

Why Myanmar's Sham Election Is Military Rule In Civilian Costume – OpEd – Eurasia Review

www.eurasiareview.com/01042026-ballots-under-bombers-why-myanmars-sham-election-is-military-rule-in-civilian-costume-oped/

April 1, 2026

A Fact-Check and Rebuttal of “Myanmar’s Second Shot At Limited Democracy”

This article responds to “Myanmar’s Second Shot At Limited Democracy” by Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia, published by Gateway House on March 26, 2026, and republished by Eurasia Review on April 1, 2026. That piece presents the junta-managed 2025–26 electoral process as a renewed opportunity for Myanmar to move toward civilian government. That characterization is deeply misleading. What took place was not a “second shot at democracy,” but an attempt by the perpetrators of a coup and ongoing atrocities to repackage military rule as electoral rule.

Military rule wrapped in ballots after a sham election is not “Myanmar’s Second Shot At Limited Democracy.” It is a tactical move by the junta to secure a veneer of legitimacy while continuing a brutal campaign against its own population. Any framing that treats this process as a new democratic opportunity ignores both the reality on the ground and the clear position of the Myanmar people, as well as much of the international community.

Democracy is not defined by the mere act of holding elections. It requires genuine competition, basic freedoms, and credible inclusion of the people’s will. None of these conditions were present in Myanmar’s recent voting exercise.

The Author’s Intent and the Danger of the “Pragmatic” Frame

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia is a Distinguished Fellow at Gateway House, the Indian Council on Global Relations, and India’s former Ambassador to Myanmar. His 37-year career in the Indian Foreign Service included postings across Asia and Africa, and he authored *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours* (Routledge, 2016). His perspective is not that of a neutral academic; it is that of an Indian foreign policy establishment figure whose analytical frame is shaped by New Delhi’s strategic calculus — specifically, its competition with China for influence in Myanmar and its border security concerns in the Northeast.

The article’s true audience is Indian policymakers. Its central argument is not really about whether Myanmar’s elections were democratic — Bhatia himself acknowledges the “scepticism and despair” surrounding them and concedes that analysts view this as a transition from “a military-clad dictatorship to a civilian-clothed

one.” Rather, his argument is that India should engage early with the new junta-installed government, recalibrate its “two-track” diplomacy, and treat this sham process as a workable political reality.

This is precisely what makes the article dangerous to the revolution. By framing the elections as Myanmar’s “second shot at limited democracy” — drawing an explicit parallel to the 2010–2011 transition that preceded a genuine, if imperfect, opening — Bhatia provides intellectual cover for governments looking for an excuse to normalize relations with the junta. The article’s harm lies not in overt support for military rule, but in its quiet acceptance of a military-designed political order as a fact to be managed rather than an injustice to be opposed.

Who Rejected the Elections — And Why That Matters

A wide range of democratic governments and international bodies publicly condemned or rejected the junta’s elections, stressing that they could not be free, fair, or credible under current conditions. As SWP Berlin — the German Institute for International and Security Affairs — concluded in its March 13, 2026 analysis: “neither ASEAN, the EU, the UK, Australia nor the US supported the recent elections in Myanmar, which they branded as not credible.”

The United Nations spoke with unmistakable clarity. UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated: “I don’t think anybody believes that those elections will be free and fair,” calling instead for “a credible path back to civilian rule” (Security Council Report, December 4, 2025). UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk warned that polls would be held in an environment “rife with threats and violence” (Security Council Report, December 4, 2025). On January 30, 2026, after all three phases had concluded, Türk declared: “The military is seeking to entrench its rule-by-violence after forcing people to the ballot box. This couldn’t be further from civilian rule” (OHCHR, January 30, 2026). UN Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews described the first phase as a “junta-orchestrated sham,” stating: “You cannot have a free, fair or credible election when thousands of political prisoners are behind bars, credible opposition parties have been dissolved, journalists are muzzled, and fundamental freedoms are crushed” (OHCHR, January 8, 2026). On January 23, 2026, after the second phase, the Special Rapporteur was unequivocal: “Illegitimate elections yield illegitimate results” (OHCHR, January 23, 2026). The Special Rapporteur’s final report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/61/58, March 4, 2026) went further still, characterizing the entire exercise as “little more than electoral theater intended to hide military oppression behind the trappings of a civilian government” (OHCHR Special Rapporteur Report A/HRC/61/58, March 4, 2026). Following the elections, the Special Rapporteur urged the international community to deny the junta money, weapons, and legitimacy — and noted that ASEAN refused to send observers and explicitly refrained from endorsing the results (OHCHR Special Rapporteur Statement, January 30, 2026).

The European Union refused to send observers. At the UN Human Rights Council's 60th session on September 8, 2025, the EU questioned the junta's election plans (EEAS, September 8, 2025). EU Special Representative for Human Rights Kaja Ollongren stated on October 16, 2025, that the EU had no plans to send observers, calling them "regime-sponsored" elections with "only one possible outcome" (Reuters, October 16, 2025). After the elections concluded, the EU formally stated at the ILO Governing Body's 356th session that "these elections lacked a credible, transparent and inclusive process, in line with international standards, and do not contribute to a return to democratic governance" (EEAS, March 31, 2026). The EU does not recognize the military regime but remains one of the largest providers of humanitarian assistance to the Myanmar population.

The United Kingdom was equally direct. At the UN Third Committee on November 19, 2025, the UK stated: "The UK is clear that any meaningful election requires an end to violence and dialogue among all parties concerned... There are no indications that the planned elections will deliver on those aspirations or be perceived as free or fair" (GOV.UK, November 19, 2025). On December 22, 2025, UK Chargé d'Affaires Ambassador James Kariuki warned that "any meaningful election requires an end to violence and dialogue amongst all parties concerned. And there are no indications that the planned elections will be perceived as free or fair. Elections under current circumstances risk provoking further violence" (GOV.UK, December 22, 2025).

Australia added its voice clearly. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade stated on December 10, 2025: "The current situation in Myanmar falls short of what is needed for free, fair and inclusive elections... We are seriously concerned that elections held without these conditions will lead to greater instability" (DFAT, December 10, 2025).

New Zealand's Parliament unanimously adopted a resolution on November 5, 2025, rejecting Myanmar's elections. The resolution was moved by Foreign Minister Winston Peters (DVB English, November 7, 2025).

ASEAN leaders at their October 2025 summit rejected the junta's plan, with the 47th ASEAN Summit Chairman's Statement asserting: "We emphasise that the cessation of violence and inclusive political dialogue must precede elections" and underscoring "the importance of free, fair, peaceful, transparent, inclusive, and credible general elections" — conditions that were manifestly absent (BERNAMA / 47th ASEAN Summit Chairman's Statement, October 26, 2025). ASEAN has continued to bar Myanmar's junta leader from its high-level summits since 2022.

Japan's then-foreign minister Takeshi Iwaya stated that "if general elections are held without seeing any moves toward political progress... it could only provoke further strong backlash... and make a peaceful resolution more difficult" (Human Rights Now, December 2025).

Respected electoral monitoring bodies took equally strong stances. International IDEA and ANFREL, together with Club de Madrid, issued a joint statement on February 6, 2025, to “unequivocally reject plans by Myanmar’s illegal military junta... to hold a so-called ‘election’” (International IDEA / ANFREL Joint Statement, February 6, 2025). In August 2025, International IDEA declared that “the elections will not be a genuine democratic exercise but are a calculated attempt to undermine Myanmar’s legitimate interim government” (International IDEA, August 12, 2025). Following the elections’ completion, International IDEA’s February 4, 2026 statement confirmed: “These polls, conducted amid armed conflict, mass displacement and severe repression, do not meet the minimum conditions for free, fair or inclusive elections... These elections were designed to manufacture a veneer of civilian legitimacy for continued military rule.” Critically, the statement noted that “International IDEA concurs with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, the European Union and ASEAN, all of which refuse to endorse the junta-run elections” (International IDEA, February 4, 2026).

The International Labour Organization adopted a historic Resolution under Article 33 — the first such resolution in its history — explicitly calling on all governments and international organizations to “review the relations they may have with Myanmar military authorities” to ensure they do not “enable, facilitate or prolong” gross violations (ILO Governing Body Article 33 Resolution; reaffirmed by the EU at EEAS, March 31, 2026).

315 civil society organizations from across the ASEAN region and international community signed an urgent joint statement demanding governments “unequivocally reject the Myanmar junta’s sham election” and refuse to recognize its outcome (Burma Campaign UK, September 2025).

Ambassador Bhatia’s article mentions none of this. Not one of these rejections appears in his analysis. The omission is not incidental — it is structural. By erasing the international consensus that the elections are illegitimate, the article creates the false impression that engagement is the mainstream position.

Who Observed — And Who Truly “Witnessed” the Process

Credible, independent international election observation was essentially absent. Established organizations with professional standards for election observation — the EU, International IDEA, ANFREL — did not deploy missions because the basic preconditions for a genuine election were not present.

Instead, the junta relied on hand-picked delegations from sympathetic or authoritarian-leaning countries. According to Myanmar’s state newspaper *Global New Light of Myanmar* and the junta’s official Myanmar Information Television, election observation teams arrived from: **Russia** (led by Deputy Chairman of the State Duma

Kara-ool Sholban), **China** (led by Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Deng Xijun), **Belarus, Kazakhstan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and Japanese organizations** (Myanmar ITV, December 28, 2025; The Wire, December 28, 2025).

The case of the Indian “observers” is particularly revealing. Myanmar state media listed retired Indian Army Commander Lt. Gen. Arun Kumar Sahni and strategic affairs commentator Atul Aneja as leading an Indian delegation, placing them alongside Russia’s and China’s high-level officials. When pressed, India’s Ministry of External Affairs stated that New Delhi had not sent an official delegation, and that the individuals were participating “in their private capacity.” Former Indian ambassador to Myanmar Gautam Mukhopadhyaya noted that this episode “betrays a lack of conviction and a desire to please both sides,” and that “the choice of an ex-general as invitee signals keenness to please the junta” (The Wire, December 28, 2025).

These are not observers in any professional sense; they are stage-managed witnesses, invited under controlled conditions, shown Potemkin polling stations, and encouraged to make positive public statements. By contrast, the people who truly “observed” the election were Myanmar citizens who saw polling stations surrounded by armed personnel, communities under threat, and friends and relatives in prison or displacement camps.

Ambassador Bhatia’s article claims the elections were held in “80% of the country’s townships in a peaceful environment.” This claim requires scrutiny.

How Much of the Country Actually Voted?

Even using the junta’s own figures, the election was conducted under conditions of radically limited territorial control and participation.

The election was conducted in three phases: Phase 1 on December 28, 2025 (102 townships); Phase 2 on January 11, 2026 (100 townships); and Phase 3 on January 25, 2026 (61 townships) — totaling approximately 263 townships out of Myanmar’s 330 (AP News, February 4, 2026; Vietnam Plus / Xinhua, January 29, 2026). The junta itself had conceded in September 2025 that voting would not occur in 56 “not conducive” townships, and by October 2025 still did not have control over at least 80 townships (Human Rights Now, December 2025).

The junta’s spokesperson Zaw Min Tun claimed a cumulative turnout of approximately 54–55% of the 24.22 million registered voters in participating townships, with about 13.14 million votes cast across all three phases (Reuters, December 31, 2025; Rohingya Khobor analysis, February 2026). Zaw Min Tun declared the 52% Phase 1 turnout a “source of pride,” noting that “in developed nations, there are situations where voter turnout does not exceed 50%.”

But these numbers are deeply misleading. The 54–55% figure refers only to registered voters in townships where the military managed to organize polling — not to all eligible voters nationwide. In the 2020 general election, Myanmar's Union Election Commission registered approximately 38.27 million voters across 315 townships, with a turnout of 71.89%. Using a conservative baseline of 30–32 million total eligible voters in 2025–26 (accounting for displacement and population changes since 2020), the actual participation rate falls to roughly **41–44% of all eligible voters nationwide** — meaning well over half of Myanmar's potential electorate either could not vote or chose not to participate (Rohingya Khobor, February 11, 2026).

Moreover, nearly 1.8 million people expressed rejection via the online “No To Sham Elections” campaign (Visual Rebellion, December 28, 2025). Across wide swathes of Sagaing, Magway, Chin, Karenni, Karen, Kachin, and other states, armed conflict, displacement, and resistance administrations made normal voting impossible. Even in townships designated as “stable” for Phase 1, the Centre for Information Resilience documented 94 conflict-related incidents — including airstrikes, fires, landmine events, and casualties — in 19 of the 102 townships (Centre for Information Resilience, January 9, 2026).

The outcome was preordained. The USDP — the military's proxy party — secured 339 out of 586 total seats. Combined with the military's automatic constitutional allocation of 166 seats (25% of parliament), the junta and its proxy control approximately **505 seats, or 86% of parliament** (AP News, February 4, 2026). The National League for Democracy — which won landslide victories in both 2015 and 2020 — was banned. Its leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, remain imprisoned. Hundreds were arrested under a draconian “Election Protection Act” that criminalizes criticism of the elections and carries the death penalty for dissent.

This is not an election. It is a coronation in democratic clothing.

Atrocities Continue — Even As Ballots Are Cast

The most damning fact is that the junta's atrocities did not pause for the election; they continued alongside it.

The United Nations verified that **at least 170 civilians were killed in more than 400 military airstrikes** conducted during the two-month voting period between December 2025 and January 2026, with the true figure “likely to be higher” (OHCHR, January 30, 2026). One of the deadliest incidents occurred on January 22 in Kachin State's Bhamo township, where an airstrike killed up to 50 civilians.

In December 2025, 30 people were killed and 70 wounded in the bombing of a public hospital in Rakhine State — the deadliest attack on a health facility since the coup (Visual Rebellion, December 2025).

The OHCHR also documented that **404 people — 324 men and 80 women — were arrested under the “Election Protection Act,”** with one person sentenced to 49 years in prison for posting anti-election material. Reports of voter coercion were widespread, including threats of forced conscription, restricted access to food, and administrative penalties (OHCHR, January 30, 2026).

In the broader context, the junta's escalation preceding the elections was massive: airstrikes on civilians and civilian infrastructure in January–May 2025 numbered 1,134 — compared to 640 in the same period in 2024 and 197 in 2023 — amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity (Human Rights Now, December 2025). Since the 2021 coup, over 7,300 civilians have been killed by the military, more than 29,000 arbitrarily detained, and over 3.5 million displaced (Burma Campaign UK, October 2025; OHCHR, January 2025).

Holding an election amidst ongoing atrocities is not a sign of democratic intent. It is an attempt to launder violence through ritual.

Ambassador Bhatia's article acknowledges that “armed clashes between the military and the resistance have not ceased” but then pivots immediately to asserting that “the military situation has turned in favour of the government.” This framing treats atrocities as background noise in a strategic assessment, rather than as disqualifying evidence against the legitimacy of the entire process.

Who Is Backing the Process — And Why

The junta's electoral project draws its main backing from states prioritizing strategic or economic interests over democratic principles:

China is the primary backer. Beijing pressed the regime to proceed with the polls, welcomed the outcome, and has expanded its political, military, and financial backing since mid-2024, expecting concessions on long-planned Chinese infrastructure and investment projects in return (Crisis Group, March 30, 2026).

Russia has deepened economic and political ties, supplying military hardware including fighter jets, drones, and surveillance technology, maintaining Myanmar as a foothold in Southeast Asia (YouTube / The World, March 2025).

India — Ambassador Bhatia's own country — occupies an ambiguous position. While it maintains that elections should be “free, fair and inclusive,” it sent unofficial observers (while denying official status), and Bhatia's article itself advocates for early engagement with the new junta-installed government. As the Foundation for Defense of Democracies noted, India's endorsement “would give the junta a level of legitimacy autocratic partners cannot” (FDD, December 19, 2025).

Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are pushing to ease Myanmar's diplomatic isolation within ASEAN, while **Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Nicaragua** provided token observer delegations to lend an illusion of international validation.

This backing is fundamentally transactional. It is not a reflection of legitimacy in the eyes of the Myanmar people.

The Real Democratic Mandate — And the Emergence of SCEF

There is already a democratic mandate in Myanmar: the outcome of the 2020 elections and the broad popular support for the National Unity Government and allied resistance forces. The junta's election does not erase that mandate; it is an effort to overwrite it.

In this context, the formation of the **Steering Council for the Emergence of a Federal Democratic Union (SCEF)** on March 30, 2026 — just days after Bhatia's article was published — is deeply significant. Announced by the NUG via its official channels, SCEF is built on three pillars: (1) the pillar representing States, Federal Units, and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations; (2) the pillar representing the people; and (3) the pillar representing women (NUG Myanmar announcement, March 30, 2026).

SCEF's stated objectives include:

- Completely dismantling all forms of dictatorship, including military dictatorship
- Ensuring all armed forces operate solely under the command of a civilian government elected through democratic processes
- Abrogating the 2008 Constitution in its entirety
- Drafting a new constitution that embodies federalism and democratic values
- Establishing a federal democratic union
- Instituting transitional justice for victims of injustice, including gender-based violence

SCEF represents a higher level of strategic coordination among key revolutionary and resistance actors — a commitment to more effective, unified implementation of political and military strategies aimed at dismantling military rule and building a new federal democratic order. Its emergence underscores that the real struggle in Myanmar is not between "limited democracy" and authoritarianism within a stable constitutional framework. It is between a population determined to end military domination once and for all, and an institution that has repeatedly destroyed constitutional order to preserve its own power.

As Intelligence Online reported on March 30, 2026: “The SCEF does not aim to replace the civilian administrations established by the NUG. Resistance forces govern over a third of Myanmar’s territory.”

Why the “Second Shot at Limited Democracy” Frame Is Dangerous

Describing this election as “Myanmar’s second shot at limited democracy” is not a neutral analytic choice. It has concrete consequences:

It normalizes military supremacy in politics by treating a rebranded version of the 2008-style hybrid system as an acceptable endpoint. Bhatia draws an explicit parallel to 2010–2011, when a genuine if constrained opening occurred under Thein Sein. But the conditions are fundamentally different. In 2010, the NLD existed as a political force. Today it is banned, its leaders imprisoned, and over 30,000 political prisoners languish in jails. The USDP’s 86% parliamentary control, combined with the military’s constitutional lock, makes this not a hybrid democracy but a unitary military state with civilian window-dressing.

It undermines the revolution by signaling that the international community may again settle for cosmetic reforms and “disciplined democracy,” instead of supporting structural change. As the International Crisis Group bluntly assessed: “The change in administration will not alleviate the political crisis or the intensified armed conflict triggered by the 2021 coup” (Crisis Group, March 30, 2026).

It weakens accountability efforts by giving the impression that Myanmar is already “on a path back” to civilian rule, and that pushing too hard on justice might destabilize a supposed transition. Meanwhile, the International Court of Justice is set to hear the merits of the Rohingya genocide case, and Argentine courts have issued international arrest warrants for 25 Myanmar officials.

It marginalizes the voices of victims and resisters, whose lived experience tells them that elections conducted at gunpoint cannot possibly express their will.

For India, ASEAN members, and others in the region, this framing offers a convenient story: that a flawed but functional semi-civilian government is emerging, and that engagement and connectivity can safely resume. But this story is built on ignoring the visible reality of ongoing war, mass displacement, and organized resistance.

Military Rule with Ballots Is Still Military Rule

Myanmar does not need another carefully limited “shot” at democracy inside a framework designed by its own captors. It needs a genuinely new beginning: a federal, democratic order in which the armed forces are firmly under civilian control, ethnic peoples have meaningful autonomy, and political power flows from the consent of the governed — not from the barrel of a gun.

The junta's sham election is not a step toward that future. It is an obstacle to it.

Those who care about democracy and stability in Myanmar — and in the wider region — should refuse to confer on this process the language of “second chances.” Military rule with ballots after a sham election is still military rule. The only meaningful “shot” at democracy is the one the people of Myanmar are taking now, at great risk and sacrifice, to finally remove the military from its self-appointed role as the country's political master.