results typically elicit strong emotions, anyone with some skin in the game could do worse than heed some of the PACE pre-election poll findings related to voter turn-out and concerns over Covid-19 (the poll was conducted as early as August). After all, the findings are useful warning signals. Recent successfully run elections in Asia, such as Singapore and South Korea, have shown the need for ensuring that voters have sufficient time to cast their vote while observing necessary safety precautions at the polling stations. Early indications of voter sentiment and concerns speak volumes about the credibility and outcome of Myanmar's upcoming poll amid the pandemic.

Moe Thuzar is an ISEAS Fellow and Co-Coordinator of the ISEAS Myanmar Studies Programme.

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