



Myanmar's digital election

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A liberalization of Myanmar's telecommunications sector has contributed to the arrival of new applications aimed at keeping voters informed in November's election.

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Myanmar is gearing up for its first digital election. In the 2010 vote, people could not access the Internet properly and few had access to mobile phones. In the 2010 election, SIM cards would cost more than K5 million (roughly US\$5,000 at the time) and had dropped only as low as K2 million when the 2012 by-election took place.

In 2015, the situation is dramatically different. The November 8 election will be the first poll in the country when the press will be free of the censorship board, which was abolished shortly after the 2012 by-election, and the first where many people will have access to a digital platform.

In anticipation, young entrepreneurs have developed new products to cater to the boom in mobile penetration. There are 28.1 million mobile SIM cards across Myanmar as of March 2015. The government-owned Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications had 18.4 million subscribers, while new entrants Telenor and Ooredoo had 6.4 million and 3.3 million respectively, according to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

Despite the government's guarantees that the election will be free and fair, skepticism prevails. Will youth-driven mobile technology be able to provide support for free and fair polls?

Voter education

"I didn't know about the election, especially how to vote, who to vote for and who the candidates in our constituency actually were," Ko Ye Min Htut, 18, a developer of mVoter 2015 mobile app told *Frontier*.

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mVoter 2015 emerged from a hackathon competition held at [Phandeeyar](#), a Yangon start-up incubator, in September. The winners were a team called Popstack, comprising five young mobile app developers, who devised the mVoter 2015 app.

The mobile app targets first-time voters, explaining who the candidates are in which constituencies, where the polling stations are in each constituency, as well as knowledge about electoral fraud and the voting process.

By using the app, voters can easily compare candidates by their performance in parliament (if they are current MPs) and a short biography. Voters can check the policies and profiles of political parties and the app reminds voters of election day with its countdown feature.

"Our app can provide background for voters on all the eligible candidates. This can create a better informed electorate, I think," Ko Ye Min Htut said.

But mVoter 2015 will not be counting the actual post-election voting results and will terminate after the polls.

There are many other free mobile applications similar to mVoter 2015, including Mae app, MaePaySoh app, Doh Sanda app, Vote Up app and Yway Ya Aung app aimed at the November 8 election. Many of these applications include games on how to distinguish between valid and invalid ballots. Among mobile applications with voter education themes, mVoter 2015 has had the most download among Android users, with 20,000 recorded as of October.

Most of these applications have iOS versions and some have new releases pending.

The mVoter team claims their app claims a "90 percent" success in teaching voters how to use the ballots correctly.

Reporting on Election Day

Another application has been developed for voters to report on electoral fraud or cheating at polling stations on election day.

The Kyeet ("Watch") app will be used on election day only. It was designed by Myanmar Election Monitoring Technology Alliances (MEMTA), a joint effort between Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) and the Center for Civic Tech (CCT).

"On election day, people can see and report on what has happened in their constituency and other constituencies if they use Kyeet app," Ma Yatanar Htun, a project coordinator at MIDO told *Frontier*.

"Kyeet aims to go to into 'action' on election day, tracking the problems and who's committing fraud, and providing details," she added.

If voters detect electoral fraud, such as polling station officers forcing voters to vote for specific parties or threats by security guards, especially election police, and/or illegal campaign activities, they can submit the report by using the app. It can be used both online and offline, via SMS. Application users can also upload photos as evidence of what they have seen.

The application will show various reports of many voters on its app. There are two kinds of reports on the app — verified and unverified. The Yangon-based core team of the application will monitor the reports and then verify them for accuracy, but users can also see the two versions of the reports.

The core team is organised by community-based organisations, media partners and technicians.



“The team will verify the submitted reports by calling and checking with reporters and monitoring groups on the ground,” Ma Yatanar Htun said.

The team will report the results and findings on election day a week after the polls, with the results posted on Facebook.

“It’s the very first time for this kind of monitoring the election through mobile phones and not just by being on the ground,” she said.

Unfortunately, there is no application for iOS users but people can report on the kyeet website.

Another application, Electroscope, has been developed offering data, analysis and infographs around the election.

The app shows the education level of candidates and the percentage of female candidates. Users can compare political parties between states and regions on the user-friendly website.

“[Using] Microsoft Excel for data and statistics is kind of boring, unlike this website where you can find things easily,” said Ko Thuya Myo Nyunt, 23, a leader of the five young developers behind Electroscope.

“Our web app provides a sort of entertainment for users,” he said. It is aimed at researchers, journalists and long-term observers of the elections. Later, data from previous elections will be uploaded to the app.

Despite efforts to use these the apps to assure free and fair elections, the technology gap between rural areas and cities remains a big challenge.

None of the Internet-based applications are supported by “dumbphones” with basic connectivity, which are widely used in poor, rural areas.

Therein lies the technological bottleneck: with 70 percent of the population living outside of Myanmar’s cities, it remains to be seen if these mobile apps will have a real impact come election day.

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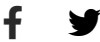
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