

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 40

To accompany the **October 2009** issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: **No Good Options, Only Less Bad Ones**

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Discussion

This article is about the election planned to take place in Burma in 2010, and the difficult decisions faced by the political parties.

What do you think is needed for an election to be 'free and fair'?

Activity 2 Vocabulary Practice 1

The words in column A are key-words in this article. Match them to the correct definition in column B.

- | A | B |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. dilemma (<i>n</i>) | a. take part |
| 2. stakeholder (<i>n</i>) | b. unbelievable / unlikely / unconvincing |
| 3. strategic (<i>adj</i>) | c. legality |
| 4. implausible (<i>adj</i>) | d. difficult choice |
| 5. mandate (<i>n</i>) | e. believable |
| 6. boycott (<i>v</i>) | f. person affected by the outcome |
| 7. participate (<i>v</i>) | g. power to act on behalf of others |
| 8. legitimacy (<i>n</i>) | h. refuse to take part in |
| 9. credible (<i>adj</i>) | i. well-planned |

Activity 3 Vocabulary Practice 2

Without looking back at Activity 2, replace the underlined words and phrases with the correct word from column A above.

The political parties face a difficult choice in this election. They have to decide whether to take part, or refuse to take part in the election. If they do take part, that may make the election results more believable to the outside world. But if they refuse to take part, then they will have no chance of winning. This is why they need a well-planned approach. Everyone is a person affected by the outcome in this election. The results will give the winners the power to act on behalf of the citizens to confirm or change the Constitution. The 92% vote in favour of the Constitution in 2008 was an unconvincing result, which called into question the legality of the process.

Activity 4 Vocabulary Practice 3

Fill in the blanks in this passage. You will need six of the words from column A above.

The party-leader spoke to the party-members: “We need to have a _____ approach to this election. Should we _____ in the election or should we _____ it? This is the _____ we face. If we take part, it may make the election seem more _____ to the outside world, when actually we don’t believe in the _____ of the process.”

B. Activities during reading

Read the article in two stages, and do the comprehension exercises for each stage

Activity 5 Paragraphs 1 - 6: Comprehension

1. Why do you think that the writer believes 92% approval in Burma for the new Constitution is ‘implausible’?
2. In the writer’s view, what is the most serious weakness in the new constitution?
3. In paragraph 3, the writer gives three reasons why he thinks the election will not be free or fair. What are these reasons?
4. In paragraph 4, the writer gives two examples of important changes he thinks the election will bring. What are they?
5. In paragraph 5, the writer identifies three groups who need to decide what to do about the election. Which are they?
6. In paragraph 6, the writer identifies three possible responses to the election. What are they?

Activity 6 Paragraphs 7 - 12: Comprehension:

The paragraphs about the strategic choices gives pros and cons (arguments for and against). Use this table to list in note form as many as you can find for each strategy. One example is done for you.

Pro – arguments for an action	Con – arguments against an action
Boycott: ~ <i>stakeholders register disapproval</i>	Boycott ~ <i>easier for regime to get result it wants</i>
Participation:	
‘Mixed strategy’:	

Activity 7 Identify the Writer's Opinion

Answer this question in your own words:

Which of these three strategies does the writer support? How do you know?

C. Activities after reading

Activity 8 Discussion or debate

Divide into three groups. One group supports participation; one group supports a boycott; and one group supports the mixed strategy.

In your group, think of all the reasons to support the position you have been asked to support.

Then each group in turn presents their arguments to the whole class

Activity 9 Class vote: To participate or boycott?

Arrange a class vote on whether opposition parties should participate in or boycott the election. The voting method needs to make sure that:

- It is clear what people are voting about
- No-one knows how anyone else has voted
- No-one can vote more than once
- The system for counting the votes can't be mis-used or manipulated
- The results that are announced are the true results

In small groups discuss how to do this.

Share each group's ideas in the whole class

Agree how you are going to carry out the vote.

Conduct the vote, count, and announce the results.

Activity 10 Free Writing: What is needed to make an election fair and free?

In your own words, write a short article (about 100 words) about what is needed to conduct a 'fair and free' election. To help you, make use of

- the discussion at Activity 9
- Information from the article
- Things you already know
- Things you thought about as you worked on the activities

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No Good Options, Only Less Bad Ones

By RICHARD HORSEY

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There are no simple solutions to the dilemmas posed by next year's election

1

The 2010 election, and the new Constitution that it will bring into force, has been widely condemned within Burma and internationally, with good reason. But it is essential at this juncture that all stakeholders take a strategic approach to make the best of a difficult situation.

2

The new Constitution was adopted last year with an implausible approval rate of 92 percent in a flawed referendum. This new charter has serious shortcomings, the most obvious of which is that it guarantees a leading political role for the military.

3



The election itself is unlikely to be free or fair—leading opposition figures remain in prison or under house arrest, and politically motivated arrests have increased markedly over the past year. The regime has also been moving against its armed opponents, with military operations in Karen State and the takeover of the Kokang region.

4

But however flawed, the election is certain to bring about significant changes. The current leadership will retire, making way for a new generation of military leaders. This may well bring a new set of problems, but also possibilities for progress. The same is true of the new political institutions that the Constitution establishes. It would be a mistake to ignore these new dynamics and opportunities to push for change.

5

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Against this backdrop, the Burmese people, opposition parties and ethnic organizations now face some extremely difficult but critically important strategic choices. At this stage, the regime is not likely to revise the Constitution, so it is up to everyone else to decide how to respond to this situation.

6

There are no good options, but some are less bad than others. Essentially, stakeholders will have to choose between one of three strategies: boycott, participation, or a “mixed strategy.”

7

A boycott strategy would be understandable, but could be highly counterproductive. It does enable stakeholders to register their disapproval and try to weaken the credibility of the result, but it also makes it much easier for the regime to obtain the result it wants without resorting to manipulating the campaigning process or fixing the count. If the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other major opposition parties boycott the election, they relieve the regime of one of the main reasons for trying to rig the vote—a repeat of the 1990 NLD landslide. Paradoxically, this attempt to weaken the legitimacy of the election by boycotting it may actually make it easier for the regime to present the result as genuine.

8

A strategy of participation would force the regime to resort to more blatant manipulation. However, many Burmese fear that broad participation could be used by the regime to claim that there is broad endorsement of the process itself. This risk is real, but overstated. The credibility of the polls will be judged primarily on the basis of how they are conducted, rather than who participates. Parties that participate can continue to be critical of the process, and their objections will be no less powerful if they take part, and possibly more so. If it can be shown that the election result is fraudulent, opposition parties will be in a much stronger political position than if they choose not to participate at all.

9

The NLD and other parties that were handed a powerful mandate in 1990 do face a dilemma here, though. Participating in the 2010 election would mean that the NLD would have to give up on its longstanding demand that its previous victory be recognized—something that will be difficult for the party to do.

10

The third option, a mixed strategy, offers a way to avoid this dilemma. Opposition parties and ethnic armed groups can decline to participate in the election, but they can endorse (or even help establish) political parties that will represent the interests and aspirations of their constituencies. This is in fact the strategy already adopted by some cease-fire groups, and some influential voices in the NLD are also advocating such a strategy.

11

The period between now and the election will be an extremely difficult one for the political opposition and ethnic groups. They are likely to face continued harassment and, in the case of armed ethnic groups, potential military action.

12

And the outcome of the election is unlikely to offer much hope of radical reform. But this only makes it more important to make the right strategic choices. Now is the time to look ahead, to what might be achieved in the coming generation, rather than looking back at what was not achieved in the previous one. History will give a verdict on the choices that are now made by all sides.