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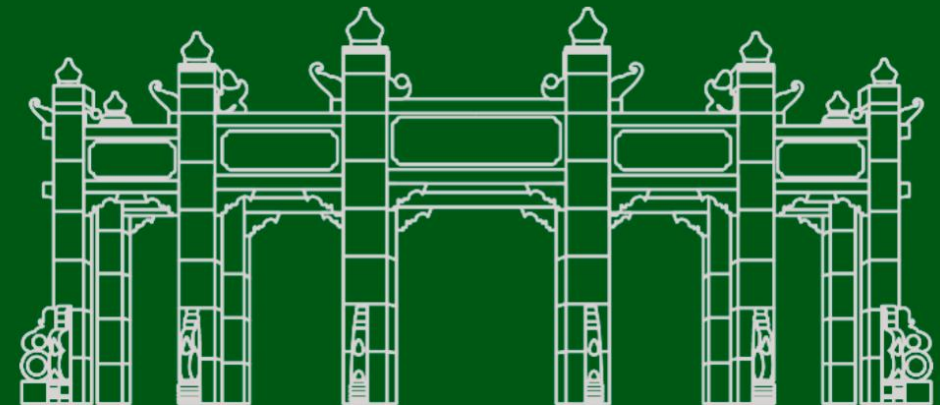
# Depoliticization and Party Politics during Myanmar's Transitional Decline

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*2026 Myanmar Update — Contours of a New Myanmar · Australian National University*



## ABOUT THE SPEAKER

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Ph.D. in Diplomacy. Visiting scholar at the University of Yangon (2018–2019);  
Boya Postdoctoral Fellow at Peking University (2022–2024).

His research centres on Myanmar's politics and transition, international legitimacy, and generational politics in Southeast Asia. With Zhu Xianghui, *Political Transition of Myanmar*, China Social Sciences Press, May, 2019.

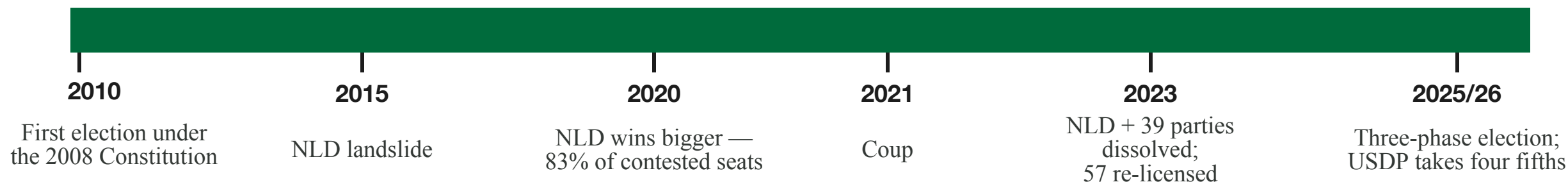
Fieldwork in Rohingya settlements in Cox's Bazar and in communities along Myanmar's borders.

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# Parties without party politics

## THE PARTY FORM



## PARTY FUNCTIONS



### CIVIL CONFLICTs, 2021–

about 1,300 armed clashes and 300+ air strikes during the voting weeks; 77 constituencies never held.

# The parties never left. The politics did.

4/5

of elected seats  
taken by the USDP

39

parties dissolved  
alongside the NLD

4 yrs

of party law, registrations,  
delegations

Yet the same junta governed under a state of emergency and was fighting a civil war that it was failing to win.

***Why would a military that can rule without parties spend four years rebuilding the whole form of party politics?***

# Manipulation is not enough

## THE READIEST READING

Unfree elections harvest legitimacy, at home and abroad (Schedler 2013; Levitsky and Way 2010)

The one study of the post-coup project reads it as manipulation (Lidauer 2023)

First assessments call the election a sham and façade (SWP 2026; FIDH 2026; Crisis Group 2026)

## WHAT IT MISSES

- Manipulation presumes a contest that needs rigging.
- Myanmar engineered the contest away — years upstream of polling day.
- The question is not how votes were bent, but what a licensed party is for.

The military is now taken seriously as a constitutional actor in its own right (*Crouch 2024*).  
The party system it licenses is ... ?

# Constitutive depoliticization

Keep the form of multiparty politics — in order to block what parties are for.

Interest  
aggregation

Linkage

Representation

Mobilization

Leadership  
selection

*Blocked, these five never mature — and a party politics that never matures cannot carry a country from military rule to civilian government. (Lawson 1980; Sartori 1976; Diamond and Gunther 2001)*

**Party form here is an instrument of foreclosure:** politics is pre-empted through the very shell that promises it.

# The party form as a machine



*Legitimation the regime manufactures — not legitimacy any observer confers.*

# One distinguishing question

Single-case, theory-developing. Process tracing across three phases

partial competition (2011–16) · politicization peak (2016–20) · transitional decline (2021–26)

**At each institutional choice, does the evidence fit seat-maximization or function-blocking?**

THE HOOP TEST · NECESSARY, NOT SUFFICIENT

**Wins seats at least cost** → **seat-maximization holds** (X1 survives)

**Costly — and wins no seats** → **seat-maximization fails; depoliticization is the deeper logic** (X2)

*e.g. closed-list PR under dominance · rebuilding parties it had just buried · party diplomacy that wins nothing at home*

**Seat-maximization explains the cheap wins. Only depoliticization explains the costly residue — and that residue, choice after choice, is the finding.**



MECHANISM 1

45% of the vote — four fifths of the seats

Share of the vote



44-45%

Share of elected seats



about 81% (four fifths)

*The gap was built upstream — in registration, closed lists, and cancelled races. Not on polling day.*

The military's reserved quarter is a floor, not a ceiling.

25%

of the full 664-seat house — the floor

28%

of the 586 actually seated this time

86%

the military-and-USDP bloc

*166 reserved seats are never cancelled; the 77 cancelled races shrank only the elected pool 498 → ~420 (elected side only)*

*The hegemonic party system did not win the election. It was the election.*

# A stage, not a contest

## WHAT THE PARTIES DID

*At a Yangon factory, the ruling party's labour officer lectured workers on their rights — then handed out 20 Buddha images.*

The outcome was already secured, so no vote needed canvassing. Under Thein Sein, campaigning was necessary — not campaigning could cost you the seat. By 2025–26 the seats were locked, so this display won nothing: **performance for legitimacy, not a bid for votes.**

**SEAT-MAXIMIZATION** campaigns only when a vote is in doubt — here none was

**FAILS**

**FUNCTION-BLOCKING** the public sphere is staged for acclamation

**HOLDS**

**M2** — the public sphere refeudalized into acclamation: parties perform, they do not compete.

## MECHANISM 2

# “Welfare”



A USDP labour-affairs official visits the ACE Apparel garment factory in Hlaing Tharyar, Yangon — lecturing workers on their rights, then donating Buddha images to the factory.

# Parties, turned outward — for recognition

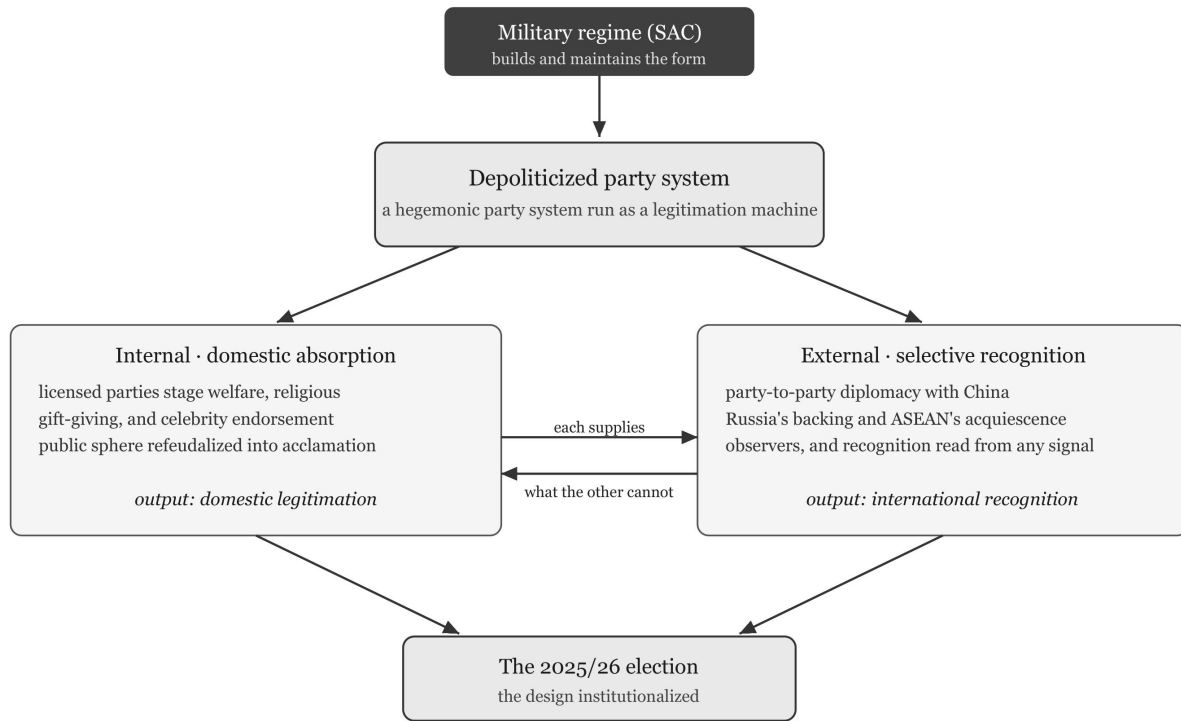
*The same licensed form is aimed at foreign audiences — satellite and ethnic parties paraded abroad to display plurality.*

|               |                                                                                                    |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| China         | Ten-plus licensed parties toured China; satellite and ethnic parties paraded to display plurality. |
| ASEAN         | Malaysia's foreign minister received weeks before the vote — the visit itself was the prize.       |
| Russia        | Four visits in seven months; nuclear and space deals bought steady backing.                        |
| United States | A tariff letter read as recognition; then three junta-linked firms quietly delisted.               |

|                   |                                                      |       |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| SEAT-MAXIMIZATION | would not pay abroad to win nothing at home          | FAILS |
| FUNCTION-BLOCKING | the licensed form is exported to harvest recognition | HOLDS |

*Recognition abroad is piped home — **legitimation the regime manufactures, not legitimacy anyone confers.***

# The 2025–26 election and its aftermath



### A military operation in electoral form

Phased from the strongholds outward; the 77 cancelled races mark the limits of control; the war did not pause — about 1,300 clashes, 300+ air strikes.

### A president out of uniform

Min Aung Hlaing hands over the commander-in-chief's insignia, then is elected president — a civilian face on an unchanged core.

### Councils past the parliament

The NDSC (11 loyalists) and a new Consultative Council — created weeks before the government it advises. Form created first, substance kept out.

**Consolidation, not transition.** The party system delivered the uniformed state a civilian face. **legitimation** the regime manufactures, not **legitimacy** anyone confers.

## CONCLUSION

# Give parties back to party politics

The politics the form blocked did not vanish. It moved outside, into the war. The way out is to let the party functions live again.

## FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Fixing Myanmar's transition is not just political and military. It is also economic, institutional, and legal. Its constitution is a patchwork of layered legacies, and both the junta and the opposition argue in the language of their own constitutionalism. So is there a legal road that lets party politics grow again? Or is the 2008 charter the lock?
- 2 Who can lead Myanmar out of depoliticization? Can we look to the Gen Z generation and the new democratic elite of the post-NLD era?
- 3 Seen through party politics: do we hope for an opening under authoritarian rule, or watch party politics hollow into a shell? And how far can the ethnic armed groups become parties?

# Thank you

*Comments and suggestions are very welcome.*

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## RECENT WORK

Fangliang Zhang & Tian Zhang (2026). “*Labelling Rohingya across borders: differential governance, label conversion, and mobility-induced stratification.*” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

[doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2026.2704341](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2026.2704341)



Whats of mine