



Monthly Brief on Countries under Restrictive Environment

Series #9: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Malaysia & Myanmar

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Introduction

This monthly brief intends to provide an update on democracy and election-related issues in selected countries and territories under a restrictive environment.

Bangladesh

The five-year tenure of the incumbent Election Commission (EC) led by Chief Election Commission KM Nurul Huda expires on 14 February 2022. Although there were demands from all quarters to enact a law to form the new EC, the High Court on 12 December refused to order the government to do so, saying the law minister had reportedly mentioned the government would formulate the law in line with the mandate of the constitution.

In order to form the next EC, Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid began a dialogue with the country's registered political parties from 20 December. Among 32 political parties invited to join the dialogue, at least seven rejected the invitation as they said discussion was meaningless¹.

In December, the EC announced that the seventh and the final phase of Union Parishad (UP) elections that involves 137 UPs would be held on 7 February 2022². The fifth phase of the elections (707 UPs) was held on 5 January and the sixth phase (219 UPs) will be held on 31 January.

Since the beginning of the UP elections in June 2021, the death toll from election violence has surpassed 100³. Deadly clashes often took place between supporters of different parties, causing casualties among supporters and election candidates.

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<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/elections/news/ec-formation-bangladesh-muslim-league-boycotts-dialogue-president-2935741>

² <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/elections/news/7th-phase-elections-feb-7-2928281>

³

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-union-council-poll-violence-01052022152313.html>

Cambodia

In December, the National Election Committee (NEC) announced that the number of registered voters is now 9,203,262, including 442,440 new voters. It will then display the voter lists in public in January 2022 for the voters to review them and file complaints or requests for corrections.

The opposition Cambodia National Heart Party (CNHP)'s efforts to participate in the upcoming elections has come to an end after the Supreme Court rejected the party's appeal against the Ministry of Interior's decision not to validate it over fraudulent thumbprints⁴.

The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has nominated its president and incumbent prime minister, Hun Sen as the prime minister candidate for the 2023 national assembly elections. Earlier, Hun Sen publicly endorsed his eldest son Hun Manet, in command of the Cambodian Army since 2018, as his successor.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong held its Legislative Council (LegCo) elections on 19 December 2021 with a lowest-ever voter turnout of 30.2%. These were the first LegCo elections since China made controversial overhauls to the city's electoral system.

According to South China Morning Post, representatives from the pro-establishment camp took 89 of the 90 seats in the first "patriots-only" elections. All 11 non-establishment candidates contesting in the directly elected seats, on the other hand, were defeated by a wide margin⁵.

Following the elections, G7, EU and Five Eyes members Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand issued joint statements to criticise the elections, while the US decided to sanction five Chinese officials for undermining the city's semi-autonomous status⁶.

⁴ <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50995301/supreme-court-ends-cnmps-bid-to-take-part-in-upcoming-polls/>

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3160469/hong-kong-elections-already-dominant-pro-establishment-camp>

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3160478/us-sanctions-five-chinese-officials-saying-hong-kong-elections>

Malaysia

Malaysia held the Sarawak state elections on 18 December 2021 to elect the state legislative assembly members. For the first time, the local ruling party Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) won a landslide victory of 76 out of the 82 seats in the legislature.

During the election period, Malaysian electoral watchdog Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) observed the government's machinery and resources, including state-owned print media and social media, were misused by the caretaker state government for campaign purposes⁷. Unfortunately, Malaysian election laws do not cover issues related to the caretaker government and therefore require reform to be in line with international standards.

Myanmar

Following the charges filed against ousted Union Election Commission (UEC) Chair Hla Thein and members Myint Naing and Than Htay over their alleged electoral fraud in the 2020 general elections, the junta-appointed UEC has been ordered to file more lawsuits against township level election subcommission chiefs and members in December⁸. However, it is still unclear what they will be charged with.

The military junta arrested more than a hundred election officials who oversaw the 2020 general elections after the coup on 1 February 2021. A majority of them were later released, but the UEC chair and about 20 officials remain in detention as of the end of December 2021, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners⁹.

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<https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2021/12/753911/sarawak-polls-bersih-urges-gps-stop-using-govts-machinery-resources>

⁸ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-to-charge-2020-election-local-officials.html>

⁹ <https://aappb.org/?p=19515>