

In Myanmar election, anti-Muslim campaign loses in free, fair vote

by [Paul Vrieze](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) Yin Yin Moe can still remember the fear she felt when a group of men began rioting in her neighborhood of mainly Muslim-owned stores in downtown Mandalay, Myanmar's second-biggest city.

"Last year, some Buddhists came, we never saw them before," said the pharmacy owner. "They started throwing rocks and began fighting with the young men here. . . . I was afraid for the safety of my old parents and my young niece. We had to close the shop and left for three days."

The police did not come until the fifth day of conflict, she said.

That unrest marked the rise of a powerful movement of nationalist Buddhist monks, known in Myanmar as Ma Ba Tha. Their pro-government and anti-Muslim positions and speech were seen as fomenting fear and division among people in this multifaith country. Some predicted that they could swing November's historic elections away from the party of eventual winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

The leader of Ma Ba Tha, a charismatic monk named Wirathu, campaigned for months in support of laws in Myanmar restricting rights for racial and religious minorities. So potent was his movement's supposed influence that Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy didn't field any Muslim candidates, despite leading what it calls a people's party.

Yet the hard-line Buddhists and their military backers failed to stop the NLD, even in areas where they had prominence. Analysts say the hard-liners underestimated Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity and the desire for change in Myanmar and went too far by opposing her.

Still, as the Nobel Prize winner prepares her NLD party to govern the country for the first time, both nationalist monks and military elites continue to be powerful forces.

"Their plan was to use Ma Ba Tha, spread online hate speech . . . and to buy votes," said Kyaw Thu, who heads a network of NGOs called Paung Ku that monitors

communal tensions.

On November 12 the NLD was officially declared the winner of Myanmar's first truly free and fair elections in a quarter century. The party won more than 80 percent of the votes, ushering in what observers here are calling a new political era.

The victory is being seen as a source of relief for Myanmar's Muslims, who have increasingly suffered under government targeting and popular prejudices.

In February, the government disenfranchised about 1 million Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority in western Myanmar. The state-run election commission disqualified most Muslim candidates from running in elections, and the new parliament will have no Muslim representatives.

"We are very glad the NLD beat the USDP [Union Solidarity and Development Party] because most Muslims in Myanmar feel depressed—most feel the USDP is unfair to Muslims," said Khin Maung Htwe, a Muslim resident, about the pro-military party. "We hope for a better future. We believe Aung San Suu Kyi has no feelings of discrimination."

Aung San Suu Kyi told the BBC that her government would protect Muslims in Myanmar and guarantee equal treatment for all. Yet it remains unclear whether the NLD will improve the plight of the Rohingya, who are viewed by many people in Myanmar as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

The NLD vice chairwoman in Mandalay, who is a Muslim, said she understood her party's request that she not run for office. But Win Win May said the NLD's win will bring change in terms of pushing back against prejudice.

"If there is a new government, the Ma Ba Tha will disappear, only the NLD can do a lot about this situation," she said.

Kyaw Thu, the activist, worries, however, that the military will continue to stir up communal tensions.

"They know the NLD has a lack of capacity," he said. "So they can use this strategy to create chaos and problems to justify the role of the military—this is a problem for the NLD in the next five years."

This article was edited on December 8, 2015.