

With excitement and hope, millions vote in Myanmar polls

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Yangon, Myanmar: With tremendous excitement and hope, millions of citizens voted Sunday in Myanmar's historic general elections that will test whether the military's longstanding grip on power can be loosened, with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's party expected to secure an easy victory.

In a country that was under military rule for almost a half-century, many of the eligible 30 million voters were voting for the first time in what's been billed as the freest election ever. It was the first time even for Suu Kyi, the epitome of the democracy movement who defied the junta for decades.

Wearing her trademark thazin flowers in her hair, a smiling Suu Kyi arrived at the polling station near her lake-side residence where she was mobbed by hundreds of journalists. She quickly cast her vote and left without speaking to reporters.

People had lined up in Buddhist temples, schools and government buildings since early morning to vote. Election monitors called it "a remarkable day" full of excitement and energy.

"This is very, very significant ... it's the first time that most people in the country will have an opportunity to vote for the main opposition party," said Richard Horsey, an independent Myanmar analyst.

Although more than 90 parties are contesting, the main fight is between Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, and the ruling Union Solidarity Development Party, made up largely of former junta members. A host of other parties from ethnic minorities, who form 40 percent of the country's 52 million people, are also running.

"I am so excited to come to vote. I couldn't sleep the whole night, so I came here early," said Ohnmar, a 38 year-old woman who goes by one name. "I came to vote because I want change in my country. I think Aung San Suu Kyi will win if this is a real free and fair election."

Certainly though, the election will not bring full democracy to this nation, which spent nearly five decades under brutal military rule and the last five years under a quasi-civilian government. Myanmar's constitution guarantees 25 percent of seats in Parliament to the military, and was rewritten to keep Suu Kyi, the country's most popular politician, from the presidency.

This time, however, there is hope that the election will move Myanmar a step closer to democracy.

After taking power in 1962, the junta first allowed elections in 1990, which Suu Kyi's party won overwhelmingly. A shocked army refused to seat the winning lawmakers, with the excuse that a new constitution first had to be implemented — a task that ended up taking 18 years and intense international pressure. It finally held new elections in 2010, which the opposition boycotted, citing unfair election laws.

The USDP won by default and took office in 2011 under President Thein Sein, a former general who began political and economic reforms to end Myanmar's isolation and jumpstart its moribund economy. But the USDP's popularity, or lack of it, was really tested in the 2012 by-election when the National League for Democracy won 43 of the 44 seats it contested.

Suu Kyi couldn't vote in any of those elections, either because she was under house arrest or there was no election in

her residential area. But she did win a seat to the Parliament in the by-election.

Even if Suu Kyi's party secures the highest number of seats in the bicameral Parliament in Sunday's vote, it will start with a disadvantage because of the reserved seats for the military in the 664-seat Parliament.

This means in theory that the USDP, with the military's support, need not win an outright majority to control the legislature. To counter that scenario, the NLD would require a huge win.

That may not be farfetched, given Suu Kyi's popularity.

After the polls, the newly elected members and the military appointees will propose three candidates, and elect one as the president. The other two will become vice presidents. That vote won't be held before February.

Suu Kyi cannot run for president or vice president because of a constitutional amendment that bars anyone with a foreign spouse or child from holding the top jobs. Suu Kyi's sons and late husband are British.

The military is also guaranteed key ministerial posts — defense, interior and border security. It is not under the government's control and could continue attacks against ethnic groups. But critics are most concerned about the military's constitutional right to retake direct control of government, as well as its direct and indirect control over the country's economy.

Horsey, the Myanmar analyst, said that given the powers it has, the military will not be too perturbed about allowing a transfer of power to the NLD if it wins.

"But that's not to say the relationship between the new administration and the military will necessarily be a strong one. It's very difficult to imagine that anyone will be running the country without having the support of the military," he said.

There are concerns also about the vote's credibility, because for the first time about 500,000 eligible voters from the country's 1.3-million-strong Rohingya Muslim minority have been barred from casting ballots. The government considers them foreigners even though many have lived in Myanmar for generations. Neither the NLD nor the USDP is fielding a single Muslim candidate.

Abdul Melik, a 29-year-old Rohingya, spent election day watching other people vote. He stared out from a camp on the outskirts of western Rakhine state's capital, Sittwe, where the Rohingya are forced to live in squalid camps and can't leave without official approval.

"I can see the Buddhist Rakhine, the Kaman Muslim and Hindus voting at a polling station close to the barricades," he said in a telephone conversation. "We were hoping that somehow we'd be allowed to vote. But today I have lost hope of any change in my lifetime."

"This is the day that hope ends," he added.

With some 11,000 local and international monitors overseeing 40,000 polling stations, election observers said they are hopeful any attempts at systematic wrongdoing will be spotted.

- AP