

The 2020 Election in Myanmar: The NLD Supporters and Facebook

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Abstract

This article explored how the National League for Democracy (NLD) supporters used Facebook to conduct their campaigns in the 2020 election. I argue that the NLD supporters used Facebook to excite people's sentiment to support the NLD and to resent the Union the Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), backed by the Myanmar military Tatmadaw. I employ securitization to examine the issue. The theory of securitization shapes the NLD supporters as a securitizing actor and people in Myanmar as audience. Through Facebook, the NLD supporters securitized political development in Myanmar, which was handled by the military junta for over 30 years, triggering the USDP supporters' pushback. I examined the data on Facebook throughout the election campaign period from September to November 2020. I used Facebook's own CrowdTangle system to collect the digital data and conducted online interviews to collect first-hand data. This research found that the NLD supporters' digital modus operandi created an echo chamber, making constructive conversations between different political supporters strenuous and political polarization intensified.

Keywords: NLD, Facebook, Securitization

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Introduction

Before the political transition in 2011, Myanmar's government tightly controlled technology and telecommunications, making devices like televisions, fax machines, and computers scarce (Krebs, 2001). SIM cards cost up to \$300, resulting in one of the world's lowest mobile penetration rates, just above North Korea. However, post-2011, the government eased these restrictions to re-engage with the global market (Schulman, 2019). This shift allowed more people to access the internet, and international telecom companies like Telenor and Ooredoo entered the market, rapidly advancing Myanmar's ICT sector (Tønnesson et al., 2021). Consequently, by 2018, Myanmar had one of the fastest-growing mobile phone markets globally.

Despite these advancements, repression continues, such as the 2019 internet shutdowns in Rakhine and Chin states, the longest in the world, which hampered communication and information dissemination during political violence (Human Rights Watch). The liberalization of the telecommunications sector also created a market where social media, particularly Facebook, became dominant. For many in Myanmar, Facebook essentially is the internet (Schulman, 2019). By 2017, 35% of the population primarily relied on Facebook for news (IRI, 2017).

Myanmar's digital transformation has had mixed outcomes. On the positive side, the public gained more access to information and communication tools. However, digital literacy remains low, and Facebook's dominance poses challenges, including spreading misinformation and hate speech (Smith & Smith, 2022). Despite these issues, Facebook has become integral to Myanmar's information ecosystem and political landscape, as seen when major news, like President Htin Kyaw's resignation, was first announced on Facebook (Rio, 2021).

The digitization of political bureaucracy has notably impacted Myanmar's democracy and elections. McCarthy (2018) explores how new technologies have altered social networks and communication practices, fostering activism and reshaping civil-military relations. The 2015 general election, Myanmar's first multiparty democratic election, saw extensive use of Facebook for voter education and campaigning, driven by the availability of cheap SIM cards and smartphones (Than, 2016). By 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had transformed election campaigns, forcing candidates and their supporters to rely heavily on online platforms like Facebook to reach voters. This period highlighted Facebook's crucial role in political communication, between candidates and supporters using the platform to share information, engage in discussions, and promote political views (García-Perdomo et al., 2017; Trilling et al., 2017).

The 2020 election, contested primarily between the NLD and the USDP, intensified political polarization in Myanmar. The NLD supporter's digital campaigns pushed polarization, exacerbating existing tensions in a country already struggling with military rule, civil conflict, and poor governance (Maizland, 2022; Rogers, 2019). This thesis explores how NLD supporters utilized Facebook during the 2020 election, analyzing its impact on political polarization and the broader political landscape in Myanmar.

Research Questions

1. How did the NLD party's supporters conduct political campaigns on Facebook in the 2020 election?

2. How did the NLD supporters influence political polarization in the 2020 election?

Research Objective

1. To understand how NLD party supporters conducted political campaigns on Facebook during the 2020 election.
2. To understand the role of NLD supporters in political polarization in Myanmar.

Literature Review

The internet, especially social media, has revolutionized how we access information and communicate. However, it can also be weaponized, as seen in studies by Conway (2017) and Rio (2021), who explored how extremist groups and political elites used social media for propaganda and inciting violence. Bossetta (2018) emphasized that political communication on social media is shaped by digital architectures that influence user behavior. Politicians increasingly use social media to reach voters during elections, often resulting in higher advertising costs and a fragmented media landscape. However, these studies often need to pay more attention to the role of the audience in digital propaganda.

Facebook is a particularly influential platform in Myanmar, and it is used extensively for communication and information during elections. Beam et al. (2018) found that Facebook news consumption can lead to depolarization by exposing users to diverse perspectives, though its role in the US elections raised concerns about filter bubbles and echo chambers.

Than (2016) highlighted Facebook's role in Myanmar's 2015 election, but more research is needed on its impact on political polarization, particularly during the 2020 election. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how NLD supporters used Facebook to securitize the election and democracy, potentially fueling political polarization.

Theories

In this paper, I employ Securitization Theory and Political Polarization to delve deeper into the dynamics of the 2020 election and political polarization in Myanmar. Securitization Theory, originating from the Copenhagen School, explains how issues are framed as existential threats by securitizing actors to prompt extraordinary measures, involving an interaction between actors and their audience (Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq, 2011: 321). Successful securitization necessitates convincing the audience of the threat's severity and the urgency of action (Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq, 2011: 321). Three key concepts in Securitization Theory are particularly relevant: counter-securitization, which refers to resistance against securitizing moves; (Buzan et al., 1998: 206; Vuori, 2008: 93, 2011: 190–193, 200–204; Charrett, 2009: 25–37; Watson, 2009: 90–96; Hansen, 2011a: 61, 2011b: 364) de-securitization, which involves shifting issues out of emergency mode into normal political processes; (Hansen, 2012: 531). and the role of the audience, whose acceptance or rejection of securitization efforts is crucial. (Côté, 2016) In the context of Myanmar's 2020 election, NLD supporters acted as both securitizing actors and audience members, using Facebook to highlight perceived threats to democracy and rally support, illustrating the interplay between securitization and political polarization in a contested electoral environment.

Political Polarization occurs when ideological distances between parties and voters increase, leading to a lack of trust and increased political gridlock (Sartori, 1976). The internet and social

media significantly contribute to this phenomenon by creating echo chambers and filter bubbles. Key factors driving this include selective exposure, algorithmic filtering, and echo chambers (Andrejevic, 2013). Selective exposure refers to the internet providing vast, tailored information, leading to fragmented media consumption. As seen on social media platforms like Facebook, algorithmic filtering personalizes content, reinforcing existing opinions and creating echo chambers (Pariser, 2011). These echo chambers are environments where individuals only encounter information that reinforces their views, hindering exposure to opposing perspectives. During the 2020 election in Myanmar, NLD supporters used Facebook to spread their narratives, and this, combined with Facebook's algorithms, likely contributed to political polarization by isolating users from diverse viewpoints.

My Conceptual Framework is NLD supporters acted as both securitizing actors and the audience. They used Facebook to highlight threats to democracy, aiming to mobilize support. This interaction occurred in a virtual space due to the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread Facebook use. However, this process likely increased political polarization, as Facebook's algorithms and filter bubbles reinforced users' existing views and limited exposure to opposing perspectives.

Research Method

This study explores how NLD supporters' use of Facebook for campaigning contributed to political polarization in Myanmar during the 2020 election.

This research employs qualitative methods to collect data, focusing on digital ethnography and in-depth interviews. Digital ethnography, which merges digital media with storytelling to represent real-life cultures, will be used to understand how meanings are assigned to technology and the cultural experiences enabled by digital media. This method is particularly relevant for the 2020 Myanmar general election, where Facebook became the primary platform for political discussions during the pandemic.

The research will examine how the Facebook system operates and the perspectives of election observer groups. At the micro level, it will analyze how NLD supporters used Facebook to securitize the election, including individual posts and opinions from NLD supporters, election observers, and digital rights activists. The analytical units include the digital revolution in Myanmar, the use of Facebook during the pandemic, the election campaigns on Facebook by NLD supporters, and the extent and nature of political polarization during the 2020 election.

History of Use of Traditional Media and Social Media in Myanmar

Myanmar, with a population of approximately 55 million, has a tumultuous political history characterized by repressive military rule since gaining independence from Britain in 1948. (Gaens, 2013, p. 6) (Ochwat, 2020, p. 247) Led by figures like General Ne Win, the country endured decades of isolationism, civil conflict, and economic mismanagement. The military junta, which seized power in 1962, imposed strict controls on society, curtailing freedom of expression and suppressing dissent through violent crackdowns on protests (Ochwat, 2020, p. 247).

Media in Myanmar mirrored this authoritarianism, with stringent censorship and state control over all forms of communication. Print media, broadcast channels, and later internet platforms were tightly regulated, serving primarily as vehicles for government propaganda. Independent

journalism faced severe restrictions, forcing many outlets underground or into exile. (Ochwat, 2020, p. 260) The media landscape began to shift after 2011 when political reforms under President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government relaxed censorship laws and allowed for more independent reporting (Brooten et al., 2019, p. 37).

Despite these reforms, challenges such as low media literacy and ongoing harassment of journalists persisted. The emergence of new media technologies, including satellite television and the internet, provided alternative channels for information dissemination but remained subject to government oversight. The period marked by the 2007 Saffron Revolution and subsequent political reforms gradually opened up the media environment, allowing for the establishment of privately owned newspapers, magazines, and online platforms (Seekins, 2009).

Digitalization and Limited Internet Access in Myanmar

Digitalization and internet access have transformed societies worldwide, yet Myanmar's journey has been marked by challenges and transformation. In 1997, Myanmar introduced limited dial-up internet, controlled by the government and requiring permission for use. Despite these early steps, internet penetration remained minimal due to high costs and regulatory restrictions (Chowdhury, 2008; Troester, 2001).

The landscape changed dramatically after 2010, transitioning from one of the world's strictest censorship regimes to significant policy shifts under the Thein Sein government. This period saw liberalization in internet access, with censorship gradually easing and infrastructure expanding. Foreign investments in the telecommunications sector further boosted connectivity, leading to a 100-fold increase in internet users by 2016, reaching 13 million people (Shadrach & A4AI, 2018; Schulman, 2019).

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Internet shutdowns, particularly in conflict zones like Rakhine and Chin states, highlight ongoing restrictions. Rural areas continue to face limited infrastructure, impacting traditional media access and amplifying disparities (International Media Support, 2023).

Popular Social Media and the Role of Facebook in Myanmar

Social media, notably Facebook, gained immense popularity post-2011, becoming a primary platform for communication and information sharing. With the rise of affordable smartphones and improved internet access, Facebook emerged as the de facto internet for many, enabling unprecedented connectivity and community engagement (Schulman, 2019).

Facebook's localization efforts in Myanmar, including support for the Myanmar language, enhanced its accessibility and adoption across demographics. However, its dominance also raised concerns about misinformation and hate speech during sensitive political periods, notably the Rohingya crisis, underscoring the platform's dual role in Myanmar's socio-political dynamics (Potkin & McPherson, 2020).

Myanmar's digitalization journey reflects the opportunities and challenges of increased internet access and social media penetration. While facilitating connectivity and democratizing access to information, platforms like Facebook pose risks, necessitating responsible use and robust regulatory frameworks. Moving forward, Myanmar must navigate these complexities to

harness the full potential of digital technologies for inclusive development and informed civic engagement.

The NLD's Supporters and Political Campaigns on Facebook in the 2020 Election

The section elucidates the multifaceted strategies and tactics NLD's supporters used on Facebook to advance their political agenda. Furthermore, it explores the evolution of these campaign activities in the context of securitization. It then provides a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics at play, shedding light on the interconnected relationship between digital campaigning and the securitization of political issues during the 2020 election.

How Did the NLD's Supporters Use Facebook for the Election Campaign?

During the 2020 election in Myanmar, political parties used Facebook as a primary campaigning platform due to its widespread popularity and accessibility. This digital approach was crucial during COVID-19, as it allowed parties to reach both urban and rural populations when physical rallies were limited. NLD supporters also were particularly active, sharing videos, infographics, and photographs to promote their party's message. They organized online discussions and live streams, mobilizing support and shaping the digital political landscape of the 2020 election.

The Role of NLD Supporters and How They Engaged With People

In the electoral landscape, the profound impact of social media platforms, especially Facebook, on shaping public opinion cannot be understated. NLD supporters, including influential figures like singers, actors, writers, religious figures, and motivational speakers, actively engaged on social media to advocate for their party.



Figure 1: Zarni Myonyunt's Facebook Page. Source: Zarni Myo Nyunt's Facebook



Figure 2: NLD campaign Songs by various artists - Song Name is “Fly NLD’s Success Flag.” Source: R Zar Ni’s Facebook Page

Figures 1 and 2 show the Facebook profile of well-known singer Zarni Myonyunt, with 762K followers. As a verified public figure, he used his account to disseminate information about the NLD and encourage people to vote. Zarni Myonyunt also participated in a music video for the NLD campaign song "Fly NLD’s Success Flag," urging voters to support the party. His posts received significant engagement, reflecting his influence in mobilizing support.

Figure 3 features the NLD campaign song "Fly NLD’s Success Flag" shared by influencer Billy La Min Aye, a popular vocalist and runner-up in Myanmar Idol. His repost of the campaign song received around 100,000 reactions, 2,300 comments, and 1.2 million views, attracting considerable attention and support for the NLD.



Figure 3: A new famous vocalist re-posted the NLD campaign song, which attracted a large audience and pushed the number of views to reach 1.2 million, receiving around 100 K reactions. Source: Billy La Min Aye’s Facebook



Figure 4: A voting music promotion post from famous vocalist Phyto Pyae Sone’s Facebook account. Source: Facebook

Figure 4 shows a voting promotion post by famous vocalist Phyto Pyae Sone, advocating for civic responsibility and proper election conduct during COVID-19. His post included the “Let’sVote” song, featuring contributions from 14 young singers and emphasizing the importance of overcoming challenges to participate in the democratic process.

The collective effort of NLD supporters, including influential figures, advocated for safe voting during the pandemic, showing their commitment to democratic participation and public health. Their campaigns on Facebook promoted safe voting practices, countering fear and uncertainty about the election amid COVID-19 constraints.

NLD Lobby Pages and How They Engage With People

The lobby pages “DHA NA - ဓန” and “D-Lann News” were key NLD platforms, advocating and endorsing the party's political pursuits. They shaped public sentiment and support by strategically disseminating statements that reinforced the NLD's goals, significantly contributing to Myanmar's digital political landscape.

Both Dha Na and D-Lann News Facebook pages shared numerous NLD campaign posts aimed at encouraging people to vote and providing voter education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, these pages posted guidelines on how to vote safely with masks and facial protection.

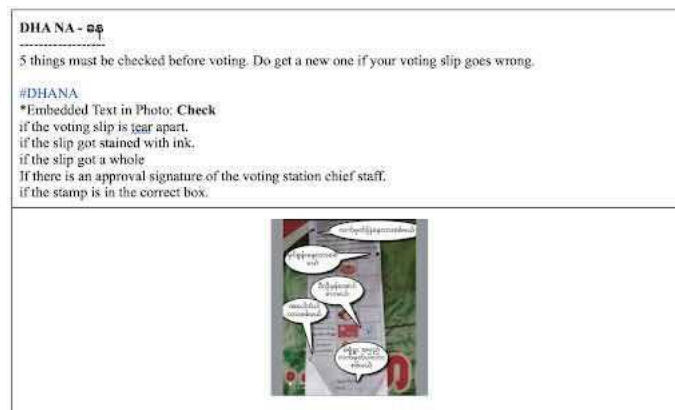


Figure 5: A voter education post showing how to vote correctly. Source: Election Social Media Dashboard

Figure 5 is a critical voter education effort from a pro-NLD page. The post includes a detailed guide for citizens on ensuring their votes are valid, emphasizing checking for torn slips, ink stains, holes, approval signatures, and correct stamp placement. These efforts were pivotal in promoting a fair and informed election process.



Figure 6: Massive crowds of NLD supporters in some are even in front of the USDP campaign sign board. Source: Election Social Media Dashboard

Figure 6 depicts large crowds of NLD supporters, highlighting their unity and determination. Notably, one image shows NLD supporters gathered in front of a USDP campaign signboard, symbolizing their strong presence and solidarity. This post was celebrated on the Dha Na page, emphasizing the collective voice and support for the NLD.



Figure 7: A recorded livestream of an online conversation between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and first-time voters. Source: Election Social Media Dashboard

Figure 7: Features an online talk session between Aung San Suu Kyi and first-time voters, shared on the D-Lann News Facebook page. The comments under the post reflect well-wishes for Aung San Suu Kyi, demonstrating her followers' personal connection and support.

How NLD Supporters Use Facebook Group Function to Engage With People

NLD supporters adopted a distinctive approach on Facebook to bolster the NLD’s prospects in the 2020 Myanmar election by establishing numerous groups and pages dedicated to promoting

the party. These groups and pages, typically named “Victory for NLD (Township or Region Name)” or simply “Victory for NLD,” focus primarily on NLD updates and information about NLD President Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

In figure 8, ten groups are mentioned, with varying membership counts and focuses, all dedicated to supporting the NLD. These groups, whether established by NLD supporters or potentially by the party itself, played a significant role in the online campaigning efforts.

<p>Only NLD's victory for the 2020 election Public. 11 K Members For the sake of the group's reputation, we won't allow the contents that create a split between Myanmar citizens and tensions between ethnic people</p>
<p>The victory for NLD Public. 12 K Members</p>
<p>Magway Division, 2020 the victory for NLD Public. 2.4 K Members</p>
<p>The Victory for NLD Public. 20 Members</p>
<p>The Victory for NLD (Palun Sar village) Public. 1.9K Members . 5 Post a year Mothers lovers</p>
<p>The Victory for NLD Public. 99 Members နိုင်ငံချုပ်မြေတို့မြေ</p>
<p>NLD will win again in 2020, NLD Public. 2 K Members . 4 posts a year</p>
<p>The Victory for NLD Public. 14 Members</p>
<p>The Victory for NLD (Palun Sar village) Public. 50 Members</p>
<p>The Victory for NLD Public. 530 Members From 1988 to 2016, the dictatorship oppressed civilians and destroyed the country</p>

Figure 8: NLD campaign groups , Source: Facebook

Figure 9 illustrates various Facebook pages centered around the theme of “Victory for NLD.” These pages, with broad and specific regional references, exhibit unwavering support for the NLD, indicating a cohesive and like-minded community rallying behind the party’s success.

<p>2020 victory for NLD Personal blog . 1.9K followers</p>
<p>The victory for NLD Product Service . 65 followers</p>
<p>NLD victory songs Personal blog . 42K followers To end the dictatorship people?</p>
<p>The victory for NLD, Mother Su lovers Personal blog . 1K follower</p>
<p>The victory for NLD, Kante Personal blog . 1 followers</p>
<p>2020 victory for NLD Just for fun . 730 followers</p>

Figure 9: NLD campaign pages, Source: Facebook

How NLD Supporters From Abroad Utilized Facebook for the 2020 Election

Support for Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) extended beyond the country's borders, with overseas supporters actively engaging in the 2020 election campaign through Facebook. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, many abroad used social media to advocate and mobilize support for the NLD.

Figure 10 shows a powerful display of NLD support in Times Square, New York City, where enthusiasts waved NLD flags with a "Vote NLD" message. This image, shared by an NLD supporter page, symbolizes solidarity and optimism for a "landslide victory," highlighting the global momentum and contributions of supporters worldwide.



Figure 10: NLD supporter at Time Squares, Source: Facebook

Figures 11 and 12 feature Poe Phyu Thant, a prominent NLD supporter based in London. As a social media influencer with a substantial Facebook following, she actively advocated for the

NLD during Myanmar's 2020 election, raising awareness and support amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In Figure 11, she shares her voting experience at the Myanmar embassy in London, highlighting the safety measures such as social distancing and PPE for staff. Her transparency aimed to reassure voters and encourage participation in the election.



Figure 11: NLD supporter Poe Phyu Thant’s Facebook. Source: Poe Phyu Thant’s Facebook Account



Figure 12: Poe Phyu Thant’s Pre Voting at London Embassy. Source: Poe Phyu Thant’s Facebook Account

NLD supporters' engagement on Facebook during Myanmar's 2020 election significantly shaped public discourse and mobilized support for the party. Influential figures like Zarni Myonyunt and Billy La Min Aye promoted NLD campaign songs, while lobby pages like Dha Na and D-Lann News disseminated party messages and voter education. Facebook groups like "Victory for NLD" showcased a cohesive online community rallying behind the party. Supporters abroad also amplified NLD's message globally, overcoming COVID-19 challenges.

In conclusion, the diverse strategies of NLD supporters on Facebook—from celebrity endorsements to grassroots mobilization and global advocacy—bolstered the NLD's electoral

prospects. This highlights the transformative role of social media in modern political campaigns and its power in shaping democratic outcomes.

Securitization Argumentation on Facebook and Political Polarization

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, political polarization has deep historical roots stemming from ethnic, religious, and political divides. This polarization has exacerbated socio-political rifts, contributing to democratic erosion and societal discord (Carothers & O’donohue, 2020: p.3). The 2020 election, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, intensified these divisions (Barberá, 2020). With traditional campaign methods constrained by the pandemic, social media platforms became pivotal for political messaging. This shift enabled political leaders and influencers to disseminate extremist ideologies and propaganda, a concerning trend amplified by the pandemic (Whitten-Woodring et al., 2020). Ongoing research explores how social media influences political behavior in Myanmar, particularly in perpetuating polarization and shaping electoral outcomes (Barberá & 2020).

Before the 2020 election, similar patterns emerged in the 2019 U.S. presidential election, highlighting social media's role in exacerbating political polarization (Fujiwara et al., 2021; Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin, 2020). These studies underscored how social media biases and campaigns can intensify polarization among voters.

Facebook as a Tool for Securitization

During the 2020 election, Facebook became a battleground where supporters of political parties used securitization tactics to evoke fear and frame their party as protectors against threats. For instance, NLD supporters used Facebook to frame democratic development issues, drawing criticism from USDP supporters and leading to polarized debates and misinformation. One of the NLD's primary challenges in the 2020 election was overcoming the constitutional provision that reserves 25% of legislative seats for military personnel (Idea Myanmar, 2020). This arrangement granted the USDP significant influence in Myanmar's legislative bodies.

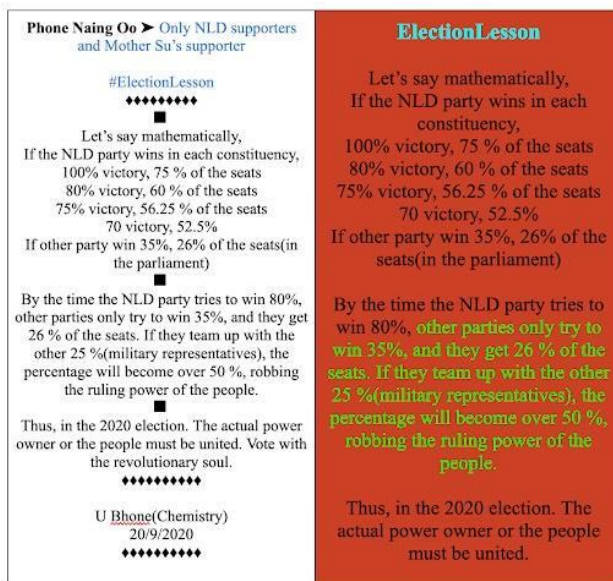


Figure 13: Phone Naing Oo post's translation. The Source: Election Social Media Dashboard Archive Link- <https://archive.fo/3u4fc>

NLD supporter Phone Naing Oo highlighted a critical viewpoint on Facebook (Figure 13), emphasizing the electoral challenges faced by the NLD due to Myanmar's constitution. He noted that for the NLD to govern effectively, it would need to secure an overwhelming majority of seats, given the military's constitutional advantage of 25 percent. Phone Naing Oo illustrated that even with substantial electoral victories, the NLD's ability to govern could be undermined if other parties align with the military-backed USDP, potentially diluting the people's mandate. His post in the NLD supporter group garnered significant engagement, reflecting widespread concern and mobilization around electoral fairness and constitutional reform.

In Myanmar’s politics, the NLD stood out as the primary contender against the USDP. This unique position necessitated a well-thought-out strategy, especially given the presence of various ethnic parties competing in the election. Myanmar’s electoral landscape is marked by diverse political parties, each representing distinct interests. To secure a full parliamentary majority, the NLD had to balance the interests of diverse stakeholders while advancing its democratic aspirations.

Moreover, Myanmar has faced the grim reality of becoming one of the poorest countries in Asia due to over six decades of military rule. However, there has been hope and progress since opening up to the world in 2010. Winning the 2020 election meant protecting these hard-fought freedoms and development from regressing under military administration.

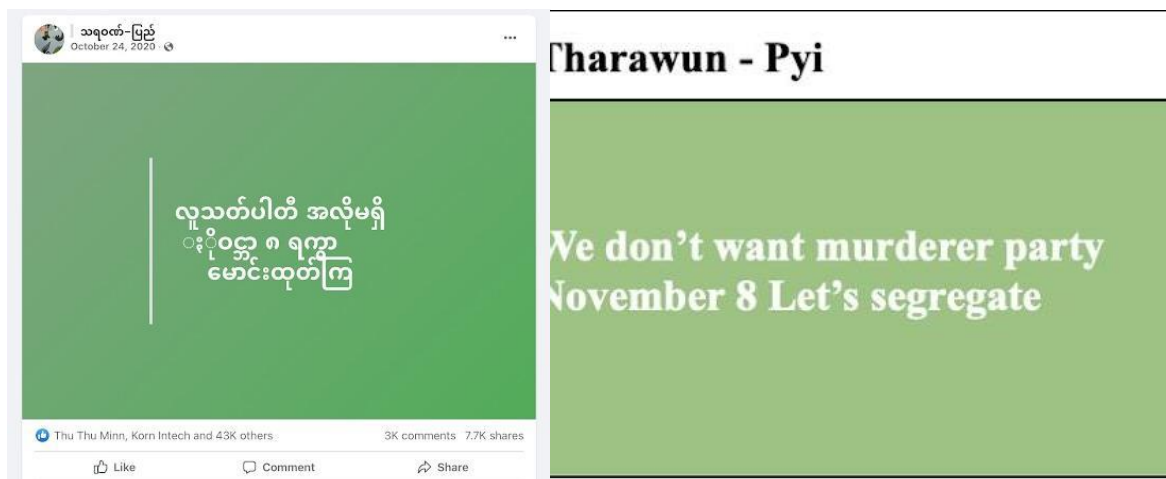


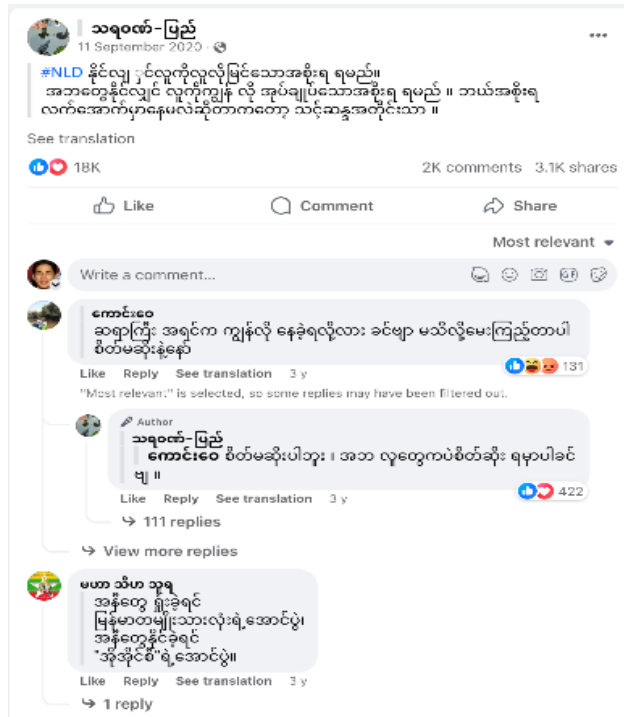
Figure 14: The post reads, “Don’t want a murderer party. Drive out/kick out/force out.”

Source: Election Social Media Dashboard

Archive Link: <https://archive.ph/IGrjf>

Amidst the election fervor, influential individuals like Tharawon Pyi, a prominent influencer, played pivotal roles. As a tour guide and author, Tharawon Pyi strongly supported the NLD and critiqued the USDP. His viral posts securitized the USDP as a party made of murderers, significantly influencing public discourse and adding depth to the election narrative.

Figure 15 shows Tharawun-Pyi's strategic use of securitization rhetoric during the election. By highlighting the USDP's actions and history, he aimed to instill fear among netizens, framing the USDP as a significant threat to democracy. His posts, which criticized the previous government and advocated for the NLD, received substantial engagement, with over 1,000 likes, shares, and comments. This effective framing of issues as national security concerns significantly influenced public opinion and the broader electoral discourse.



Tharawun - Pyi
 If #NLD wins, we will have a government that will respect the civilians.
 If #Aba (code word for Military Generals and affiliated people) win, we will have a government that will treat the civilians as slaves. It's up to your desire to choose under which regime you would like to live.
 See translation

Kaung Wai
 You survived as a slave before? Don't mind me, I am just wondering
 Author
Tharawun - Pyi
Kaung Wai I don't mind at all, Aba's folks should be upset about it

Mahar Thiha Thura
 If the red lose, it's a victory for the entire Myanmar nationality.
 If the red wins, it's the victory of ISIS

Figure 15: Tharawun-Pyi's Post Related to the Election.
 Source: Election Social Media Dashboard

USDP's Securitization Tactics

USDP supporters also employed securitization strategies, focusing on religious and ethnic issues to frame the NLD as a threat. Posts often depicted the NLD as biased towards Muslims, which resonated strongly in a predominantly Buddhist country like Myanmar.

Figure 16, posted by a USDP supporter “Mai” during Myanmar's election campaign, exemplifies the securitization tactics employed by USDP circles. The post framed their stance through a religious lens, suggesting a refusal to patronize shops selling NLD-affiliated merchandise due to alleged biases favoring Muslims under the NLD government. While the authenticity of accompanying images could not be verified, the narrative underscored concerns over religious and societal hierarchies, serving as a deliberate securitization strategy to discredit the opposition.

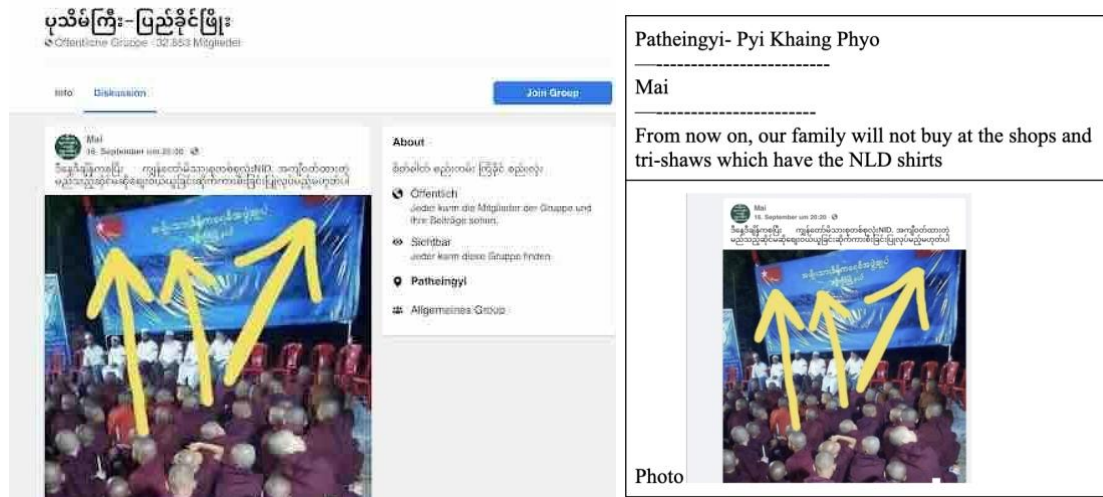


Figure 16: A USDP Supporter Post.
 Sources: Election Social Media Dashboard
 Archive Link -<https://archive.vn/BVUvP>, <https://archive.vn/waGfQ>

During Myanmar’s election campaign, contentious discussions emerged around the issuance of identity cards, notably the NVC (National Verification Card) introduced by the NLD government. USDP supporters feared that granting NVC cards to Rohingya individuals, whom they refer to as Bengalis, could lead to demographic shifts and destabilization.

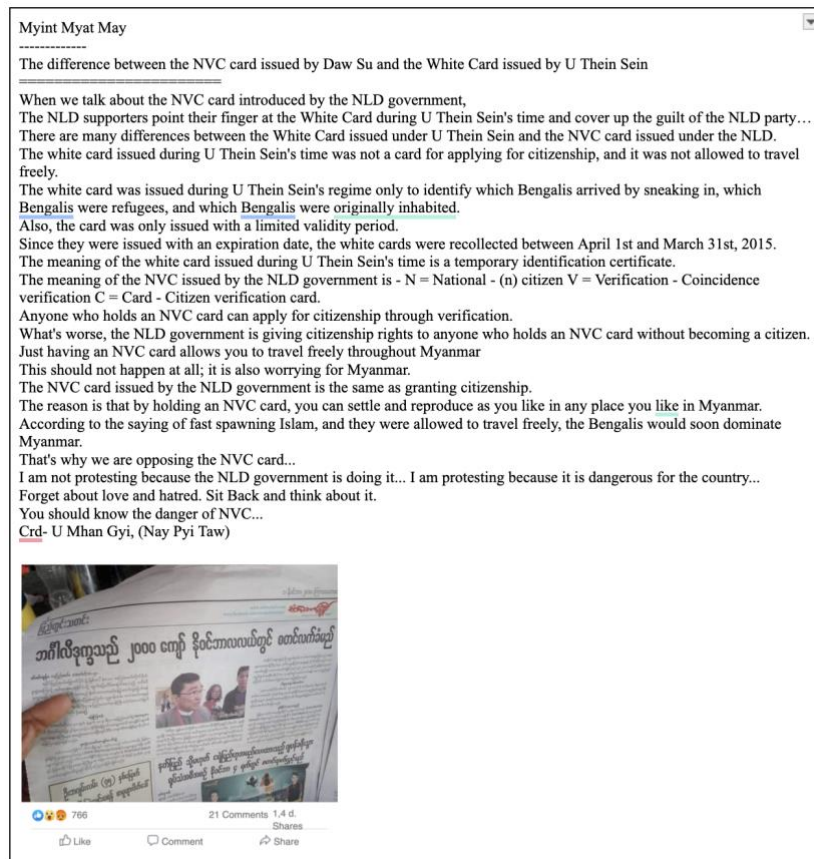


Figure 17: Myint Myat May Account Post the difference between NVC and White card
 Sources: Election Social Media Dashboard
 Archive Link-<https://archive.vn/HDXnt>

Figure 17, posted by USDP supporter Myint Myat May during Myanmar’s election campaign, criticized the NVC (National Verification Card) policy, framing it as a threat to national security and demographic integrity. This rhetoric exacerbated ethnic and political divisions, intensifying polarization and hindering inclusive governance. The USDP's campaign tactics politicized religion and portrayed NLD policies as security threats, deepening societal divisions and fostering an "us versus them" mentality. These biased narratives and misinformation created echo chambers eroded trust in institutions, and hindered constructive dialogue.

Facebook's Role in Polarization

Facebook’s algorithmic feeds created echo chambers where users only saw content that aligned with their beliefs, deepening polarization. Pro-NLD and pro-USDP groups became isolated, fostering an “us vs. them” mentality.

TOP FACEBOOK INFLUENCERS				Top Facebook Influencers			
Type	name	Records	Interaction	Type	name	Records	Interactions
* Group *	Aung San Suu Kyi (Myanmar State Counsellor)	465	389	* Group *	Aung San Suu Kyi (Myanmar State Counsellor)	465	389,22
* Group *	USDP Daily News	78	197	* Group *	USDP Daily News	78	197,25
* Group *	NLD ဘက်စုံအဖွဲ့အစည်း	177	113	* Group *	NLD supporters	177	113,01
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း (အမေ့ဆွေ)	119	112	* Group *	Amey Sui's lovers(Only)	119	112,83
* Group *	We Love NLD	147	109	* Group *	We Love NLD	147	108,40
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း (We Stand with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi)	70	88	* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း (We Stand with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi)	70	88,50
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း (အမေ့ဆွေ)	118	63	* Group *	New Generations of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi	118	83,38
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း	65	60	* Group *	Ayeyarwaddy Thinhaw	65	60,88
* Group *	Aung San Suu Kyi (State Counsellor)	86	44	* Group *	Aung San Suu Kyi (State Counsellor)	86	44,85
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း	123	43	* Group *	Amee's sons and daughters(Only)	123	43,19
* Group *	We Love USDP	108	42	* Group *	We love USDP	108	42,67
* Group *	PPP (People's Pioneer Party) (official)	60	34	* Group *	PPP: People's Pioneer Party (Official)	60	34,69
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း	66	28	* Group *	Amee's sons and daughters meet up	66	28,46
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း	42	28	* Group *	Amey Sui's sons and daughters	42	28,27
* Group *	NLD ဘက်စုံအဖွဲ့အစည်း	42	27,5	* Group *	NLD youth election campaign committee	42	27,96
* Group *	NLD ဘက်စုံအဖွဲ့အစည်း	38	26,8	* Group *	NLD supporting Amey Sui's lovers(only)	38	26,70
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း	56	25,7	* Group *	Amey Sui's sons and daughters(only)	56	26,96
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း	9	23	* Group *	Lottery Winner Check	9	23,61
* Group *	Bogalay usdp	30	21,9	* Group *	Bogalay usdp	30	21,38
* Group *	အမေ့ဆွေအဖွဲ့အစည်း	36	20	* Group *	Amey Sui supporters	36	20,58

Figure 18: The most influential groups during the election campaign period
 Source: [Election Dashboard](http://mmtan.org/ElectionDashboard)

Figure 18 shows the top 20 Facebook groups by interaction during Myanmar’s 2020 election. A pro-NLD group led with 465 discussions and nearly 400,000 interactions, compared to a pro-USDP group’s 78 discussions and 200,000 interactions. This disparity highlights NLD supporters' strong online presence, fostering echo chambers and polarization. Facebook’s algorithm-driven content distribution reinforced partisan viewpoints, limiting diverse discussions.

The spread of securitization narratives and misinformation, such as the depiction of Buddhist monks and Muslims, amplified fear and mistrust, deepening polarization. Misinformation undermined trust in political processes and fostered negative perceptions. Facebook’s role in Myanmar’s political discourse entrenched polarization by amplifying partisan voices and spreading misinformation. Addressing these challenges requires promoting digital literacy and enhancing fact-checking to foster inclusive and informed public dialogue.

In conclusion, Myanmar's 2020 election showed Facebook's role in deepening political polarization through echo chambers, securitization tactics, and misinformation. The platform amplified partisan voices, restricted diverse viewpoints, and deepened societal divisions. Enhancing digital literacy, improving fact-checking mechanisms, and fostering inclusive online discourse are crucial to promoting a more unified political landscape in Myanmar. Understanding these dynamics is essential for navigating digital platforms' evolving role in shaping electoral outcomes and societal stability.

Conclusion

This thesis explores the role of Facebook in exacerbating political polarization during Myanmar's 2020 general election. The study combines theoretical frameworks with empirical analysis to understand how social media shapes public discourse and influences political outcomes in Myanmar. The research starts by contextualizing Myanmar's political landscape, from military rule to fragile democracy, highlighting social media's emergence in political mobilization. Grounded in securitization theory and media studies, it investigates Facebook's contribution to societal polarization through a rigorous methodology involving qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis of Facebook posts from influential groups during the election campaign. Key findings include: The NLD used Facebook to promote achievements and policy agendas and mobilize grassroots support, leveraging the platform's broad reach for electoral success. Both NLD and USDP supporters used Facebook to frame issues like identity cards and religious discrimination as national security threats, deepening political polarization. Pro-NLD discussions dominated Facebook groups, creating filter bubbles that reinforced biases and hindered inclusive governance. Facebook's algorithm prioritized personalized content, fostering echo chambers and intensifying societal divisions. These findings highlight the urgent need for digital literacy, enhanced fact-checking mechanisms, and fostering inclusive dialogue to mitigate polarization.

As conceptualized by the Copenhagen School, securitization theory helps explain how political actors in Myanmar framed issues as national security threats to mobilize support and delegitimize opponents. This strategy, amplified by Facebook, deepened public distrust and polarization. The study underscores the necessity for critical engagement and fact-checking to counter misinformation and promote informed discourse.

The research on Myanmar's 2020 election and political polarization faced several critical limitations. Limited and unreliable Facebook data, the extensive effort required for data processing, and translation challenges constrained the analysis. Restrictions on accessing older data hindered longitudinal studies, and the volatile political environment affected data accessibility. Additionally, the lack of studies on social media's role in Myanmar limited contextual understanding.

Future research should focus on transparent data-sharing, ethical guidelines, exploring historical and institutional factors, and ensuring participant safety. Comparative and longitudinal studies can offer insights into digital politics over time. Investigating platforms like TikTok, Telegram, and WhatsApp can reveal their political roles. Multidisciplinary collaborations are essential for a comprehensive understanding of digital politics in Myanmar and Southeast Asia, promoting informed civic engagement and inclusive discourse.

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