



Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL Foundation)

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For Immediate Release

Another Positive Step Towards Myanmar's 2020 General Election

Yangon, 03 April – Today, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) commends the people of Myanmar for their holding of By-Elections on April 1, 2017. For a country still early in its democratic transition, the success of the by-elections is something the people of Myanmar can be rightly proud of. Observations from ANFREL observers across the country revealed polls that, generally speaking, represent continued progress in Myanmar's electoral development. ANFREL hopes that the lessons learned from these by-elections can be combined with those from 2015 to bring elections in 2020 that strengthen and build upon the improvements made in recent years.

ANFREL's Head of Mission, Mr. Damaso Magbual, agreed when he said that "While the post-election period should not be overlooked, ANFREL's observation so far reveals that Myanmar has taken another important step towards a more democratic future. We hope the UEC and all stakeholders will continue during the post-election period the vigilance, dedication, and professionalism they have shown up until now."

We also wish to extend congratulations to the Union Election Commission (UEC) and all related government offices for their management of the polls. While the UEC's post-election work remains, the efforts of Polling Station staff to create an environment conducive to free and fair elections is worth noting. Compared to 2015, ANFREL found both polling station staff and election administrators to be more confident and better able to follow the by-election's rules and guidelines. Given what is still relatively little experience managing elections, the UEC, its sub-commissions and down to the Polling Station level generally performed admirably to manage the process. We were also happy to see that some of the 2015 recommendations from Election Observers, both domestic and international, were implemented. ANFREL hopes that future reform incorporates even more of those recommendations.

ANFREL is very pleased to see that two townships, Mongshu and Kyethi, that were unable to hold elections for security reasons in 2015 successfully did so in these By-Elections. Regarding the moving of some polling stations in Mongshu, ANFREL wishes to commend the local sub-commission's extensive effort to help voters get to the relocated polls but regrets the late timing of the decision to move them and the fact that such measures were necessary in the first place. ANFREL is troubled by any impediment to political parties and their followers' freedom to campaign openly and freely and hopes appropriate measures are taken to prevent such instances in the future. Elections in these two townships nevertheless filled six empty seats and gave representation to the people living there. ANFREL is encouraged by the enfranchisement of the people of Mongshu and Kyethi and hopes that ceasefires enable voting in all the remaining areas unable to hold elections in 2015 or 2017 so that all of Myanmar's people can be represented by duly elected leaders.

While ANFREL understands that lower turnout is common in by-elections, especially those without control of a legislative body at stake, we were nevertheless disappointed by the low voter turnout in

Afghanistan – FEFA; *Bangladesh* – FEMA, ODHIKAR; *Cambodia* – COMFREL, NICFEC; *East Timor* – Women Caucus; *Indonesia* – KIPP, JPPR, Perludem; *India* – Lokniti; *Maldives* – Transparency Maldives; *Mongolia* – Women for Social Progress (WSP); *Nepal* – NEOC, NEMA; *Pakistan* – FAFEN; *Philippines* – IPER, PPCRV, NAMFREL; *Singapore* – Maruah; *South Korea* – PSPD; *Sri Lanka* – PAFFREL; *Taiwan* – CCW; *Thailand* – PollWatch

some areas. We hope that more voter education and outreach by Civil Society, the media and the UEC will remedy this lower turnout in the future and believe that the necessary resources to conduct such campaigns should be made available.

Additional voter education will have the benefit of not only increasing voter turnout but also lowering the high number of invalid ballots encountered in some areas during counting. While the UEC's easing of the standards for what is considered a valid vote was a welcome improvement, the high percentage of invalid ballots in some areas reveals a great need for more voter education.

ANFREL was happy to see that the UEC made efforts to improve the accuracy of the 2015 voter list by conducting door-to-door verification in addition to the usual public posting of the list for voters to check. The changes to how the list is displayed, by household instead of alphabetically, was also appreciated by ANFREL's interlocutors.

ANFREL was also delighted to see the enthusiastic participation of domestic election monitors as well as political parties in observing the vote. The continued involvement of both will lead to greater transparency and electoral accountability in the future.

While ANFREL observed some improvements in advance voting such as more knowledgeable staff and more consistent polling practices, we believe that broader reform is necessary to alleviate the lingering weaknesses of the advance voting process. UEC control of all aspects of the voting process, regardless of whether voting takes place overseas or on a military base, would be a helpful start to reforming the process. Indeed, this holds true for advance voting as well as Election Day. Empowering the UEC to be the sole body in charge of managing voting will over time produce more consistency, accountability, and transparency. While the UEC may still need to borrow staff from other ministries from time to time, such personnel should be under the authority of the UEC during the election period.

ANFREL was also pleased to see that 2017 included a higher percentage of female candidates than 2015 and hopes that this trend line continues. More female candidates, and eventually female MPs, will result in a parliament that more accurately reflects Myanmar's people and their aspirations.

The 2017 By-Elections offer us a rare opportunity to measure progress looking back to 2015 and assess lingering challenges with an eye towards the 2020 General Election. Fortunately, these elections revealed considerable progress in some areas that can and should be built upon and consolidated. ANFREL hopes that any persistent weaknesses exposed by the by-elections are addressed head on by Myanmar's electoral stakeholders. Together, they can continue the remarkable progress made over the last five years and push the country another step forward on its democratic path.

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ANFREL relied upon its fifteen international election observers across the country to observe in every By-Election Constituency and 194 Polling Stations on Election Day. As a signatory to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, ANFREL's methodology adheres to the principles therein and to the Bangkok Declaration on Free & Fair Elections, the Dili Indicators, and the Bali Commitment on Transparency.