

Getting Ready for the 2020 General Election

Ways to Improve the Campaign Strategies
of Ethnic Political Parties in Myanmar

NAW GLADYS MAUNG MAUNG | MAY 2020



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Salween Institute for Public Policy

Salween Institute for Public Policy is a Burma/Myanmar think tank contributing to the development of public policy: producing relevant policy analyses and providing policy-oriented empowerment training to leaders of communities throughout the country.

Through a combination of research, training and technical assistance, we empower community leaders and advocate to policymakers about just and effective approaches to peace building, policy making and community development.

We believe

- that equality and the right to self-determination for all ethnic nationalities are fundamental to building a peaceful and prosperous nation.
- that cultivating a strong intellectual foundation is crucial to fostering muchneeded social cohesion among Burma/Myanmar's pluralistic communities.

Foreword

A multi-party system is one of the cornerstones of a strong democracy. As such, having multiple political parties compete in Myanmar's 2015 national election was a sign of a multi-party system. However, a different story and implications emerge once the election results are examined closely. For instance, while a total of 59 registered political parties contested in the election, only 23 parties - less than half - won seats at the union or state and regional level.

More specifically, at the union level, only 12 parties won seat(s) in both houses combined, which accounted for only 20.3% of all political parties contesting in the election. The distribution of seats among the winning political parties was even worse. The current ruling party occupied 80% of seats in the Upper House and 78% of seats in the Lower House. Moreover, in the states and regions, the same party dominated all parliaments except the Rakhine and Shan. Finally, among a total of 29 ethnic affairs ministers nationwide, 21 - or 72% - were from the ruling party as well .

Free and fair election is another cornerstone of a strong democratic system. Strong democracy requires both free and fair election, not free or fair election. While the 2015 election may be considered as free by many, it was hardly fair. The ruling party from the previous term had enjoyed the advantages of strengthening its institution and supporter bases for decades, using unlimited resources from the State as well as from cronies. Likewise, the current ruling party had benefitted from having a democracy icon its leader, but also from being perceived as a viable alternative for the military rule and supported by people from all walks of life. On the other hand, other political parties had had very little, if any, opportunities or support to build and strengthen their institutions prior to the election.

Political parties are key to ensure a multi-party system as well as free and fair election. Without strong political parties' institutions, the essence of a multi-party system will not be realized and election will be neither free nor fair. Thus, this paper offers campaign strategy options for ethnic political parties as they are getting ready for the 2020 general election.

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Abbreviations

ANP

Arakan National Party

FPTP

First-Past-the-Post

NLD

National League for Democracy

SLORC

State Law and Order Restoration Council

SNLD

Shan Nationalities League for Democracy

UNA

United Nationalities Alliance

USDP

Union Solidarity and Development Party

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1.

Introduction

In an attempt to protect their rights and interests, numerous ethnic minority groups all over the world have formed political organizations known as 'ethnic political parties.' While an ethnic party aims to win elections and seek power the way any other political party does, its appeal is limited to a particular ethnic or regional constituency as it generally presents itself as championing for the interests of one ethnic group only (Chandra, 2011).

Since ethnic parties do not seek votes from outside of their target groups, their scope of political mobilization tends to be narrow. While it may seem as if they can carry out their political campaigns effectively due to such narrow scope, their votes become threatened when powerful national political parties compete with them in their constituencies.

Power imbalance between non-ethnic national parties and ethnic parties persists in a number of diverse societies often due to the electoral systems designed to marginalize ethnic groups from gaining seats in the parliament (Reynolds, 2006). This is particularly the case in Myanmar, a country in which the ethnic minorities have repeatedly failed to gain political representation that they deserve.

One can dismiss the results in the previous elections in 1990 and 2010 due to their flawed and unrepresentative nature (Transnational Institute, 2015a). However, the 2015 election served as a wakeup call to the ethnic political parties in the country when they were defeated in their own states by the current ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) Party and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which are both Bamar-dominated parties that do not represent the interests of ethnic minorities (Macgregor, 2015).

The results came as particularly shocking to many because the 2015 general election was considered the first free and fair election in the country's history reflecting the will of the people (Transnational Institute, 2015a). The fact that ethnic political parties got barely any seats in the parliament in the 2015 general election indicates that non-Bamar ethnic minority groups are currently at a disadvantage because not only do these groups have minimal influence in the country's legislature, their issues are also getting constantly ignored by the ruling government (San Yamin Aung, 2019).

Despite the lack of ethnic representation in the government throughout Myanmar's history, scholars and analysts are now predicting that ethnic political parties will manage to secure seats in the 2020 elections (San Yamin Aung, 2019). However, the chances for ethnic parties to win elections and gain a significant number of seats in the parliament remain threatened due to the current dominance of the NLD in the parliament, its persisting popularity amongst the majority and its recent "plan to compete with ethnic parties" by establishing "ethnic affair committees" (Zarni Mann, 2019).

Because ethnic minorities cannot rely on neither of the big parties such as the NLD or USDP to advocate for their cultural, political and social rights, the electoral victory of ethnic parties in their respective states has become an urgent matter. At the same time, it is important for ethnic parties to keep in mind that representation should not only be reflected in the numbers of seats in the parliament but also in the quality of representation.

Looking into the reasons why ethnic parties lagged so much behind the electoral race in 2015, it becomes evident that besides the major institutional challenges such as the country's constitution or the current electoral system (see Nu Tsen Mun, 2020), the problem with ethnic political parties also lies in the relative weaknesses of their political strategies and campaign tactics. While 'ethnicity' is the primary appeal of every ethnic political party, ethnicity alone is not adequate to win in the electoral race. In order to catch up in the 2020 electoral race, ethnic political parties need to get critical, creative and communicative in their political strategies.

It is definitely important to make consistent strides to change the country's electoral system (Nu Tsen Mun, 2020) and the constitutional provisions that are limiting the representation of ethnic minorities in the country's legislature. At the same time, it is equally important to equip the ethnic political parties with necessary tools in order to help increase their number of seats in the parliament in 2020, and simultaneously improve the quality of their representation.

The goal of this paper is to provide ethnic political parties in Myanmar with tools to improve their campaign strategies, helping them to increase their competitiveness in the upcoming elections. By doing so, the hope is to increase the representation of ethnic minorities in Myanmar's legislature, and ultimately strengthen the democracy of the country.

In order to do so, the paper will first look at ethnic political parties in diverse societies and the evolution of their campaign strategies, reflecting the changing needs of the constituents. The performance of ethnic political parties in Myanmar, particularly during the 2015 election period, will then be evaluated, taking into consideration the obstacles to these parties' success specific to the context of Myanmar. Finally, opportunities to overcome these challenges will be presented along with practical steps to strengthen ethnic political parties and improve the quality of their representation.

2.

Ethnic Political Parties in Diverse Societies

Currently, there are more countries practicing democracy than there were ever in history with more than half of the world's countries identified as democracies (DeSilver, 2019). One of the most important principles of democracy is freedom of association, and the formation of political parties is the reflection of this principle in practice.

There are several ways of defining a political party but the baseline definition of political parties, according to Schroder (2000/2017), is that they are "groups of like-minded people that strive for control in government in order to be able to influence public opinion and implement their common political ideals" (p. 344). Political parties can be classified based on their 1) nature and interests of followers; 2) organisational structure; 3) political and strategic goals; 4) degree of institutionalisation; and 5) function in society (Schroder, 2000/2017).

Similarly, an ethnic political party also has several definitions developed by different scholars. It is, however, defined in fundamental terms as a party that appeals to voters as "the champion of the interests of one ethnic category or set of categories to the exclusion of others, and makes such an appeal central to its mobilization strategy" (Chandra, 2005, p. 236).

According to this definition, ethnic parties can comprise of more than one group but they "always exclude some group, implicitly or explicitly," (Chandra, 2011, p. 155), due to their nature in which the representation of the interests championed for is limited to particular groups. 'Exclusion' or 'particularity' is what makes ethnic parties representing more than one group different from multi-ethnic parties that are universalistic in invoking ethnic identities (Chandra, 2011).

Today, ethnic parties are flourishing in electoral democracies across the globe from Canada to Spain to South Africa to India. Yet the impact that ethnic parties have on the stability of democracy in more or less ethnically diverse societies remains a topic of debate in literature to this day. Specifically, the exclusive nature of ethnic parties is at times considered a concern because promoting ethnic party politics could lead to "the marginalization and exclusion of a cultural minority," consequentially encouraging minorities to "resort to undemocratic or even violent means in order to counter this dominance" (Ishiyama, 2009, p. 58).

Moreover, ethnic political parties that are supposedly given rise to by the politicization of ethnic divisions, are often perceived as dangerous to democracy, especially in new democracies where democratic institutions are fragile (Chandra, 2005; Ishiyama, 2009). Politicizing ethnic differences, according to the theory of ethnic outbidding, leads to the destruction of competitive politics altogether because ethnic parties have 'infected' the system (Chandra, 2005).

Such association of ethnic parties with ethnic conflict and violence stretches beyond a mere academic issue, for many states have used this argument to justify their actions to ban ethnic parties within their boundaries. In fact, in countries such as Bulgaria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq, and in over twenty sub-Saharan African states, bans on the existence of ethnic parties have been employed either in an attempt "to contain the destructive effects of the ethnification of politics," or as "a policy remedy for ethnic conflict" (Ishiyama, 2009, p. 56).

Contrary to the arguments that the emergence of ethnic parties promotes conflict, a number of scholars argue that ethnic parties are merely a reflection of differences that already exist and that they can, in fact, play a constructive role in democracy (Stroschein, 2001, in Ishiyama, 2009). Indeed, upon analyzing 82 new democracies and 213 ethnic/communal groups, Ishiyama (2009) found no tangible evidence of relation between the ethnification of politics and ethnic conflict nor did he find a relation between the appearance of ethnic parties and the level of communal conflict.

Additionally, it is claimed that ethnic minorities with the history of political exclusion can channel their demands into more legitimate forms of participation through political parties



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(Ishiyama, 2009). In fact, rebel organizations that have transformed into political parties after the end of a conflict are found to assist the states' peace duration in the long term upon being included in the political process and legislative representation (Marshall & Ishiyama, 2016). Transitioning of ethnic groups from rebellion to party politics should, therefore, be encouraged, because including relevant rebel groups "reduces the likelihood of civil war and conflict resumption" (Marshall & Ishiyama, 2016, p. 1036).

Regardless of the ongoing debate around ethnic parties, it is crucial to acknowledge that ethnic parties, defined by their very own exclusive nature, are capable of serving as effective means for the inclusion of minorities in representative democracies. As widely accepted in the present-day democratic values, "the protection of minority rights is best achieved and articulated through a combination of majority sensitivity and minority inclusion" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 3).

Embracing a diverse range of political parties, then, enables a state to properly accommodate different groups of people. Politics, in addition to being a tool for strength and power, is also a tool for resolving conflicts through negotiation and mediation, and the efforts to tackle the issue of ethnic minority representation and ethnic conflict are made effective and achievable through ethnic political parties.

2.1 Ethnicity as a campaign strategy

Campaign strategy is a specific form of political strategy whose objective is "to obtain good results at the hustings in order to garner as much power and influence as required to push through policies to achieve desired societal changes" (Schroder, 2000/2017, p. 15). Campaign strategy constitutes "mobilization (seeking to increase turnout among core supporters) and persuasion (seeking to convert potential swing voters)" (Horowitz, 2015, p. 325).

Similar to any other political party, ethnic political parties, once established, hold the responsibility of mobilizing the voters by manifesting campaign strategies, serving as a means to get candidates elected. Ethnic political parties, nonetheless, differ from other parties in that their electoral mobilization "should not be understood as the mobilization of the whole society, but of its targeted ethnic group(s)" (Strijbis & Kotnarowski, 2013, p. 458).

It is widely observed in literature that in multiethnic developing democracies, ethnicity plays a prime role in predicting voting patterns (Hoffman & Long, 2013; Huber & Suryanarayan, 2016). There are a number of reasons why people choose to vote and why political parties campaign based on ethnic lines. According to Hoffman and Long (2013), "Strong assertions of identity and expectations of patronage or policy favoritism" are found to be the "two broad channels that may link ethnicity and voting behavior" (p. 129).

First, ethnic groups, sharing an identity based on region, religion, language, family, tribe, ancestry and so on, often display in-group favouritism, preferring their in-group members over out-group members, which extends to voting. (Hoffman & Long, 2013). Ethnic political parties take advantage of this group affinity and run their political campaigns by reinforcing these strong in-group attachments. An effective way of ensuring in-group loyalty is to negatively evaluate out-group members, "which may produce ethnic fear, anxiety, and animosity," and this will then force voters to "select co-ethnics to avoid what they perceive to be the negative consequences of governance" (Hoffman & Long, 2013, p. 129).

Another reason voters may select co-ethnics in elections is "to receive patronage or club goods for their group" (Hoffman & Long, 2013, p. 129). "Clientelism," according to Hoffman and Long (2013) and Chandra (2003), is a strategy commonly used by ethnic parties in multiethnic societies such as India or Ghana. "Clientelism" is defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary as "a political or social system based on the relation of client to patron with the client giving political or financial support to a patron (as in the form of votes) in exchange for some special privilege or benefit" (n.d.).

In a democracy where clientelism is common, "the currency is votes and the clients are voters," (Chandra, 2003, p. 56), and both constituents and ethnic political parties take advantage of this practice. Specifically, for ethnic parties, ethnicity makes targeting simpler and coalition-building more efficient, while for ethnic voters, clientelist promises by ethnic political parties give them information about what to expect from their elected officials, that is, how candidates will behave once in office (Chandra, 2003; Hoffman & Long, 2013; Horowitz, 2015).

Consequently, when ethnicity comes into the picture of elections, loyalty is often mutual between the ethnic party and the ethnic group, because the power base that the party manages to secure in an ethnic constituency incentivizes them to work for the benefit of their ethnic group, and these benefits, in turn, reinforce voting for ethnic parties (Chandra, 2003). Such mutual loyalty often allows candidates and parties to successfully persuade voters without having a particular set of ideologies or policy plans laid out for them (Chandra, 2003; Huber & Suryanarayan, 2016).

2.2 Evolution of ethnic political parties' campaign strategies

Ethnic political parties usually rely on the ethnic groups that they represent as their primary voter base. But how ethnic political parties go about crafting their political campaigns for those target ethnic groups is heavily dependent on the social, political, and historical context of the society in which the parties are established. Campaign strategies of ethnic political parties also differ due to the differences in their goals, principles and competency. Whatever the circumstances may be, examples of ethnic political parties around the world reveal



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In India, for instance, ethnic voting and ethnic campaigning remain common but ethnic political parties find that the appeals to ethnicity only work when specific social and economic policies to benefit the target group are laid out during their campaigns (Huber & Suryanarayan, 2013). Specifically, if the ethnic group that an ethnic party represents has low income and poor socioeconomic conditions, advocating tax and redistributive policies that benefit the rich is going to cost the party votes from their own targeted group.

Essentially, the differences in socioeconomic status are what affect the voting behaviour of ethnic voters in India, not ethnicity. Because of this reality, sole reliance on ethnic loyalty to win seats would only do a disservice to ethnic political parties. To maintain their competitiveness in the elections, ethnic political parties in India are extending their campaign strategies to policies. The increasing need for ethnic political parties to extend their campaign strategy to policies is not unique to India. Upon assessing political parties in a number of multiethnic African countries, Elischer (2013) found that the political salience of ethnicity has been decreasing over the last few decades.

Revealed by the results from the exit polls of the 2008 Ghana elections, "While ethnicity was relevant for some voters, evaluations and perceptions of the parties were far more important determinants of vote choice," and the beliefs voters associated with each party's candidates were "independent of their ethnicity" (Hoffman & Long, 2013, p. 127). In other words, most ethnic voters participating in multiethnic democracies decide to pick a candidate because they believe in the candidate's ability to deliver his or her policy promises rather than because the candidate belongs to the same ethnic group as the constituents themselves (Hoffman & Long, 2013). This means that candidates and political parties cannot simply limit their campaign strategies to ethnic appeals in order to win elections.

In addition to the changing voting behaviors of ethnic voters, another reason why campaign strategies of ethnic political parties are evolving is due to the uncertainty of supporter population and uncertainty of the territorial concentration of loyal voters (Horowitz, 2015). Generally speaking, a party whose target group is large enough in number and territorially concentrated only needs to mobilize its voter base in order to win an election. Meanwhile, an ethnic party whose target group is small and dispersed has to persuade other groups to elect its candidates in order to increase their chances of winning.

Additionally, the effect of the territorial concentration of a target group is often amplified in countries that use first-past-the-post (FPTP), also known as the single-member constituency voting system. In multiethnic societies, the winner-take-all nature of this electoral system often creates a distortion in

representation of groups since it allows electoral success of a minority group with high territorial concentration, while the territorially dispersed minority groups often go unrepresented in the legislature (Reynolds, 2006).

Most ethnic parties in Africa, for instance, fall under the category of having a multitude of small ethnic groups dispersed throughout the country. Specifically, in many African countries, the numerousness of ethnic groups and parties formed along those ethnic lines makes it realistically nearly impossible for one ethnic group to govern alone. Acknowledging this reality, ethnic parties in Africa are increasingly appealing to groups beyond their 'own' community (Elischer, 2013; Hoffman & Long, 2013; Horowitz, 2015).

Thus, seeking to increase both vote share and turnout, parties in Africa diversify their campaign efforts and engage in both 'persuasion' and 'mobilizing' targeting both loyal ethnic groups and swing voters (Horowitz, 2015). A good example of an African country in which ethnic political parties are expanding their voter base beyond their target ethnic group is Kenya. Ethnicity is so important for Kenyan voters that all political parties in the country are classified as 'ethnic,' and attempts to form non-ethnic national parties in Kenya have repeatedly failed (Elischer, 2013).

Yet, even in such an environment, there has been a gradual yet definite transformation of 'mono-ethnic political parties' into 'multiethnic alliances' as parties begin to take more inclusive approaches to reach more voters (Elischer, 2013). Realizing the importance of policy-based party programmes, ethnic parties in Kenya are beginning to pay close attention to the necessities of the public and formulating policies based on proper assessment (Elischer, 2013).

To sum up, revealed in the examples of ethnic political parties in India and a number of African countries is the reality that ethnic political parties can no longer rely on the mutual loyalty between the party and the ethnic constituents in order to win elections. Ethnicity remains important for ethnic voters but what they look for in a political party's campaign message are policies that positively affect their income, education, healthcare and other socioeconomic conditions. Uncertain voter population and uncertain territorial concentration of a target group also make it challenging for an ethnic political party to solely rely on ethnic appeals. On the whole, ethnic political parties need to adapt to the changes in demands of their target ethnic groups and only then, they are going to maintain their relevance in the electoral race.

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3. Ethnic Political Parties in Myanmar

Myanmar has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in Asia with rich historical and cultural traditions. At the same time, due to the deeply rooted stratifications among different groups, it is also home to the world's longest ongoing civil war, with a series of ethnic conflicts under every government era since the country gained its independence from the British in 1948. Ethnic minorities in Myanmar have struggled for their political and economic freedoms as well as their ethnic nationality rights for decades, and divisions along ethnic lines remains a defining factor in the country's political landscape today (Kempel, Chan Myae Aung Sun & Aung Tun, 2015). Championing for their interests and claiming their rights as minorities in the country, ethnic groups have been in the political scene arguably since the pre-colonial times. In fact, the first modern political party in the history of Myanmar was an ethnic party called Karen National Association (KNA), established in the year of 1881, representing the voice of Karen communities aiming to promote their economic and social conditions as well as to protect them from the influence of the Bamar (Win Tint Tun, 2013).

With the exception of KNA, political parties in general only came into existence in the 1900s after the entire territory of Burma was conquered and transformed into a British colony. According to Win Tint Tun (2013), political parties in Myanmar during the 20th century were formed based on one of the four following categories: 1) religion, 2) class, 3) political ideology, or 4) ethnicity. Political parties that were formed along ethnic identity lines undoubtedly reflected the existing ethno-linguistic differences in the country.

At the same time, it is important to note that the political salience of ethnic differences reflected the further solidification of ethnic identities under the British rule due to the colonial geographical-administrative divisions between Ministerial Burma (largely constituting the Bamar population), and the Frontier Areas (mainly inhabited by non-Bamar ethnic groups) (Siegener, 2019). While the then-ethnic parties never stopped championing the interests of the respective ethnic minorities, ethnic tensions were mostly put aside during the common struggle for independence.

A number of ethnic parties joined the non-ethnic nationalist parties in the fight for national liberation and in the anti-colonialist and anti-fascist movements in the 1940s. Significantly, in February 1947, representatives from three ethnic groups, namely Shan, Kachin and Chin, together established a political organization called Supreme Council of United Hill Peoples (SCOUHP), also known as United Hill People's Congress (UHPC), making a collective effort to collaborate with Proper Burma/ Ministerial Burma in order to gain independence as a unified country. UHPC, representing the Frontier Areas, then signed the Panglong Agreement in 1947, accepting the "federal accommodationist approach pursued by Aung San," (Siegener, 2019, p. 100), who represented the Ministerial Burma through the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) party.

However, when the final 1947 Constitution led the country's institutional configuration "towards the assimilationist non-federal side of the continuum" (Siegener, 2019, p. 100) in the aftermath of Aung San's assassination, and the country proceeded to gain independence in January 1948, ethnic nationalists from Karen, Karenni, Mon and Rakhine communities took up arms against the government, revealing their resentment towards the domination of Bamar in politics (Siegener, 2019).

The Shan, Kachin and Chin, the signatories of the Panglong Agreement, on the other hand, "largely remained loyal to the government until the early 1960s despite what has been called the broken promise of Panglong" (Siegener, 2019, p. 100). To the ethnic groups whose trust in the central government was shattered due to its denial of ethnic self-determination rights, representing ethnic minorities through political means was inadequate and consequently, the ethnic political parties found it difficult to strengthen their position as legitimate organizations.

Before the 1962 coup that brought in a military junta, Myanmar had a brief moment of parliamentary democracy under the 1947 Constitution, with periodic general elections. However, this democratic era during the 1950s was characterized by "a backdrop of armed conflict and the dominance of a

large national party, drawing its support from the Burman (Bamar) majority, at the perceived expense of ethnic minority representation" (Transnational Institute, 2015a, p. 2). While a handful of ethnic political parties contested in these elections, many ethnic groups went underground and turned into armed organizations instead (Win Tint Tun, 2013).

Due to the weakened position of ethnic parties, ethnic minorities barely got any representation in the parliament, let alone made a significant impact in the government. To make matters worse, the Bamar majority in the government not only failed to compromise with ethnic people but they also did almost nothing to promote development in the ethnic regions (Siegener, 2019). Consequently, this led to even deeper divisions and mistrust between Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic groups in the country.

After the 1962 coup, electoral politics went away and the formation of political parties became illegal, which led to further multiplication of the number of armed resistance movements in the country. Competitive elections were also absent under the one-party state system established under the 1974 Constitution, which allowed Gen. Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) to hold power until the extensive pro-democracy demonstrations took place in 1988. Multi-party elections then returned to the country in 1990 under the subsequent State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The total number of parties contesting in the 1990 general election was 93, among which 45 were ethnic parties. Because nearly half of the contesting parties were ethnic parties, this election is acknowledged as reflecting the ethnic diversity of the country (Transnational Institute, 2015a). More impressively, 14% of the available seats in the two houses of the national legislature went to 19 out of 45 ethnic parties that had contested, making their success rate 42%, representing nearly all of the seats that were not taken by the NLD (Transnational Institute, 2015b).

The success of ethnic parties in the elections, however, does not conceal the fact that those elections still resulted in the dominance of the National League for Democracy (NLD), similarly to how AFPFL dominated the parliament in the 1950s. The results revealed more or less the same pattern of the elections in the 1950s; namely, a dominance of one national party in the midst of conflicts, with several areas in the periphery not being able to hold polls. Furthermore, however impressive these results were in terms of reflecting the country's ethnic diversity, they were neither recognized nor used as the basis for forming a new government due to the statement of the SLORC that it could not transfer power without a constitution in place (Transnational Institute, 2015a).

The process of drafting a constitution began in 1993 and only in 2008 did it come to finalization. Competitive elections then resurfaced in the country in 2010 under the new 2008 Constitution, but this time, the general election was boycotted by many political parties (including the NLD and a number of ethnic parties), protesting that the 2008 Constitution was undemocratic and so were the election-related laws. The elections were hence considered deeply flawed (Whelan, 2011). The NLD was joined in boycotting the elections by the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) that was formed in 2002 by eight of the former member ethnic parties of the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD) which was deregistered by SLORC in 1992 (Transnational Institute, 2015a).

With the NLD and UNA supporters out of the picture, the military-backed USDP swept most of the polls, gaining 76.5% of the total seats in the parliament. The pattern of the previous elections was reflected in this one, too, as a large national party had taken control of the legislature, while conflict-affected parts of the ethnic borderlands were not able to hold election polls. Interestingly, the boycott by some ethnic parties and the dominance of yet another large national party did not stop other ethnic parties from contesting and winning seats.

Specifically, a total of 37 parties contested in the 2010 general election and almost 65% of the parties were ethnic. Because 13 out of the overall 24 ethnic parties were able to gain seats in the national legislature, the overall success rate of ethnic parties was 54%. Being able to secure 180 seats, 15% of the total seats went to ethnic parties (Transnational Institute, 2015b). Even though the number of seats the ethnic parties gained was disproportionate to the votes that they garnered, this was the biggest victory that ethnic groups have been able to claim so far in the electoral history of Myanmar.

After five years under President Thein Sein's nominally civilian government, a general election was held in 2015. It was indeed a successfully held election, since it was regarded by both domestic and international observers as free and fair. Nonetheless, despite the elections themselves being peaceful, "Significant conflict continued in parts of the Shan and Kachin states, with attacks by the national armed forces (Tatmadaw) usually intense both before and after the polls" (Transnational Institute, 2015b, p. 2). With NLD back in the competition, it managed to dominate the national legislature with 79.4% of the total seats.

Many hoped that the 2015 general election would present "an important opportunity to give political voice to Myanmar's diverse ethnic nationality communities and empower them to pursue their aspirations" (Transnational Institute, 2015a, p. 1), but the results unfortunately contradicted the predictions. A total of 55 ethnic parties contested in the 2015 elections but only 10 won seats, securing only 11% of the available seats overall. This makes the success rate of ethnic parties just 18%, which was the all-time poorest showing in comparison to the previous elections.

Additionally, 2015 elections resulted in unequal distribution of seats between the stronger, bigger ethnic parties and weaker, smaller ones in the national legislature. Arakan National Party (ANP) won a total of 22 seats between the two chambers of parliament, and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) won 15, making them the third and fourth parties respectively in terms of the number of seats they gained in the parliament. Smaller ethnic parties such as those representing Karen and Kayah ethnic groups, on the other hand, failed to secure even a single seat in either Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house) or Amyotha Hluttaw (upper house).



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Ethnic parties' failure to secure seats extends beyond the national legislature since the results in the seven state assemblies were similarly discouraging. Besides the ANP that won 48.9% of the seats in the Rakhine State Parliament and SNLD that won 17.6% of the seats in the Shan State Parliament, the success of other ethnic parties in ethnic states was insignificant and dissatisfactory (Transnational Institute, 2015b).

All in all, a quick revisit to Myanmar's history reveals the reality that the emergence of ethnic political parties was purely a reflection of the already existing differences and divisions in the country. Although historically, institutionalized limitations discouraged ethnic groups from pursuing political aspiration through legal means (Siegener, 2019), there is no denying that ethnic political parties have played a constructive role in Myanmar's journey to democracy.

Specifically, the significant role that ethnic political parties in Myanmar have played throughout the country's history fighting for independence to the overthrowing of the military regime strongly supports this notion. This then reflects the previous literature (e.g. Marshall & Ishiyama, 2016) that encourages the formation of ethnic parties and their inclusion in the political process and legislative representation.

Finally, for those who had predicted a higher success rate for ethnic political parties, the 2015 elections might have come off as a surprise; yet, looking back at the electoral history of this country, the election results become much less shocking because they revealed an identical pattern with the previous election results: the dominance of a large national party with slim room of representation for smaller ethnic parties.



The 2015 elections might have come off as a surprise; yet, looking back at the electoral history of this country, the election results become much less shocking because they revealed an identical pattern with the previous election results: the dominance of a large national party with slim room of representation for smaller ethnic parties.

3.1. Challenges for ethnic political parties in Myanmar

There were indeed a lot of factors that went into the unsatisfactory success rates of ethnic parties in the 2015 election in Myanmar. Many of these challenges are rooted in the history of Myanmar and hence difficult to change. Most importantly, ethnic political parties' insignificant wins in the 2015 election can be argued to have been largely due to the consistent crippling of political parties during the decades of military regime and a mere repetition of the historical dominance of the Bamar ethnic majority on the political scene.

Hence, institutionally speaking, the current constitutional reservation of 25% of the seats for the military at every level of the parliament, and the FPTP electoral system that distorts parliament representation by creating vote-seat anomalies continues to limit the representation of ethnic minorities in the legislature, essentially making the access to power for ethnic minorities difficult (Transnational Institute, 2015b).

While certain constitutional structures such as the upper chamber and ethnic affair minister positions accommodate ethnic minorities and acknowledge their historical struggles, the

extent to which these structures guarantee the representation of ethnic minorities is minimal.

In addition to the country's electoral system, its constitution and the historical baggage, other obstacles that heavily affected the success rates of ethnic political parties in 2015 - which the parties have virtually no control over - include untransparent cancellation of voting polls in conflict areas (Transnational Institute, 2015b) and the country's campaign finance networks that allow inequity in candidates' and parties' spending limits (Pyae Sone, 2018).

On one hand, observed in the report of Transnational Institute (2015b), the cancellation of polling in the 2015 elections affected "a total of 21 constituencies in Shan State," closing down voting polls in seven whole townships in addition to many parts of townships "in the Kachin, Shan and Kayin (Karen) states and Bago region, as well as one village-tract in the Mon state" (p. 5). Hence, it was estimated that "up to half a million voters in nearly 600 village tracts may have been disenfranchised" (Transnational Institute, 2015b, p. 5), and because many of the affected areas were in ethnic borderlands where different ethnic communities resided, not only were a number of ethnic voters stripped away their right to vote but ethnic political parties also lost the opportunity to target their respective groups and win seats in the election.

On the other hand, funding constraints matter significantly for most ethnic political parties because not having enough financial resources means that they do not have the capacity to run substantial campaigns throughout the campaigning period. This matter becomes an institutionalized issue when taking into consideration that the campaign finance networks provide virtually no protection for small political parties.

Specifically, there is a spending limit of 10 million kyats for campaign activities but this limit only applies to candidates, not to political parties (Pyae Sone, 2018). What this means is that the campaign finance networks allow wealthy political parties to essentially spend however much they want on their candidates to advance them in the election. These campaign finance policies that only affect the candidates and not the political parties are argued to "generate unfairness towards independent candidates and candidates from parties with small financial resources" (Pyae Sone, 2018).

Additionally, political parties are not obligated to disclose their finances unless the Union Election Commission officially asks them to, basically turning a blind eye to wealthy political parties and their spendings. By favoring rich political parties such as the NLD or USDP, although indirectly, these campaign finance policies have negative effects on ethnic political parties that are already small and financially disadvantaged.



Funding constraints matter significantly for most ethnic political parties because not having enough financial resources means that they do not have the capacity to run substantial campaigns throughout the campaigning period.

4. Evaluating the campaign strategies of ethnic political parties in Myanmar

However, not all factors that played into the failure of ethnic political parties in the previous elections were out of the parties' control. While there is little ethnic political parties can do about the above-mentioned challenges, it is equally as important, if not more, to pay attention to the campaign strategies of ethnic political parties that are in their own hands. Only through evaluating and assessing the campaign strategies that ethnic political parties adopted in 2015, there will arise ways to effectively improve them.

Consequently, these improved campaign strategies will increase ethnic political parties' chances to win seats in their targeted constituencies in the future elections at both regional/ state and national level legislature. An analysis of the campaigning efforts that ethnic political parties made in 2015 revealed three important lessons that ethnic political parties can learn from in order to win more seats in the 2020 elections. The lessons include 1) focusing on mobilization over persuasion; 2) taking an exclusive approach; and 3) lacking policy platforms.

4.1 Focusing on mobilization over persuasion

Before adopting any campaign strategies, the first important assessment for any political party to make is on the territorial concentration of its core supporter population. In Myanmar, there is a popular narrative surrounding ethnic identity that ethnic communities are stationary and homogenous (Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, & Zabra Yu Siwa, 2019), and ethnic political parties have often based their campaign strategies on this belief. There are indeed ethnic groups that are territorially concentrated, and ethnic political parties representing these groups usually succeed in elections under the FPTP voting system.

As described by Transnational Institute (2019b), the two largest ethnic political parties in Myanmar, namely the SNLD and ANP, "benefitted from the geographical concentration of their voter base, gaining twice as many seats in comparison to their percentage of the popular vote" (p. 13). Moreover, "other ethnic parties that did well in their respective areas were those representing smaller nationality groups that are concentrated in particular geographic areas, including the self-administered territories" (Transnational Institute, 2019b, p. 7). Ethnic political parties such as Pao National Organization and Lisu National Development Party in Shan State, and the Zomi Congress for Democracy in Chin State, were able to secure seats only because the ethnic groups that these parties represented were concentrated enough in the constituencies in which the parties contested.

However, not every ethnic group is territorially concentrated, and when one's ethnic group is either small or spread out over a number of constituencies, it becomes challenging for the ethnic party to mobilize the voters and, consequently, to win. Many assume that the ethnically named states in Myanmar are a good indicator of the geographical concentration of the respective ethnic groups but in reality, all of these states are home to heterogeneous populations due to migration that is taking place on a daily basis (Clarke et al., 2019).

The seven main ethnic groups in Myanmar, after whom the states are named, move around and settle in states and regions that are not traditionally considered their 'homelands', pursuing better employment and education opportunities. In fact, according to the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census data, (Myanmar Department of Population, 2016), 19.3 percent of individuals, making up a population of nearly 9.4 million (out of 51.5 million total population) reported moving at least once over their lifetime. Moreover, there is a significant Bamar population in most ethnic states as well, especially in urban areas. (Clarke et al., 2019; Transnational Institute, 2015a).



Underestimating the dispersal of one's own group and overlooking the relatively high number of 'other groups' that reside in their 'home states', ethnic political parties have typically focused on solely mobilizing their target ethnic group when persuasion of 'other groups' was in fact necessary to win elections.



Ethnic political parties' failure to properly assess the territorial concentration of target voter groups prior to the election, combined with the effects of vote-splitting, can be said to largely explain the discouraging success rates of many ethnic political parties in the 2015 election.

The Mon ethnic group is a good example of an ethnic group that is dispersed in territory, and thus challenging to mobilize during the election periods. The group, with approximately 1.1 million people, only makes up 2% of the country's population and inhabits Mon State, Karen State, Irrawaddy Delta, Bago Region, Yangon Region and Tanintharyi Region. Two Mon parties namely Mon National Party (MNP) and All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP) targeted the same ethnic group in virtually the same constituencies in 2015. However, across all three levels of the legislative branch, these two parties only won 4 seats in total. In addition, the constituencies they won were in Mon State alone, indicating that Mon ethnic people living in states and regions other than Mon State were not represented by either of the Mon parties despite their contesting in those areas.

Underestimating the dispersal of one's own group and overlooking the relatively high number of 'other groups' that reside in their 'home states', ethnic political parties have typically focused on solely mobilizing their target ethnic group when persuasion of 'other groups' was in fact necessary to win elections. Not having assessed the number of the target voter population has also led ethnic political parties to spend resources on campaigning and running in constituencies where they did not even have a chance of winning.

On top of all that, the stakes of vote-splitting became too high when numerous ethnic political parties were competing against each other for the votes of the same ethnic group in the same area. To sum up, ethnic political parties' failure to properly assess the territorial concentration of target voter groups prior to the election, combined with the effects of vote-splitting, can be said to largely explain the discouraging success rates of many ethnic political parties in the 2015 election.

4.2 Taking an exclusive approach

Relating to the misjudgment about the dispersal of ethnic groups throughout the country, another campaign strategy that cost a number of ethnic political parties votes was taking an exclusive approach over an inclusive one. As previously discussed, ethnic political parties tend to base their entire establishment on the premise of ethnicity, and exclusiveness is part of the characteristics that differentiate ethnic political parties from national political parties.

However, when they target and promise to champion the interests of a single ethnic group, they tend to overlook the fact that constituencies they compete in have diverse ethnic groups other than the ethnic group that they target and appeal to. Such overlooking, whether or not it is intentional, leads ethnic political parties to adopt exclusive campaign strategies, which end up costing them votes in their constituencies.

In addition to the 'large' ethnic groups dispersed across the country, it is also important to note that there are approximately 130 other officially recognized ethnic groups besides those 'main' ethnic groups that are spread out across

the seven ethnically named states as well as the seven regions. In addition, "mixed-race children" as a result of "mixed marriages" are also common throughout the country despite an "idealised view of ethnicity as a fixed and exclusive trait." (Clarke et al., 2019, p. 34). These ethnic minorities and mixed-ethnic people who do not belong to the dominant local ethnic group usually lack resources, capacity and sometimes, they simply do not have enough supporter population to establish a political party based on their identity.

And because they do not have political parties claiming to exclusively represent their interests, their options are limited to national and other ethnic political parties that are contesting in the areas of their residence. In such cases, non-ethnic national parties, in 2015, did a more effective job than ethnic political parties targeting these groups as they delivered 'all-inclusive' campaign messages promising the wellbeing of all nationalities.

To show how ethnically 'inclusive' they were, the NLD and the USDP, the two most successful national parties, also promoted ethnic minority candidates locally, boosting their already-large voter base. On the contrary, most ethnic political parties could barely garner any votes from the people outside of their target ethnic group due to their exclusive nature that limited their ability to effectively persuade important swing voters such as minority groups without specific political parties championing for their identity.

While a number of ethnic political parties have expressed their commitment to bring equal rights and opportunities to all ethnic groups in their party programmes (Union Election Commission, 2019), their campaign messages emphasized the wellbeing of specific ethnic groups and thus reflected the parties' exclusiveness rather than their inclusiveness. In a situation where persuasion of swing voters becomes necessary for most ethnic political parties in order to beat national parties in the election, the exclusiveness of the ethnic political parties actually discouraged these voters from giving these parties a chance.

4.3 Lacking policy platforms

While the misjudgment of the territorial concentration of ethnic minorities and the exclusive campaign messages are the issues that can be argued to be the most relevant to ethnic political parties' unsatisfactory success, both national and ethnic political parties overlooked the need to develop specific policy plans prior to running for elections.

Upon conducting a qualitative research in the second half of 2014 in six localities of Mon State, Rakhine State, Chin State, Kachin State, Mandalay Region and Ayeyarwady Region, Kempel and her colleagues (2015) found that that political parties, ethnic and national alike, made vague promises with the absence of sector-specific policies in their efforts to mobilize voters to turn out on the election day in 2015. This was generally because attaining power came before the development of policies for most political parties (Kempel et al., 2015).



Taking an exclusive approach over an inclusive one, whether or not intentional, leads ethnic political parties to adopt exclusive campaign strategy, which end up costing them votes in their consistencies.

Specifically, in preparation for the 2015 election, non-ethnic national parties expressed their positions on social, economic and political issues by throwing around terms such as ‘development’, ‘democracy’, and ‘unity’ (Kempel et al., 2015). Similarly, most, if not all, ethnic political parties centered their campaigns around ethnic identity with generic issues such as “self-determination’, ‘equal rights’, ‘genuine democracy’ and a generalised notion of federalism” (Kempel et al., 2015, p. 14).

These were merely buzzwords that circled around their campaign trails without any detailed plan on how exactly the parties were going to achieve those goals once they got elected. Despite such broad campaign messages across the board, the voter turnout in 2015 was impressively high, with 69% of 34.3 million eligible voters turning out to vote (Vogt, 2015), meaning that political parties’ vague promises had little to no effect on the voter turnout.

However, the consequence of lacking policy plans during the 2015 election period was “a disconnect between overall campaign issues and local issues of importance to the electorate” (Kempel et al., 2015, p. 26). This was largely because political parties did not make their generic campaign issues fit the local context in the constituencies that they were competing in (Kempel et al., 2015).

Cases of land confiscation, for instance, were common and seriously discussed among local constituencies and local authorities, but political parties did not bother to mention this as a campaign issue in 2015 (Kempel et al., 2015). Such disconnect between political parties and local constituencies led the voters to have a hard time identifying with the political parties because the public could not hold a grasp of what real effects these big promises would have on their daily lives.

This has not changed much since the 2015 elections, because according to a recent report on Citizens’ Political Preferences for 2020, 16.3% of the respondents say that no party represents their interest while 34.5% of the respondents did not know which political party represents their interests the most (People’s Alliance for Credible Elections, 2019). In a country with more than 90 political parties registered, these numbers reveal how much of a disconnect between political parties and voters there is. Hence, even though the voter turnout was impressively high in 2015, this does not mean that the voters were confident in the political parties they voted for.

Although it is both national and ethnic political parties that lacked policy plans in their campaigns, not every political party suffered the same consequences simply because not all parties are created equal. Political parties with advantages such as having a charismatic leader, strong financial resources and party organization (i.e. the NLD and USDP) still succeeded in the 2015 elections, while those without these advantages suffered. In fact, when an ethnic political party went head to head with a large national political party such as the NLD in a constituency in 2015, voters chose to support the latter party over the former regardless of their ethnicity despite the fact that they both made equally broad promises.



Although it is both national and ethnic political parties that lacked policy plans in their campaigns, not every political party suffered the same consequences simply because not all parties are created equal.

This, according to Xianghui (2019), was because "ethnic voters [in Myanmar] put political identity before ethnic identity" (p. 9). More concretely, in the 2015 election, ethnic political parties did not stand a chance at beating the NLD when ethnic groups across the country translated their strong resonance with "[the NLD leader] Aung San Suu Kyi's charisma, her bitter experience fighting the military government and promise to change the status quo" (Xianghui, 2019, p. 9) into votes.

Putting aside one's ethnic identity for a political cause was exactly the case in Kayah State in the 2015 election. The Kayah ethnic group is small in number but relatively concentrated in its home state, Kayah. Ethnic political parties representing this group then, in theory, should have been favored by the FPTP. However, all the Kayah ethnic parties combined won zero seats in all three levels of legislature in 2015. According to the calculation by Transnational Institute (2015b), vote-splitting was not responsible for this either, because even if all the Kayah parties had merged prior to the elections, the number of votes that Kayah parties garnered altogether in 2015 was not enough to secure them any seat in the legislature. This shows that ethnic voters who politically align with a non-ethnic national party do not vote for an ethnic party purely because they share the same ethnicity.

Ethnic political parties' assumption that they had the support of ethnic voters and that they did not need specific policies to garner those votes, therefore, backfired. If ethnic political parties were to take this as a lesson to learn and lay out sector-specific policies that reflect the priorities of the constituencies they represent in the upcoming elections, they would be able to get themselves a leg up in the competition with large national parties.

In order to ensure that everyone in the constituency is being represented, ethnic political parties should also explain how groups of different religions, genders, ages, socioeconomic statuses and ethnicities within the constituencies are going to be affected once the promised policies are implemented. Basing campaign strategies on specific policy plans would not only improve the ethnic political parties' chances of securing more seats but it would also be helpful for better-quality representation of the citizens.



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Basing campaign strategies on specific policy plans would not only improve the ethnic political parties' chances of securing more seats but it would also be helpful for better-quality representation of the citizens.

5. Opportunities for ethnic political parties in Myanmar

Upon evaluating the campaign strategies adopted by ethnic political parties in the 2015 elections, it becomes evident that many of the above-mentioned challenges also include opportunities in them. Ultimately, despite many limitations, ethnic political parties are responsible for the choices they make when it comes to their own campaign strategies. Ethnic political parties can overcome a lot of the above-mentioned obstacles by making a few adjustments to their approaches. With appropriate campaign strategies that are voter-oriented and policy-based, the risk of votes going to waste can be effectively reduced and the voter base can also be expanded.

First and foremost, it is important for ethnic political parties to be able to make the most out of the given political structure. There are a number of countries in which ethnic parties are banned from being established, let alone freely campaigning to pursue their political aspirations but fortunately, this is not the case in Myanmar. There is no constitutional provision that explicitly bars ethnic political parties from registering and competing in the elections.

There is no limitation on the number of ethnic parties allowed to be established, either. Under Article X of the Constitution, political parties can organize freely and the only obligation for political parties is to observe the three national causes of "non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of national sovereignty," and to "accept and practice a genuine and discipline-flourishing multiparty democratic democratic system" (Myanmar, 2008). Looking at the number of ethnic political parties registered in Myanmar today, it is evident that ethnic groups have already been taking advantage of this provision in the 2008 Constitution.

Second, ethnic political parties can use Myanmar's current electoral system to their advantage despite its flaws in guaranteeing ethnic representation in the country's legislature. As previously mentioned, there are already a few ethnic political parties, whose target ethnic groups are territorially concentrated, that benefit from the vote-seat anomaly that this winner-take-all system presents. Vote-seat anomaly is a situation where votes gain in the election for a political party does not reflect seats gain in the parliament. Even small ethnic political parties could beat national parties in a number of constituencies under the FPTP system if they knew exactly which constituencies to target and if they adopted appropriate campaign strategies based on the information about the parties' supporter population. All that ethnic political parties need to do is to find ways to make the most out of the given system.

Once they know about how the system works and what it can offer them, a crucial step for ethnic political parties to take would be to assess the territorial concentration of their respective target ethnic groups. Being able to target constituencies effectively is important for ethnic political parties, especially for parties with limited financial and human resource. This is way to avoid spending resources in constituencies where they have absolutely no chance of winning.

At the same time, it is equally important for ethnic political parties to figure out ways to win elections in constituencies where other groups are present, in order to maximize the number of seats for ethnic political parties in the parliament. Based on the preconditions regarding the territorial concentration of target ethnic groups as well the nature of competition among different ethnic political parties, three separate scenarios arise (see Figure 1). Ethnic political parties in different situations can adopt relevant strategies for each scenarios in order to achieve a higher level of representation in the country's legislature.

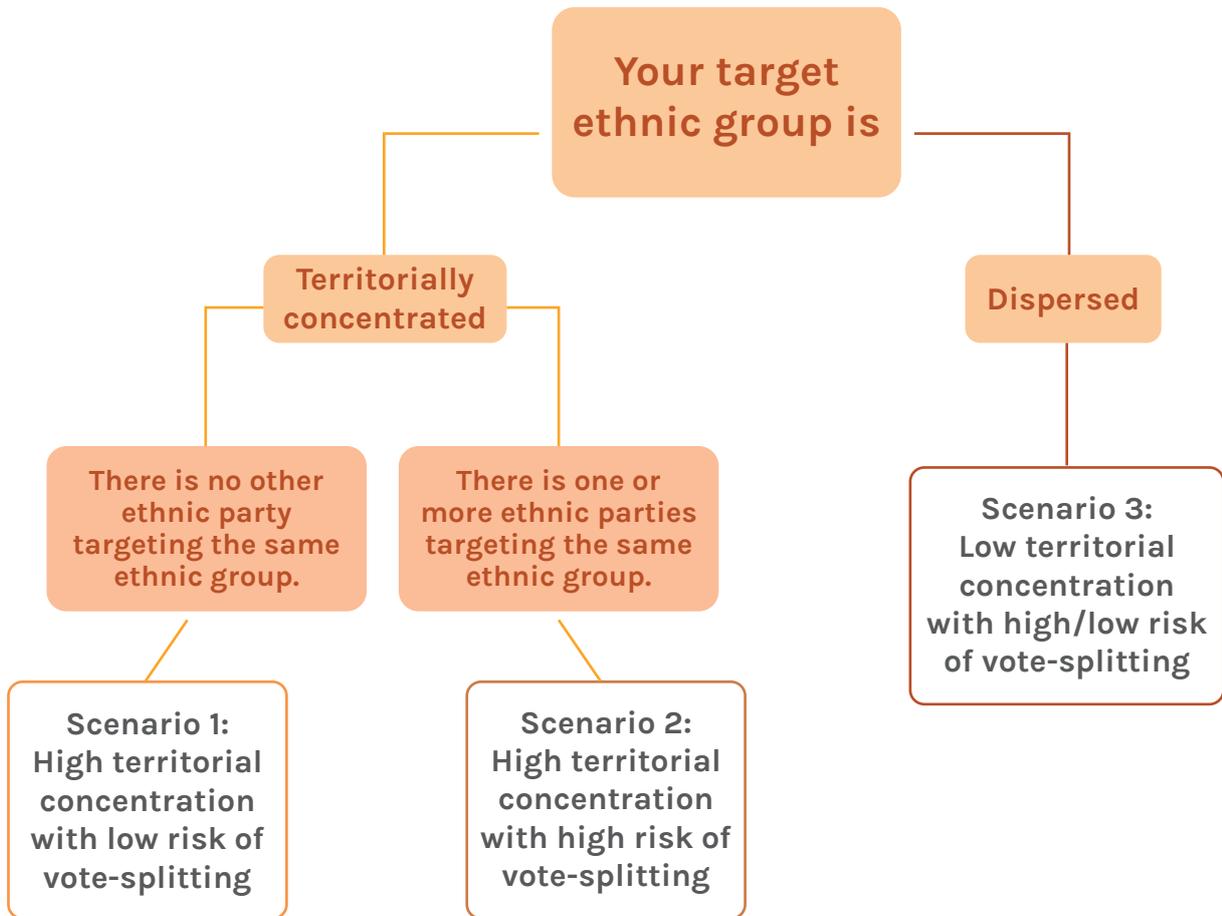
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Being able to target constituencies effectively is important for ethnic political parties, especially for parties with limited financial and human resource.

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Ethnic political parties in different situations can adopt relevant strategies for each scenarios in order to achieve a higher level of representation in the country's legislature.

Figure 1.
Identifying the preconditions of ethnic political parties in Myanmar



5.1 Scenario 1: High territorial concentration with low risk of vote-splitting

The first scenario is when the core voter base or the target ethnic group of an ethnic political party is territorially concentrated and there is minimal risk of vote-splitting, meaning that there is virtually no other ethnic political party targeting the same ethnic group in that area. Examples of such ethnic political parties include Ta'ang (Palaung) National Party contesting in Shan State, and Zomi Congress for Democracy in Chin State. The Palaung population is largely concentrated in Namkhan, Manton and Namhsan townships of Shan State and Ta'ang (Palaung) National Party, being the only Palaung party in the area secured seats in the parliament representing those constituencies. Similarly, the territorial concentration of the Zomi population in Tonzang and Tedim townships of Chin State led to the success of the Zomi Congress for Democracy in those constituencies.

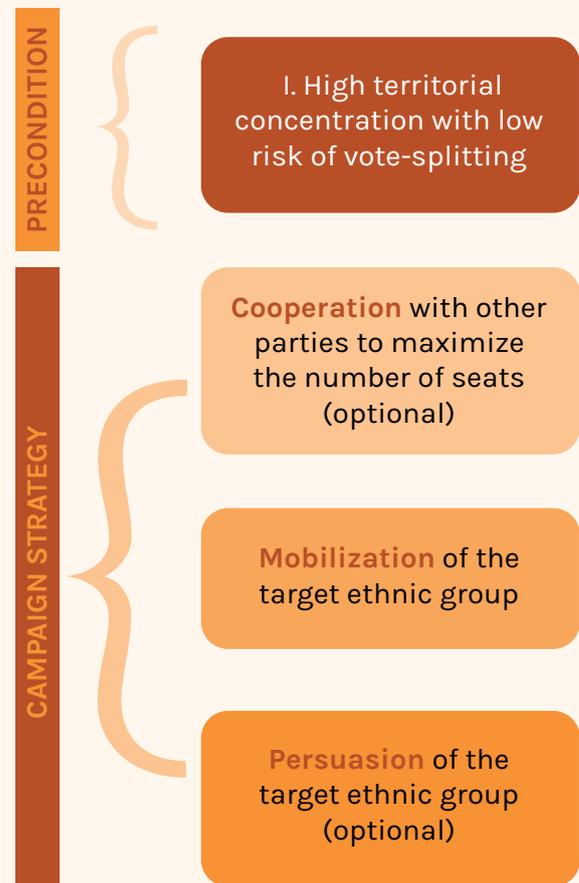
In such case, an appropriate campaign strategy to secure the same number of seats in the upcoming elections would be to continue targeting their ethnic group and prioritize 'mobilization' and get the core supporters to turn out to vote at the time of elections. Because the FPTP favors parties with territorially concentrated supporter population, the challenges that these kinds of ethnic political parties face are limited to funding and party organization.

Ethnic political parties in this scenario also benefit from the fact that there are no other ethnic political parties claiming to exclusively represent the same group. However, the issue with ethnic political parties in this situation is that their representation tends to be limited to only a few seats in the legislature.

Mobilization efforts combined with the vote-seat anomaly granted by the FPTP is going to help these parties claim victory in the few constituencies where their target ethnic groups reside, but if the goal of an ethnic political party in this scenario is to maximize the number of seats in the parliament, mobilization alone would not be enough. Maximizing the level of representation means winning more seats, and the more seats a party wants to win, the more constituencies it has to compete in.

A larger area of competition means that the ethnic party has to reach beyond its own target ethnic group and that it has to adopt

Figure 2. Recommended campaign strategies for Scenario I



persuasion strategies. And as discussed before, a persuasive campaign with exclusive messages and pure ethnic appeals would not be effective; in order to successfully persuade ‘outside groups,’ it is important that the party makes their campaign issues inclusive. The campaign messages of an ethnic political party in this scenario should reflect the interests of those residing in the targeted constituencies whether these constituents belong to the same ethnic group as the party’s primary target group or not (see Figure 2).

5.2 Scenario 2: High territorial concentration with high risk of vote-splitting

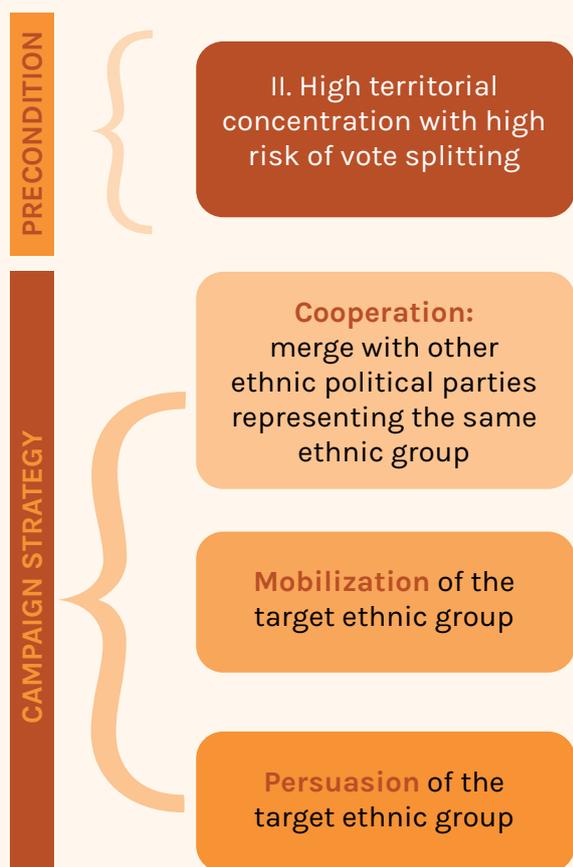
The second scenario is when the core voter base or the target ethnic group is territorially concentrated, but the risk of vote-splitting is high due to the competition among ethnic political parties targeting the same ethnic group in the same constituencies. In 2015, this was quite a common case among ethnic political parties competing in ethnic states specifically for seats in the lower house and the state assembly.

For example, the two Mon parties namely All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP) and Mon National Party (MNP), split the votes of the Mon people between them, leading to the success of the NLD in almost all of the constituencies that they competed in. If these two Mon parties had merged prior to the elections in 2015, they would have gotten two seats in the Mon State Hluttaw, one seat in the Karen State Hluttaw, and one seat in the Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house). Karen parties, Chin parties and Kachin parties would have gotten a couple seats upon merging as well.

It is then obvious that the most effective strategy for parties in this scenario would be to merge with other ethnic parties targeting the same ethnic group residing in the same constituencies (see Figure 3). Merging is a strategy that ethnic parties in Myanmar have experience using in the past in their effort to address the issue of vote-splitting.

Significantly, merging was a winning strategy for the two Rakhine/Arakan parties namely the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) and Rakhine National Development Party (RNDP); these two parties consolidated in 2014 to form

Figure 3. Recommended campaign strategies for Scenario II



the Arakan National Party (ANP) and proceeded to become the third largest political party in 2015, securing 22 seats in the National Parliament and 23 in the State Parliament (Chan Thar & Khin Moh Moh Lwin, 2019; Transnational Institute, 2019b). Desiring the electoral success that merging appears to offer, many other ethnic political parties in Kachin State, Chin State, Mon State and Karen State that lost votes to vote-splitting in 2015 have also come to merge in preparation for the 2020 elections.

Merging of political parties, however, is not an easy task. Even though it could make the merging process slower and more complicated, party ideology and policies should not be overlooked. For instance, the votes of SNLD and Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) combined would have been enough to beat the large national parties in eight constituencies in Shan State and one in Kachin State, and secure nine seats total in the three levels of the legislature (Transnational Institute, 2015).

The merger would have worked in favor of the two Shan parties in accordance with their enormous voter base; unfortunately, they had unsuccessful merger talks due to their differences in ideology and party position and had to run in the elections separately in the end.

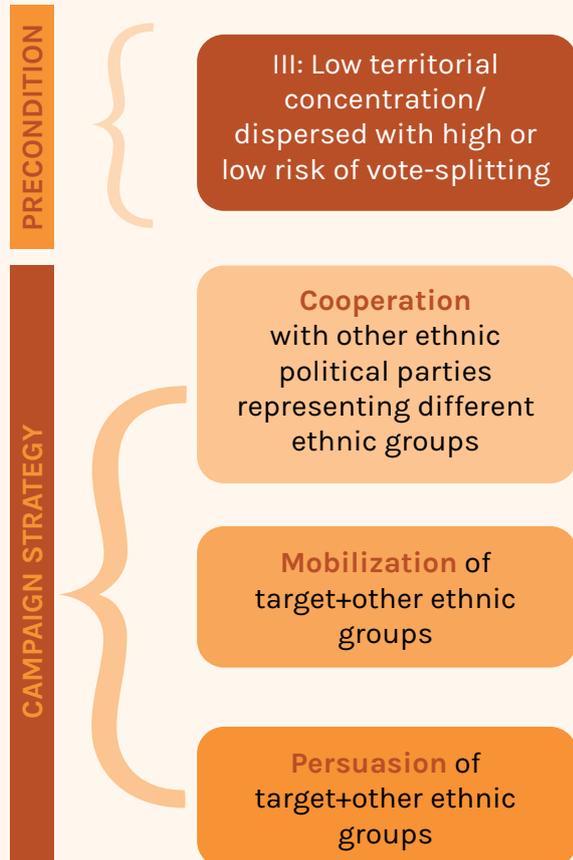
Moreover, even when the initial merging process is successful, there is a risk that the merged party would quickly disintegrate due to the fragile nature of the new alliance and the proneness of rival parties to fight. If merging were to be done on office-seeking premises alone, and if 'ethnicity' was the only thing that binds the parties together, the quality of representation that the merged party would offer would become questionable and so would the sustainability of the merged party.

The lack of cooperation and unity within the merged party could also expose the party to the risk of losing their voter base altogether to a large national party. ANP, for instance, had enormous success in the 2015 election thanks to the Rakhine parties merging, but in 2017, a faction within ANP split from the party due to intra-party clashes and founded the new Arakan Front Party (AFP; Chan Thar & Khin Moh Moh Lwin, 2019).

Once the ethnic political parties overcome the challenges mentioned above and are able to come to a successful and sustainable merge, the next most important thing for the merger party to do is to effectively mobilize and persuade its target ethnic group. The mobilization process will definitely be made simple by the fact that the target ethnic group remains the same after the merge and the fact that the member parties of the merge already have core supporters of their own. However, mobilization alone is not enough to win the constituencies.

Persuasion is also necessary 1) to convince the core supporters of member parties of the merge that the new merger is going to deliver the same promises made by the parties prior to the merge and 2) to win over the ethnic voters that chose to vote for the national party in the previous elections. There is, however, no immediate need for ethnic political parties in this scenario to persuade voters outside of their ethnic group. Successful mobilization and persuasion of the target ethnic group will certainly result in a reduced risk of splitting the ethnic votes between separate ethnic parties.

Figure 4. Recommended campaign strategies for Scenario III



5.3 Scenario 3: Low territorial concentration/dispersed with low or high risk of vote-splitting

The third and final scenario is when the target ethnic group of an ethnic party is dispersed over a number of constituencies or even across different states and regions. Due to the daily internal migration and the increasing rate of ethnic groups leaving their ‘home states’ for a number of reasons, this scenario is a very common one in Myanmar. For example, in Karen State, there is a big Mon population, and Mon political parties contest in a number of constituencies in Karen State targeting the Mon people, often going head to head with Karen parties.

Similarly in Mon State, there are a number of Karen voters targeted by both Karen and Mon parties to secure seats in these constituencies of mixed-ethnic residents. In a constituency where no ethnic group is significantly dominant, targeting one ethnic group exclusively and focusing on mobilizing alone is not adequate. If a Mon party wants to compete in a constituency where both Mon and Karen voters reside, for example, excluding the Karen population will only hurt the party.

In order for the Mon party to successfully campaign in such a constituency, persuading Karen voters is as important as mobilizing the Mon voters. It is worth noting, too, that having a dispersed target population is not unique to the ethnic political parties competing in the seven ‘ethnic states’ of the country. Ethnic parties competing in the seven regions of the country also belong to this category because the parties’ target ethnic groups reside in the regions alongside the Bamar and other ethnic groups.

An appropriate strategy for ethnic political parties in this scenario would then be to cooperate with other ethnic parties in the constituency representing different ethnic groups. Depending on the political aspiration that two or more ethnic political parties in this scenario share, cooperation could take on a number of different forms. The first form of cooperative strategy is mere coordination between ethnic political parties in regards to the constituencies that they compete in.

For example, prior to the election, the Mon political party and the Karen political party could agree to avoid the constituency that each other is competing in. When the two parties are not

competing against each other in one constituency, the chance of winning will increase for both parties. By coordinating the constituencies this way, ethnic political parties in this scenario would be able to maximize the number of their seats at every level of legislature.

Coordination between the two ethnic political parties in this scenario could also be achieved by campaigning for each other's party, instead of one's own, in selective constituencies. For example, the Mon party could agree to mobilize a certain number of Mon population in an ethnically mixed constituency to vote for the Karen party expecting the same favor in return by the Karen party in another similar constituency.

This, however, does not mean that the Karen party should solely rely on the Mon party's efforts to help garner Mon votes. Even with the help of the Mon party, the Karen party in this scenario should still be persuasive and convincing enough for Mon voters to choose it over other parties in the ballot. With a high enough level of trust and cooperation between the two ethnic political parties in this scenario, this might be an effective campaign strategy for one election cycle or two.

To be able to execute such coordination tactics effectively, a strategy that is appropriate for ethnic political parties in this scenario is to establish a multiethnic alliance or to strengthen the existing ones (see Figure 4). Historically speaking, a number of ethnic groups and ethnic political parties in Myanmar have joined forces and formed different alliances in the past to collectively campaign against the military rule and Bamar dominance as well as to fight for causes such as 'equality' and 'self-determination rights'.

The formation of a pan-ethnic front in 1989 called the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD), resulted in the significant success of ethnic political parties in the 1990 elections. (Transnational Institute, 2015a). Significant party alliances among ethnic political parties that are still active today include: the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), composed of eight ethnic political parties that competed in the 1990 elections; and Nationalities Brotherhood Forum (NBF), composed of 22 ethnic political parties.

As observed by Kempel et al. (2015), the joint meetings that these alliances hold are often "to seek agreement and common positions on larger political issues such as the constitutions and the peace process" but not "to form joint policies on different sectors, such as education or health, or to initiate joint action on development issues" (p. 22). Kempel et al. (2015) also noted that "the party alliance structure only exists among the parties at the union level and has not been replicated at the local level of the parties" (p. 22).

Having a common position on political issues and being able to make public statements at the national level is important for a political alliance, but the member parties of such an alliance should not be relying purely on these efforts to bring them electoral success. In order to maximize ethnic representation at every level of the country's legislature, the established multiethnic alliances should be able to extend their cooperation to the campaign trail.

Hence, ethnic political parties in the multiethnic alliances should consider making joint policies and appeal to the local constituents with the image of inclusiveness and unity. Without having policy platforms or action plans specifically catered to the constituents, the coordination efforts by the ethnic political parties will only read as efforts to manipulate voters for political gain.

5.4 Importance of making campaigns policy-based and less exclusive

Due to the differences in the nature of the target ethnic groups and the ethnic political parties that represent them, campaign strategies may vary. Nonetheless, what these above-discussed scenarios suggest is that ethnic political parties whose ultimate political goal is to maximize ethnic representation in the parliament need to persuade 'other groups'. In order to do this successfully, ethnic political parties, regardless of their preconditions, need to make cooperative efforts with other ethnic political parties representing either the same ethnic groups or different ones (see Figure 5.)

Cooperation, however, is not the only campaign strategy that is important and beneficial to ethnic political parties. Another important strategy that ethnic political parties should consider adopting is to create policy platforms that affect the daily lives of the constituents (see Figure 5.). Irrespective of the number of seats that ethnic political parties want to secure in the parliament, policy-based campaigns can help the parties connect to and communicate with the constituents. Taking on policy-based campaign approaches will likely prevent ethnic votes from flowing into the large national parties, as well.

As mentioned previously, the 2015 election results in Kayah State clearly revealed that ethnic voters need more than just the ethnicity argument to be persuaded to vote for a political party. As noted in the Transnational Institute report (2015b), despite the dominance of ethnic voters in ethnic states, the NLD won with more than half of the popular vote in many constituencies of the Kachin, Kayah, Mon and Chin states thanks to the party's highly personalised campaign that many ethnic voters resonated with.

Since ethnic political parties cannot compete with large national parties in terms of funding, human resources or charisma, localised policy-based campaigns that discuss healthcare, social welfare, education, and so on, could be the strategy for ethnic parties to use in order to prove to their target voter population that they deserve the votes more than the national parties.

Policy platforms are also helpful in managing the risks of merger ethnic parties disintegrating quickly after the merge. Negotiating and coming into agreement on policy plans around education, healthcare, land management, and so on, prior to merging is going to help ethnic political parties come together and stay together. Additionally, focusing on policies that closely connect with the local constituents will make it easy to convince the voter base that the newly merged party is going to represent their interests better than before the merge.

Once the merged ethnic political party lays out policies and action plans that speak to the constituents, the high territorial concentration of the merged party's target ethnic group will become a comparative advantage for the ethnic political parties, and the risk of losing votes to the national parties will likely decrease. Moreover, policy-based campaign messages will be able to help the merged parties sustain their success over more than just one election cycle as well.

Finally, ethnic political parties, whether they represent the same ethnic groups or different ones, should convey a less exclusive message to the

voters, because an exclusive approach could not only decrease the parties' chances of winning the elections but it could also hurt the quality of their representation (see Figure 5.) It is rather inappropriate to suggest that ethnic political parties in Myanmar should completely leave their 'exclusiveness' behind because doing so would defy the reason of ethnic political parties' existence.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the more inclusive the campaigns are, the more likely that the ethnic political party will be able reach 'out-group' voters and maximize the number of seats it secures in the parliament. What is equally important is for ethnic political parties to evolve and make constituent-oriented policy promises that answer the needs of the voters regardless of their ethnic background. Policy-based campaigns with a less exclusive approach are going to enable ethnic political parties to effectively persuade a larger voter base and successfully cooperate with other ethnic political parties not only on the campaign trail but also in the parliament.

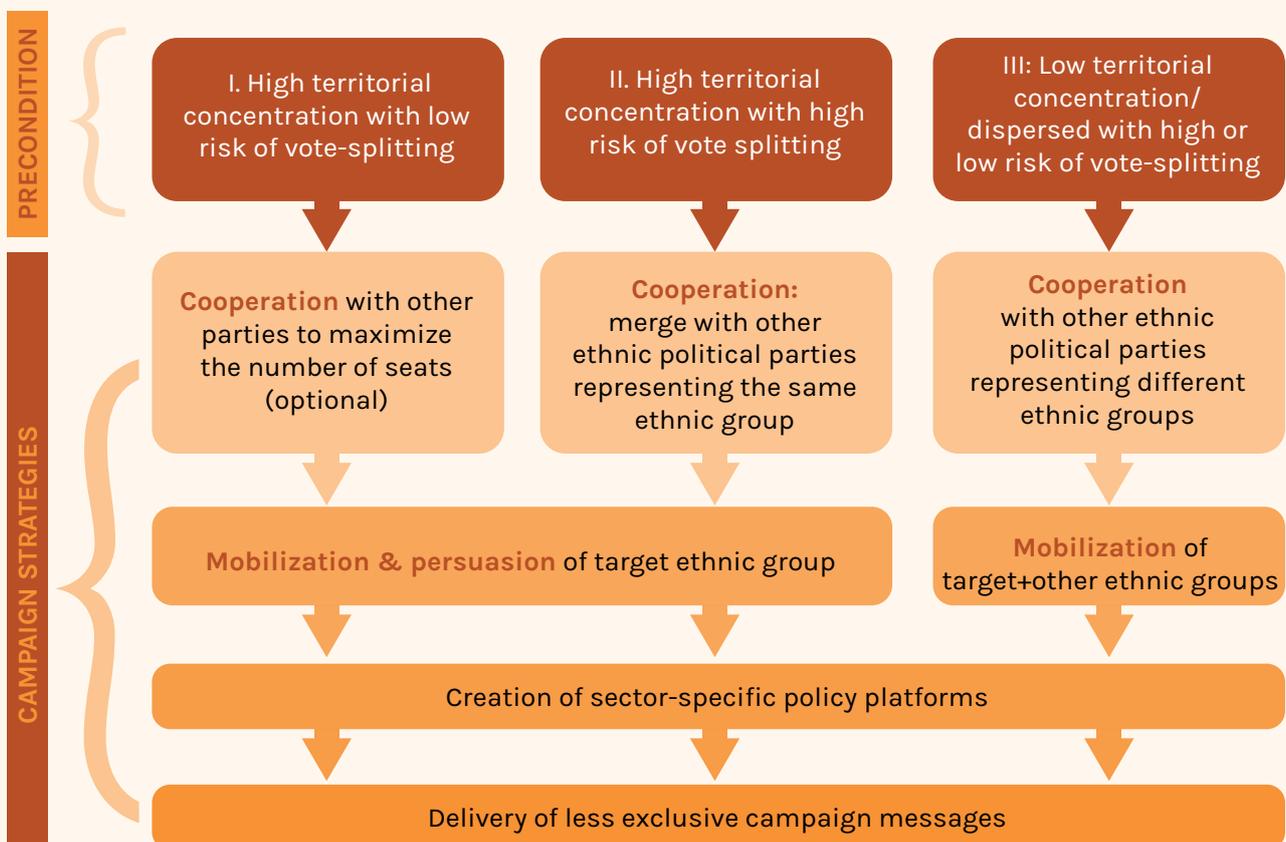
Advantages of policy-based campaigns

- Improve the connection between the political party and the constituents
- Prevent ethnic votes from flowing into large national parties
- Help manage the risks of merger ethnic parties disintegrating quickly after the merge
- Improve the quality of representation

Advantages of less exclusive campaigns

- Improve the connection between the political party and the constituents
- Help ethnic political parties to reach a larger voter base
- Enable ethnic political parties to persuade 'out-groups' effectively
- Lead to successful cooperation with other ethnic political parties

Figure 5:
Recommended campaign strategies for ethnic political parties in Myanmar



6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to evaluate the campaign strategies adopted by ethnic political parties in Myanmar and how these strategies affected the parties' electoral success (or the lack thereof) in the 2015 general elections. The aim of the paper was to provide ethnic political parties with a guide to modify their campaign strategies in the upcoming elections so that they would be able to appeal to voters effectively and maximize their representation in the country's legislature.

To reach this goal, the paper has looked at the pattern of territorial concentration of ethnic groups and how voters responded to the campaign efforts of ethnic political parties. This was to suggest different ways to refine the approaches that the ethnic political parties took to appeal to the voters in the previous elections in order to maximize ethnic representation at every level of the country's legislature in the upcoming elections.

The existing literature suggests that the emergence of ethnic political parties around the world often reflects the ethnic diversity of the constituents and that there is no right way to campaign as ethnic political parties. However, drawing from the experiences of India and Kenya, where ethnic diversity is high and ethnic political parties are common, it is evident that exclusive campaign messages are gradually losing their appeal.

Many political parties still use ethnicity as a campaign strategy for effective targeting of the supporter population but ethnicity alone has become insufficient for these parties to win. The literature also suggests that the campaign strategies of ethnic political parties need to evolve because: 1) ethnic groups in diverse societies are usually small and dispersed, and 2) the constituents tend to respond to the policies that directly affect their daily lives over their own ethnic identity upon voting. Moreover, the experiences from multiethnic societies reveal that cooperating with other ethnic political parties is strategically more beneficial than standing alone in elections.

Looking into the electoral history of Myanmar, the success rates of ethnic political parties have always been low, with large national parties dominating the parliament, and the 2015 general election delivered similar results. Such underrepresentation of ethnic political parties at every level of the legislature can largely be explained by the systemic oppression of ethnic minorities, and the institutional limitations that the country's constitution and the electoral system put upon ethnic groups.

However, examining the campaign strategies that ethnic political parties adopted in 2015, it becomes evident that it is also important to address the fact that ethnic political parties missed the mark in mobilizing and persuading their target ethnic groups. When approaching the voters, ethnic political parties underestimated the dispersal of their target ethnic population as well as the presence of other groups in ethnic areas. This led them to focus on mobilizing their target ethnic group with an exclusive approach that put ethnicity front and center of their campaign. Such campaign strategy worked for a few ethnic political parties whose

target ethnic groups were territorially concentrated but not for those with dispersed supporter populations or those with a high risk of vote-splitting between ethnic political parties claiming to represent the same ethnic group(s).

Based on the territorial concentration of target ethnic groups and the important role that it plays in determining the success of ethnic political parties under the current FPTP electoral system, this paper put forward a model, pulling out the patterns of situations that different ethnic political parties are in. The scenarios regarding the territorial concentration of the target ethnic group were narrowed down to three: 1) high territorial concentration with low risk of vote-splitting; 2) high territorial concentration with a high risk of vote-splitting; and 3) low territorial concentration/ dispersed with high or low risk of vote-splitting.

Strategies differ as scenarios differ but what is shared among all the ethnic political parties across the spectrum is that the more constituencies they want to represent in the parliament, the more it becomes important for their campaigns to be inclusive and policy-based. Having a cooperative relationship with other ethnic political parties is also crucial not only to maximize ethnic representation in the parliament but also to improve the quality of representation at every level of the legislature.

There are, indeed, some constraints of the paper that should be noted. Firstly, the scope of the campaign strategies that this paper reflects on is limited to the 2015 general election due to the limited democratic electoral experiences of ethnic political parties in Myanmar. Moreover, the model presented in this paper relies on the generalized patterns of the territorial concentration of different ethnic groups because the data on the ethnic composition of constituencies is not available.

The model does not take into account other complex factors such as socioeconomic status or the level of education of ethnic constituents in Myanmar that might affect their voting behavior. Media coverage and recorded materials on the campaign efforts of ethnic political parties that currently do not have any seats in the parliament were also limited, making it difficult to assess their 2015 campaigns for this paper.

Despite these limitations, this paper, to our knowledge, is the first of its kind to shed the light on the need for ethnic political parties to evolve and upgrade their campaign strategies, connecting with international examples and based on the relation between ethnic political parties and the territorial concentration of their target ethnic groups. The importance of knowing the ethnic political parties' constituents thoroughly is repeatedly emphasized for better quality representation and effective campaigning. Further study and data collection on ethnic voters' voting behavior, and the ethnic composition of constituencies throughout the country is going to be helpful for political parties to target their voters and come up with campaigns that are catered to the needs of the constituents.

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