

# FROM NOVELTY TO NORMALCY

*Polling in Myanmar's Democratic Transition*



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*Polling in Myanmar's Democratic Transition*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THIS REPORT EXAMINES the state of opinion research in Myanmar, identifies challenges, and makes recommendations for improvements. Since the government of Myanmar announced a transition from military rule to democracy in 2010, both domestic and international stakeholders have turned to polling to discover public opinion on a range of issues.

Polling is critical in transitioning countries. Polls can provide parties with data to understand the needs and desires of the electorate and serve as a check on government excesses. They make information on public views widely available and can represent both the diversity of existing opinions and positions of minority populations. Finally, they show a road to political compromise and prepare parties and the public to deal with election outcomes.

The Western public accepts and expects polling on a regular basis, but we did not find that always the case in Myanmar. Although Myanmar has a decades-long history of market surveys, political polling is a relatively new phenomenon. Organizations operating in this field face four major challenges. The first is selecting a sample in a country that lacks reliable census or voter registration data, and lacks comprehensive access to telephones or the internet. The second is how to provide survey questionnaires in several languages to accommodate Myanmar's numerous ethnic groups. The third challenge relates to interviewers, both to their training and to accounting for possible response bias based on the interaction between the interviewer's socio-demographic background and the respondent's. Finally, polling groups and interviewers must ensure respondents' confidentiality.

These problems are not unique to Myanmar. Pollsters around the world regularly grapple with similar dilemmas. What makes their task more challenging in Myanmar is the novelty of polling. Few people (even in civil society and political parties) understand its nature, and many are quick to dismiss the whole exercise when they do not like some of a poll's results. The report examines and refutes several of their criticisms, perhaps the most common being that a sample, no

matter how large, cannot capture the full diversity of opinions in a country as large and heterogeneous as Myanmar.

It is possible to tackle these misperceptions and improve practices. Our recommendations for immediate actions can be implemented ahead of the parliamentary election this year. They include suggestions on conducting polls, providing frameworks for their interpretation, and training potential users to understand polling data. Long-term change will require consistent attention and investment from polling groups, those who commission them, and users of polling data to strengthen the polling field.

Most importantly, polling organizations should continue making their data publicly available. Those who conduct and commission public surveys need to do so on a regular basis. Both practices will teach the public to see polls as a normal element of a democratic process and become another step in Myanmar's transition to a full-fledged democracy.

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MAHAR MANGAHAS

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## INTRODUCTION

THIS REVIEW EVALUATES the abilities of local actors and international organizations to conduct professional and credible opinion polls in the Union of Myanmar, particularly in the months before the 2015 parliamentary elections. The project was envisioned as an important step forward in assessing how polling data can inform the political and policy process in Myanmar as the country moves towards the fall elections and, more broadly, democracy. Since 2011, the government has provided greater space for the participation of opposition and civil society in political life and both domestic and international stakeholders have turned to polling as a way to find out public opinion on a range of issues.

There have been only a few public polls reported to date, but the questions about them indicate the need for an overview of the polling landscape in Myanmar. This report should be beneficial for domestic and international organizations, for political actors and for all citizens. It should provide a basis for understanding and interpreting well-conducted opinion polls, and should help prevent misunderstandings about public opinion polling.

In December 2014, the Open Society Foundations invited three international experts to spend six days in Yangon and Naypyidaw. Their aims were to review how opinion polls were being conducted and reported, and to recommend ways to improve the conduct and reporting of those polls.

The members of the expert committee were:

**KATHLEEN A. FRANKOVIC**, elections and survey consultant, retired Director of Surveys at CBS News, and a former president of both the American and World Associations for Public Opinion Research. She led an OSF-sponsored polling evaluation team in the Republic of Georgia following its 2012 parliamentary elections.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **That evaluation** was conducted by two international market and survey research associations, **ESOMAR** and **WAPOR**. It noted suspicions of government involvement among some respondents and suggested ways that the Georgia pollsters could improve their techniques and their image. But the report also pointed out that the most likely reason the polls did not predict the election outcome accurately was that most of them ceased interviewing weeks before the election, and missed the public reaction to a late-breaking government scandal. The Georgia experience underscores the importance of poll reports in emerging democracies. The Georgia pre-election polls and questions about their accuracy occupied a major role in pre-election discussions.

**MAHAR MANGAHAS**, founder and director of Social Weather Stations in Manila, Philippines. He founded SWS 30 years ago, and has fought for the freedom to conduct exit polls and opinion polling.

**IBRAHIM SUFFIAN**, director of the Merdeka Center in Kuala Lumpur, the only public opinion research organization in Malaysia.<sup>2</sup>

The team met with more than 50 individuals, broadly representative of polling and market research companies, NGOs and civil society organizations, the government, and the opposition. Many of those interviewed had engaged in survey research themselves in the last few years; others were involved in non-survey data collection; and still others were critics or supporters of previous polling. Those who conducted surveys were very open about their methods to us; those who had criticized polls were willing to describe their questions and concerns with us. Their input has been extremely helpful, and we are grateful to them.

The team's task became even more important following the furor that greeted **the country's first publicly reported opinion poll** in April 2014. Myanmar Survey Research conducted the interviews, and the International Republican Institute (IRI) released the poll. The published results included suggestions that the public held some positive views of the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) and the President, which **outraged media and members of the opposition** and their Western supporters. Some claimed that **questions** had been deliberately left out in the limited public release of the data. More serious concerns were that respondents were not willing to speak truthfully, and about possible interference from local authorities in selecting who would be interviewed. The balanced and nuanced IRI poll results conflicted with the standard narrative of overwhelmingly public support for the NLD (National League for Democracy) and opposition to the government.

## WHY IS POLLING IMPORTANT?

There are good reasons to conduct opinion polls in any country in the period before a major election, especially an election that could result in changes in national representation. There is even more reason to have such polling done in countries *without* a recent history of democratic elections and survey research, like Myanmar. Polls are an excellent resource for developing democracies, and serve many purposes.

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<sup>2</sup> Fuller biographies of the team members appear in Appendix 1.



**Parties need data to understand the needs and desires of the voting public in order to better represent them.** But those data must accurately represent that public. Those who collect survey data need to follow accepted norms for sampling respondents, establish good interviewer-respondent interactions, follow internationally accepted ethical standards,<sup>3</sup> and analyze their data in a fair and unbiased way.

**Polls serve as a check on government excesses,** and many of those we spoke with, including critics, appeared open to the idea of using opinion polls to determine public satisfaction with government services and identify problems that government must solve. That was true both among those who represented the government and the ruling party as well as those who represent the opposition. We found relatively little opposition to the use of polls in Myanmar as a way to provide an indicator of overall government performance.

**Opinion polling, especially polls designed with larger sample sizes, can represent the minority population as well as the majority,** and describe similarities and differences within those groups and between minority groups and the majority population. Myanmar is a country with many minority groups, some of which have been fighting against the government for decades. Using polling, local and national leaders can better evaluate the needs of minority groups, and the Myanmar public can better understand differences and areas where the majority and minorities agree. There will be issues on which there is more agreement across ethnic groups and political parties than disagreement. In this way polling can identify common ground and a possibility for compromise where otherwise it might not be apparent.

**Polling can help overcome incorrect assumptions that shape policy.** In Malaysia, which also has a multi-ethnic population, opinion surveys have proved useful to help understand how different groups perceive government policies and respond to problems. For example, low attendance of children from minority groups in the national school system (opting instead to attend their vernacular schools) had long been attributed to a desire to preserve their culture. Public opinion surveys revealed that school choice was largely driven by language mastery and perceptions of school performance.

**Polls demonstrate the range of opinions and differences within the population over time.** Polls can show individuals having favorable attitudes towards a

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<sup>3</sup> Such as those promulgated in the [ESOMAR/ICC Code](#).

ruling party and an opposition party at the same time. There will be times and issues when an individual will be in the majority and others on which he or she will be in the minority. On some issues, there may be little real opinion. This information is especially useful when gathered consistently over time in transitioning countries, as it illustrates the process of democracy as it develops.<sup>4</sup> The Philippine organization Social Weather Stations has measured social welfare for three decades, asking respondents about their self-rated poverty and hunger, crime victimization, overall quality of life, and satisfaction with government. Asking the same questions at regular intervals in a scientific manner generates reliable information about the state of the country and the direction it may be headed for both leaders and the public, as well as early indications of shifts in public opinion.

**Polls work especially well if they are released publicly and polls are conducted frequently.** One advantage of public polling is that information becomes available to all. In most developed democracies, many organizations conduct public polls with some frequency, especially ahead of an election. It is useful for citizens to know how others in society feel about problems and the parties proposing solutions. When knowledge of what the public is thinking is publicly released, polls act as a bridge between the public and the leading members of society, even in stressful situations.

Methodologies and results can be compared, and polls become part of democratic life. In Myanmar's case, the novelty of public polling has put far too much scrutiny on those few polls that have been released, elevating their individual importance. The current discussion surrounding opinion polls has become a discussion about one poll.

**Pre-election polls can encourage stability,** as they create a shared expectation for an election's outcome and the opportunity to prepare for it. Exit polls in many countries are used both to understand voters' desires and to validate the counting of votes. In Myanmar in 2015, the government has promised "free and fair" elections, which are "credible, inclusive and transparent." While it may be difficult (perhaps almost impossible) for pre-election polls to translate national party preferences into seats won, especially in the first election of its kind, pre-election and exit polls can validate results and demonstrate that an election was free, fair, and credible.

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this assumes that citizens feel free to disclose their political preferences. Although Myanmar survey practitioners and the international organizations that fund surveys are convinced of the honesty of Myanmar poll respondents, years of living under an authoritarian regime may still inhibit some respondents. For example, respondents in Malaysia are more guarded than those in either Indonesia or the Philippines.

## SURVEY CAPACITY IN MYANMAR

Good polling requires professionally trained researchers and interviewers who have a good understanding of interviewing techniques. Many of those we spoke with expressed serious concerns about survey capacity in Myanmar. They raised questions about the difficulties of sampling the large and diverse population and the experience (or lack of experience) of those who conduct survey research. Some specific questions and criticisms are addressed later in the report. In general, we found a number of organizations and individuals capable of conducting professional polls despite these limitations.

**Are there trained survey researchers in Myanmar?** Training in survey research methods has been absent from Myanmar universities until recently. **Social science academic disciplines were decimated** during the years of military rule. Restoration has only recently begun. This has serious implications for the development of survey research. In some cases, local practitioners have studied abroad in places like the Netherlands and Japan.

International associations have offered training. ESOMAR, the global market and opinion research organization, hosted a half-day public program in August 2014 with international experts, entitled “The Use and Value of Market and Social Research.” That was followed by a week-long training seminar for market researchers. The public program focused on the value of market and social research, using examples from Europe, Asia, and Australia. Other NGOs have conducted educational sessions with political leaders and party members.

A local organization, the Myanmar Marketing Services Association, was formed to host the ESOMAR conference. It is unclear how active the organization has been since then. Professional associations play an important role in setting ethical standards and promoting quality surveys; they could be especially helpful as the survey industry in Myanmar develops by sharing information that will strengthen the entire industry.

The lack of specific training in survey research methods has been partly offset by some individuals, as training in science, medicine and engineering can provide some of the skills necessary to conduct good survey and opinion research, like an understanding of data collection and analysis and recognition of the need for unbiased information. Survey work is done in some of these disciplines.<sup>5</sup> However, there is still a great need for survey research training, and it will take time

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, at least one of the medical doctors now working at Myanmar Egress came to surveys through data collection about the spread of illnesses and medical care.

for indigenous capacity for survey research to emerge and become sustainable.

**Who is conducting surveys?** Despite all these limitations, there is a relatively rich, albeit very contemporary, survey research history. Myanmar market research organizations have been in the field for at least two decades, doing studies of consumer product sales and media penetration. Social surveys, however, have a much more recent history, with most beginning in 2012 following the political changes in Myanmar.

As of now, it appears that only the commercial companies for market and business research have a track record of doing scientific surveys in Myanmar. These companies have a stake in maintaining their reputation and most international companies and non-profits commission them for most projects.

There are only two truly local market research firms, but they have worked in the field for decades. Myanmar Market Research and Development (MMRD) was established more than 20 years ago, and began by producing the Myanmar Yellow Pages. It is now linked to Nielsen. Myanmar Survey Research (MSR) has also been conducting research in the country for more than two decades.

Multinational research firms have set up offices more recently. Those companies are useful to the development of survey capacity in a country like Myanmar. They are already aware of international standards and survey needs. TNS Myanmar is a branch of TNS Global, which has offices in more than 50 countries. The local office is led by a co-founder of Compass Research, which opened in 1997 and conducted research for about a decade before closing. The other co-founder of Compass Research opened a Myanmar branch of Millward Brown, another international research company, in 2013. River Orchid, a more recent arrival, covers five countries in Southeast Asia.

These firms, both local and international, are mainly engaged in market research, but in the last few years many NGOs including the International Republican Institute (IRI) and The Asia Foundation have conducted social research and opinion polls using these Myanmar organizations for fieldwork. In addition, agencies within Western governments and international organizations have also studied opinion in Myanmar using the local companies.

We met with several other groups that are engaged in studying public and social opinions, including Myanmar Egress (which has conducted studies of teachers and has produced a report on citizenship) and the Yangon School of Political Science (YSPS), a group of former students and faculty who are working with researchers from other parts of Asia in developing the skills for conducting survey

research. YSPS will conduct the Myanmar component of the Asian Barometer.

Other national organizations, like MATA, an extractive industry transparency initiative, are interested in using their nationwide membership to assess business opinions. That would not be a traditional public opinion poll, but still a useful data collection project. All of these emerging organizations that are starting out in survey work need more resources and time to prove themselves.

We also know that at least some political parties are conducting polls. The parties appeared to recognize the limitations of collecting their own data, since they were in fact asking about themselves, and they told us they knew they might receive more positive results than more neutral questioners might elicit. They claimed that the process was useful, however, as they could discover where they were weak, and in which issue areas they needed to improve. As one party leader put it in underscoring the importance of data, “If we don’t act on what we learn from a poll, the poll is useless.”<sup>6</sup>

It is not clear how skilled those in the parties are when it comes to conducting opinion polling. Campaigning itself is new to many political candidates. Some are just learning how to canvass door-to-door, a process that was described to us as “very exhausting but necessary.”

The Myanmar media has not commissioned opinion polls as yet. We have questions about the ability of the media to report polls, and address that more specifically later in this report.

## POLLING ISSUES IN MYANMAR

### Sample selection

Myanmar’s population can be very difficult to survey, or even to count. There are continuing questions about the accuracy of census data (the last complete census was conducted more than 30 years ago), and even now data from the new 2014 census has been only **partially released**. There is controversy over the classification of ethnic minorities, and there has also been **criticism of the census process**.

While census data is not the only way to provide a sampling frame, in most countries it is the best way. Having accurate estimates of population size in a country’s states and regions allows those conducting market and opinion surveys

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<sup>6</sup> Most polls conducted for political parties are not meant for public consumption. But they also have a role to play in a democracy, as they provide information about public desires to those both in government and in the opposition. Like public polls, they should obviously be conducted according to scientific and ethical standards.

to select samples proportional to the size of the population in each area; to know the demographic composition of the adult population (age, gender, ethnicity, and other individual characteristics); and to ensure that researchers can know for sure their sample accurately reflects the population.

Having a good frame from which to select a sample is critical, and some recent opinion samples have been drawn based on provisional census data, and later weighted to match census updates. While this is not optimal, it is an established technique for survey researchers everywhere. It is important that accurate census results continue to be made available on a timely basis.

One alternative to sample selection based on census information is using voter lists, a practice common in some countries, but not currently possible in Myanmar, where those lists are not yet completely public. Our most recent interviews suggest that while the government is meeting its goals for posting those lists, like any voter list there can be inadvertent errors. In our experience, existing lists created by the bureaucracy in any country are never perfect. Even in developed democracies, voter lists are often flawed (and any published list is out-of-date as soon as it is made available). Voter lists can include the names of some people who have moved residence, some who have since died, and even some who never existed in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

A graver issue in sample selection in Myanmar is the lack of easy access to much of the country. One practitioner suggested that cellphone coverage reaches only 15 percent of the country. In addition, continued fighting in ethnic areas restricts the ability of interviewers to travel safely through the entire country. While security concerns currently affect only a small percentage of the total population, they still limit survey coverage. Researchers in other countries also experience problems with safely polling all parts of the country. While it makes survey research more difficult, good surveys are still possible.<sup>8</sup>

At the local level in Myanmar, households are selected by a random process, much as they are in countries with a longer research tradition. Most Myanmar research companies we spoke with described techniques that are standard in international research: direct multi-stage sampling of geographical areas, then sampling of spots (villages or other small geographic units), then sampling of

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<sup>7</sup> We applaud People's Alliance for Credible Elections, PACE, a civil society organization, which has taken on the task of checking the demographic information contained in the Myanmar voter list by sampling from the published lists to test the accuracy of individual demographic data.

<sup>8</sup> Successful surveys have been carried out during fighting in areas of conflict including southern Thailand, parts of Mexico, and Iraq and Afghanistan.

dwelling by a random walk procedure, then identification of qualified individuals in the dwelling by means of screening questions, and then selection of an individual after listing all those eligible or through a [Kish grid](#) or some other randomized selection procedure.

There are examples of other, less standard types of selection. For a project that involved interviews with one particular social class, one organization sent out invitations in a community and then invited respondents to come to a central location to fill out a questionnaire. That would not be seen as an optimal procedure for most opinion studies, as there is only limited assurance of respondent privacy.

There is little public, media, or even elite understanding of the concept of sampling. During our interviews we often heard the complaint, “How can 3,000 people represent a country?” In fact, 3,000 people is a very large sample size for a national survey.

In most cases, a properly selected sample of much less than 3,000 respondents is large enough to represent a population. Polls with a sample of 1,000 have a sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points. A sample of 1,000 respondents for an entire country is the standard stipulation of the Gallup World Poll, the International Social Survey Programme, the Eurobarometer, the Asian Barometer, and other regional barometers.

Recent Myanmar surveys done for IRI and TAF had samples of 3,000 respondents. Large samples using random selection methods provide much greater accuracy for national findings, with error margins of only about 1.8 percentage points, and also provide estimation at subnational (i.e. region/state) levels and better estimates for minority groups.

Of course, larger sample sizes increase the costs of polls, and most of the time the larger sample is not necessary. Subnational details are valuable because they help explain differences between parts of the country or conflicts between ethnic groups, and such data is presumably available to IRI and The Asia Foundation. Few of these details are accessible to the public, however. [The Asia Foundation survey](#) reports differences between those who live in the regions (predominantly Burman) and those who live in the states (predominantly other ethnic groups) on many questions, but only on a few items are separate statistics presented for individual ethnic groups.

## **The language of interviewing**

While Burmese may be the primary language for two-thirds of the potential electorate, and an even larger percentage of potential respondents may be capable

of answering questions in it, not providing translations into more languages in a country with more than 100 spoken languages may exclude a significant percentage of the public.

In the Philippines, for example, while Filipino (Tagalog) is the dominant language, and approximately 80 percent of the population can speak it as a first or second language, official translations are routinely prepared in four other languages—Ilocano, Bicol, Ilonggo, and Cebuano, at least one of which is spoken as a first language by less than five percent of the population.<sup>9</sup>

One researcher told us that at least one of the major firms will only officially translate an English questionnaire into Burmese, and not into any of the minority languages of Myanmar, some of which are spoken by more than two million people. The Asia Foundation poll was translated into Kachin, Kayah, Chin, and Rakhine. We have been told that at least two organizations will now require official translations into those languages for their polls.

The process of producing a good translation involves several iterations and the production of a final text, which currently happens only for translations from English to the dominant language. Interviews not in the dominant language are mainly conducted with the help of a local speaker translating spontaneously. This seems to happen quite often: one researcher estimated that 30 to 40 percent of their interviews were done in minority languages this way. Having local, individualized translations is not a satisfactory solution, as researchers no longer maintain control over what exactly respondents hear because the translation may change from person to person.

The process of creating a valid translation and working with interviewers during their training is important to correct any misinterpretations and wrongly chosen words. It will also reveal any concepts which may be commonly used in English, but which may have little meaning to local populations, especially the rural population. Accurate minority language translations need to be developed and implemented systematically.

Even when the same survey company conducts polls, there may be somewhat different results that are due to question wording differences. The IRI and The Asia Foundation polls were both conducted by MSR and included very similar items about freedom of expression in Myanmar, yet the publicly available English-language versions suggest different conclusions. When asked “are people in Myanmar afraid to openly express their political views?” in the IRI poll,

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<sup>9</sup> In the United States, some polling organizations also interview in Spanish, especially for pre-election polling.



33 percent said “most” people were afraid, 20 percent said “some” were afraid, and 42 percent said “most” or “none” were *not* afraid. One interpretation of this could be that there was fear about expressing opinions from a majority of respondents. Yet when The Asia Foundation poll asked, “Do people feel free to express their political opinions in the area where you live?” 66 percent said “yes.” Superficially these responses contradict each other. But the questions—at least in English—are significantly different. One asks about the country as a whole, the other about freedom of expression where the respondent lives. And *neither asks about the respondent’s willingness to speak openly*, only about their perceptions of others. These differences might be better understood if both sponsoring organizations released the Burmese translation.<sup>10</sup>

### **Interviewers: Training and interviewer-respondent effects**

Interviewers are the face of the survey process to respondents. Training good interviewers is a continuing and ongoing process. First, interviewers must be taught the ethical and technical standards of good interviewing: the proper method of sampling households, respect for the respondent, the importance of confidentiality, and how to ask a questionnaire verbatim. But interviewers also need to be trained on each specific questionnaire, as each questionnaire is different in its purpose and its topics.

Survey researchers everywhere must deal with questions about whether the interviewer’s individual characteristics make a difference in the accuracy of the responses he or she receives. For example, in some Muslim cultures, women can only interview women. In the United States, especially in racially charged environments, African-Americans may give different answers to white interviewers than they give to black interviewers. In countries with large rural-urban differences, it may matter whether interviewers are sent from the central city to interview those in rural areas, or whether local residents conduct interviews. If the ethnicity of the interviewer is obvious to a respondent, that also may affect the results.

These interviewer-respondent effects vary from place to place. There is not enough of a polling history in Myanmar to know fully to what extent such effects exist in the country, but survey researchers must be attentive to the possibility.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Asia Foundation has provided the [Burmese language questionnaire](#) on line.

<sup>11</sup> Having a national association could provide a professional platform to share such information, and how to mitigate it.

## Confidentiality and privacy in the interviewing process

Interviewing in Myanmar is conducted face-to-face, with an interviewer asking a respondent questions.

There are considerations for “in person” interviewing everywhere. Privacy for respondents is critical, especially when there is widespread suspicion about the possibility of honest and legitimate survey research in the country. Are respondents answering questions privately, or are there other people present or listening in? Some organizations engaged in policy-related work have gathered groups together to fill out questionnaires. While this technique has been used in some other places, it is not the optimal method of gathering poll results. International research standards, such as the [ESOMAR/ICC Code](#) and the [ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls and Published Surveys](#) highlight the importance of promising confidentiality and privacy for the respondent, only collecting personal information that is necessary for the research study, and insuring that the information collected is used only for research purposes. That is far easier to do when information is collected individually, and not as part of a group.

While we believe Myanmar researchers work hard to protect their respondents’ privacy, two international research companies<sup>12</sup> have taken the additional step of using tablets to allow respondents to enter responses without having to speak their answers aloud. One researcher noted that using tablets eliminates the need for paper questionnaires and the possibility that those who may be opposed to the survey will confiscate the paper.

Using tablets can be a good approach, assuming that respondents are literate in the language of the questionnaire and have minimal computer skills.<sup>13</sup> The enormous limits in cell phone and data coverage in Myanmar limit the utility of tablets for now, however. If there is truly cellphone coverage in only 15 percent of the country, that means that transmittal of most data captured in tablets could take days of travel from the time of interview, which risks the accidental loss of data. This problem should diminish, and perhaps very quickly, as phone penetration increases.

Limited telephone coverage currently precludes the use of the telephone as an interviewing device. The telephone is often thought of as a more private means of gathering polling data than face-to-face interviewing.

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<sup>12</sup> TNS Myanmar and River Orchid.

<sup>13</sup> Tablets require only rudimentary computer capability, and when used in survey research few respondents experience difficulty.

## REPORTING POLLS AND UNDERSTANDING DATA

The lack of any journalistic history of reporting polls and the association of many Myanmar media with a political party means that survey results often are not reported as unbiased data, but instead as a political statement, to be applauded or criticized depending on whether or not the reporter agrees with the results. That happens as well in the reaction from many political leaders. The uproar after the publication of the IRI poll may be an indication of the lack of a tradition of non-partisan journalism. But it is also evidence of a lack of understanding among journalists, politicians, and civil society organizations about how to interpret public opinion poll results.

Several local organizations are capable of conducting good research, but the capacity for public and elite understanding of such research is rare and unevenly distributed among the political parties. Several people we spoke with told us that the USDP and the government had individuals who were capable of understanding public opinion polling results and how to use them; they were less sure of the capacity of the NLD and civil society organizations to do the same.

Several of the individuals we spoke with told us that civil society groups' frequent response to hearing poll findings that suggested positive assessment of *any* government activity was to reject the entire set of findings, even if other parts of the poll results supported the civil society organizations' point of view. Some published information from the IRI Poll demonstrated the political impact of Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD leader. For example, 54 percent supported repealing the constitutional amendment that bars someone who has married a foreigner from becoming president, while 64 percent supported repeal after being reminded that the constitution bars Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president. And the NDP scored higher than the USDP on many issues.<sup>14</sup>

The negative response to the IRI poll was exacerbated by the way the results were released. A Power Point presentation without an explanatory report is not sufficient, especially in a country where opinion polls are not a usual occurrence. Although IRI did produce a press release in [English](#) and in [Burmese](#), IRI was not able to control the interpretation of the results because it did not provide its own interpretation to go along with the presentation. If it had, that would have been quoted as the organization's—and the pollster's—official conclusions. Critics might have taken issue with the interpretation, but they would have had to

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<sup>14</sup> That also may demonstrate something that has been seen elsewhere in Southeast Asia: people may be more loyal to a person than to a political party.

report that interpretation. The IRI press release may simply have been too brief to deal with the nuances of the poll results.

IRI and USAID have indicated that they will no longer release such surveys publicly, given the negative response. IRI instead will return to what has been its more common practice, giving information about party standing only to that party, with no additional public release. If adopted, this policy would be regressive. Some of those results will almost certainly be leaked to the press, without any controls over the accuracy of the information by professional researchers and the sponsoring organizations. This ensures the public almost certainly will not receive accurate information about survey results. That is an unfortunate outcome, and one that will be determined by the organization's leadership, not only by its representatives in Myanmar. It undermines IRI's own goal of advancing democracy by building political parties that are **"issue-based and responsive"** to voters' needs. While the parties may receive information from these polls, voters will have no understanding of what other citizens are thinking or what their needs look like in the aggregate, and thus they will have no way to hold the parties accountable. This is in direct contradiction to what **IRI says on its website**: "IRI believes that a well-informed citizenry is paramount to democratic reform. Qualitative and quantitative research are pivotal to modern societies, and demystifying the process of research to ensure broader use and increased public trust in the results is a key goal of IRI's public survey research."

One way of informing the citizenry is in the disclosure of how polling is done. IRI has a generally open **disclosure policy** that includes most standard items for public polling information. IRI also disclosed the response rate, something which not all organizations, even in developed democracies, are willing to do. But IRI did not prominently indicate the language or languages in which the poll was conducted.

The Asia Foundation provided a press release and a long document summarizing its survey, with very detailed information about sampling and quality control. In addition, it released the complete questionnaire, in **English** and in **Burmese**, on its website (something that IRI did not provide). There were also presentations to various government and other political actors. However, while The Asia Foundation poll did not cause the uproar that the IRI poll did, the organization also lost control of all **of the narrative**. The unguided blanket release of so much information may have confused some journalists who are not used to reporting poll results. It produced so much public information in so many forms it was not clear what was meant for which group—media, parties, or other researchers. The

Asia Foundation's openness is preferable, however, to self-censorship by pollsters.

Myanmar Egress reported on a nearly two-year study of citizenship in Myanmar, which focused primarily on better-educated middle and lower-middle class respondents throughout the country, including ethnic states. The Myanmar Egress report makes clear that this is not a usual national random sample, and its description of how the data were collected appears complete.

## RESPONSES TO CRITICISMS OF POLLING HEARD IN MYANMAR

It is useful to review some of the criticisms we heard about opinion polling in Myanmar, and evaluate the relative validity of each statement.

1. *"The polls had to be approved by the government."* As we understand the process, the Ministry of Information must be notified that research will be conducted. In addition, local authorities are presented with a letter describing the research before interviews are conducted in the village. We have been told that while most research organizations are meticulous in following these rules, the actual impact on the process of data collection may be less severe than the law suggests. In many cases, according to one researcher who described what happened in one survey, interviews in a village were completed before the village leader had acted on—or even read—the interview request. Another organization admitted doing surveys without directly seeking permission from local leaders.

In most countries, such rules do not exist. Where they do exist, they are often ignored and not enforced. Though we wish these rules were not in place in Myanmar, it does not appear currently to prevent the conduct of good surveys, or to limit participation.

2. *"People in Myanmar are not willing to criticize the government."* This criticism has been levied at polls done in many countries, especially when they are emerging from military or dictatorial rule. There is no evidence for this: in countries which were part of the former Soviet Union, early surveys were able to measure dissatisfaction, and could do so from the very beginnings of survey research there. Similarly, good surveys were **conducted in Iraq** even while fighting continued. Researchers in Myanmar conducting opinion polls as early as 2012 told us they believed that respondents were able to offer their honest opinions. One researcher told us that even in those early surveys, many respondents were happy to criticize

the government's ability to provide jobs and create and improve the infrastructure. And people in Myanmar seem willing to participate. The IRI poll reported a response rate of 79 percent, much higher than the current response rates in developed democracies. The Asia Foundation survey response rate was even higher.

There is a secondary criticism that is linked to this anti-polling argument, which is that certain kinds of assessments are biased just by the act of asking about them. For example, some opposition supporters noted that it was unfair even to ask the public to assess the parties on issues like security and social welfare, as only the government and the USDP could do anything in these areas. We know from polls in other countries that publics do sometimes believe that parties not currently in power can do better than those in control, even on subjects that are part of governing, when the question is asked hypothetically.

3. *"The survey process is strange for local people; they cannot explain their real feelings."* When the United States military brought polling to Japan at the end of World War II, there were clearly norms that needed to be developed. Asking what "you" thought was not a Japanese construction. A person was more likely to be asked what "one" thought. In addition, interviewers were frequently younger than the respondents. In normal discourse they would have been unlikely to ask the types of questions contained in surveys.

We found no evidence of such difficulties in Myanmar. While The Asia Foundation survey found a general lack of knowledge about the details of Myanmar's government, that finding had more to do with the structure of the questionnaire, which contained many open-ended questions requiring political knowledge. Even in more politically developed countries, like the United States, many citizens are not able to name their member of Congress or understand the distinctions between the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.

In fact, if there was any lack of understanding in the Myanmar population about how to respond in surveys at the very beginning, it changed rapidly. Non-response, or "don't know" answers on specific questions dropped in one series of surveys conducted by the same organization from about 20 percent in 2012 to about 5 percent today. And there has been an intensification of the nature of opinion, with more Myanmar citizens willing now to say they feel something "strongly" than did so before.

One anti-polling argument we heard in Myanmar was that potential voters are not able to evaluate the parties, but do have opinions about individuals, namely some (but not all) party leaders. That is not unusual. Even in politically developed countries, many voters may not be able to articulate a political party's goals, but they are very much able to evaluate party leaders and other prominent politicians.

Several of those we spoke with claimed that polling is not suitable for Myanmar, and that other strategies for collecting opinion information, like focus groups or in-depth interviews, are better. Focus groups and in-depth interviews are good techniques for probing the reasoning behind opinion; however, they cannot substitute for properly conducted opinion polls, as they are more easily subject to manipulation and include too few respondents to be representative of the country.

4. *"People know who the poll is being conducted for, and tailor their responses accordingly."* This statement was common from those who did not believe the survey responses indicating positive assessments of certain government officials and actions. This is an issue that individual polls deal with differently. One researcher told us that even the interviewers do not know the sponsor of his project. While they can still make assumptions, there is no way the interviewer can knowingly convey such information to the respondents.
5. *"A sample of 3,000 is not large enough to represent the entire country."* This was by far the most common criticism we heard during our interviews. Some of the people we met began our conversations that way.

This criticism stems from a lack of training and education in survey research methods. A well-conducted survey that samples far fewer than 3,000 people can yield relatively precise estimates of statistics for the total population. As mentioned above, in many countries 1,000 is the standard sample size, and polls have accurately predicted elections on that sample base. Larger samples are taken to provide even more accuracy in estimation, as well as to be able to estimate population sub-groups, such as racial or ethnic minorities, or the attitudes of those in subnational units, like states or regions.

The closure of social sciences in the universities for many years may have contributed to complaints about polling, as few journalists or political elites appear

to understand the concept of sampling, but polling will not become an accepted social and political mechanism until public education increases the level of public understanding.

We hope that these concerns about polls will disappear over time, as younger adults become better educated about the value of survey data, and political elites become more comfortable with the existence of public polls.<sup>15</sup> Because these complaints will not disappear in the near future, pollsters have a responsibility to help in the education of both the public and political elites. Pollsters must continue to make their results public, along with explanations of the poll's methodology. This will improve public and elite ability to distinguish between reliable, scientific polls and unreliable, non-scientific ones.

Finally, we want to underscore our belief in the importance of the publication of poll findings, as indicated above in the section “Why Is Polling Important?” Informing individuals where they stand in relation to the rest of the public, or the rest of their group, will make them better citizens. As George Gallup wrote: “Public opinion can be a satisfactory guide only if we can hear it, and, what is equally important, it can hear itself. . . . [P]ublic opinion polls provide a swift and efficient method by which legislators, educators, experts, and editors, as well as ordinary citizens throughout the length and breadth of the country, can have a more reliable measure of the pulse of democracy.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this team include those directed at survey practitioners, those who commission opinion polls, and those who may support them financially. Although they are not directed at political actors and the media, our recommendations will affect these groups.

The simplest way to promote opinion polling in Myanmar is to familiarize the public with polls:

- Encourage conducting as many scientific polls as possible.
- Direct resources to whomever is ready, able, and willing to conduct and disseminate scientific polls.
- Emphasize the message that opinion polling is normal and necessary in a society that aspires to democracy.

These actions will get the public accustomed to learning about conditions in

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<sup>15</sup> In Malaysia, that process took about six to seven years, suggesting that Myanmar may be part of the way along that path. Questions about donor motives, however, may be more difficult to overcome.



Myanmar directly from surveys and polls and demonstrate that polling can operate without causing social disorder. We expect that attitudes towards polling will improve with time, but that may be a very slow process. The greater the number of polls, the faster this development will occur.

We have divided our recommendations into those we believe should be implemented before the fall election, and those that are designed for the longer term.

## FOR PRACTITIONERS:

### Immediate actions:

- Translate questionnaires into more languages. Shan and Karen, which are estimated to have several million speakers each, would be the first choices for translations.
- Insure interviewers are provided with clear instructions to protect respondent privacy as part of their general and study-specific training.
- Establish internal guidelines and strategies to minimize intervention by local authorities in the selection of households.<sup>16</sup>

### Longer-term actions:

- Form an *active* national association, open to all, to encourage good practice in survey research.
- Adopt international codes of practice and standards, such as the [ESOMAR/ICC Code](#) and the [ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls and Published Surveys](#) and track how practitioners adopt them. Self-regulation will develop the profession. Practitioners who follow international guidelines may want to highlight that fact as a mark of quality.

## FOR THOSE COMMISSIONING SURVEYS:

### Immediate actions:

- Provide clearer and more focused interpretive materials for understanding poll results when they are released to prevent misinterpretations from dominating the discussion.
- Release question wordings in English and in the language or languages in which the questionnaire was administered for all items publicly reported.

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<sup>16</sup> Based on experience elsewhere, in the long term the government should relinquish control and approval of the content of surveys in line with its commitment to democratization. Practitioners can then develop a code of self-enforcing professional ethics and a political sensibility about appropriate content.

### Longer-term actions:

- Consider a more “strategic” approach by commissioning surveys at regular intervals so that they become a feature in the media and public discourse. For example, conduct polls every quarter or six months, whether or not there is an upcoming election. As more polls are publicly released, the public and political leaders will become more comfortable with them. Properly measured public opinion on both political and social questions should become part of the public discussion.
- Conduct surveys on topics other than politics, so that polling is viewed as a way to learn about public needs and interests. Measuring the level of poverty and economic optimism on a regular basis will provide information about the state of society and how it is changing.
- Consider conducting polls in selected regions or states or with stratified sampling in specific areas to provide comparative data about regional and ethnic group concerns and preferences.

## FOR OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

### Immediate actions:

- Provide training opportunities for journalists and potential users of public opinion polls in the value of polls and how to understand them. Poll results should not be viewed as threats to any institution or person but as a helpful tool.
- Distribute summary information on the usefulness of sampling to journalists, government, and civil society organizations.
- Provide training for journalists on how to report polls. Some material is already available online, and international modules for online training are currently under development.
- Train political party activists on how to understand polls.

### Longer-term actions:

- Provide funding support for survey research methods in local universities so that the pool of talent and interest in the area can be expanded.
- Suggest development agencies require social impact assessments of development projects, so that they include survey research as a tool to gain public participation in development decisions.

- Help fund collaborative projects between news and research organizations for regular news polls. For journalists, many assumptions they make about public opinion can be tested through good public opinion polls.
- Develop and fund a local non-political and non-partisan institution to carry out polling on a regular basis as a step to promote and normalize polling as a tool to measure public views.
- Encourage collaborations between Myanmar civil society organizations and those in other countries within the region to share information about methods and results.
- Fund travel for practitioners and users to international polling workshops and conferences, including those sponsored by WAPOR, ESOMAR and ANPOR/Asian Network for Public Opinion Research, to regional institutes like SESRI in Qatar, and to international trainings at summer institutes in places like the University of Michigan. Sponsor workshops in Myanmar to expose opinion survey practices to local audiences.

# APPENDICES

## 1. THE EXPERT COMMITTEE

**KATHLEEN A. FRANKOVIC** chaired the expert committee. She spent more than three decades at CBS News as the point person for the CBS News Poll and the CBS News polling collaboration with The New York Times.

As Director of Surveys and a producer at CBS News, she was responsible for the design, management and reporting of those polls, working with journalists and frequently appearing on television and radio as an analyst of poll results. From 1996 to her retirement, she was a Senior Producer for CBS News election broadcasts, and beginning in 2002, she led the team which projected results of U.S. national and state elections for CBS News.

She retired from full-time work at CBS News in 2009, and has been an election and polling consultant for CBS News, YouGov, Harvard University, the Pew Research Center and other survey research organizations. She holds a PhD in political science from Rutgers University, and has been a professor at the University of Vermont and a visiting professor at Cornell University. She speaks and writes extensively about the role of polls in the media.

She has served as president of both the World Association for Public Opinion Research and the American Association for Public Opinion Research, and now sits on the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee. She has won many national awards for her work conducting and explaining public opinion for the news media, including the AAPOR Award for Lifetime Achievement.

**MAHAR MANGAHAS** is a Filipino economist who has done research on rice economics, land reform, poverty, hunger, income inequality, quality-of-life, governance, and public opinion.

In 1985, he co-founded Social Weather Stations (SWS; [www.sws.org.ph](http://www.sws.org.ph)), the Philippines' leading institute for quality-of-life monitoring, opinion polling, and social survey archiving. He has been its President since then. SWS produces core indicators of Philippine well-being and governance based on its quarterly nationwide Social Weather Surveys. The organization is the Philippine member of the International Social Survey Programme, the World Values Survey, Asian Barometer, and Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems, and is the Philippine field provider for the Gallup World Poll.

Mangahas was on the faculty of the University of the Philippines from 1962-81, reaching the rank of full Professor of Economics. He was UNICEF Consultant on Social Indicators for the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia, Vice President

for Research of the Development Academy of the Philippines, Editor of the *Philippine Economic Journal*, President of the Philippine Economic Society and the Marketing and Opinion Research Society of the Philippines, co-founder of the Philippine Agrarian Reform Foundation, co-founder of the Foundation for Economic Freedom, Philippine national representative of the World Association for Public Opinion Research, and board member of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies. He holds AB and MA degrees from the University of the Philippines and a PhD in Economics from the University of Chicago.

In 2001, Mangahas won the Helen Dinerman Award of the World Association for Public Opinion Research, its highest honor, for “championing the rights and freedoms of survey researchers in the Philippines,” after SWS successfully petitioned the Philippine Supreme Court to nullify a provision of the Fair Election Act banning the publication of pre-election surveys. In 2011, Mangahas won the University of Chicago Alumni Award for Public Service, for being “a powerful influence in helping to define a nation’s identity and to restore democracy by demonstrating the public will through numbers. ... [His] work—much of which was done under difficult political circumstances—has led to important public dialogue and policy changes for his nation.” In 2014, Mangahas won the Distinguished Research Fellow Award of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies, for career contributions to quality-of-life research.<sup>17</sup>

**IBRAHIM SUFFIAN** is co-founder and programs director of the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, a leading public opinion polling and political surveys organization in Malaysia. Besides undertaking research assignments, he is actively involved in briefings for the diplomatic and the financial community about political developments in Malaysia. He presently manages the center’s portfolio of clients, ranging from political parties to government departments to local and international institutions of higher learning. Through the center, he has been involved in organizing surveys in Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Brunei, Singapore, and Myanmar.

Prior to his role at the Merdeka Center, Suffian worked as a project finance specialist in a Malaysian investment bank and a project manager in an international development agency.

Suffian received his education from the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University and obtained an MBA from the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University. He was a *World Fellow* at Yale University in 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Mangahas’ opinion column “*Social Climate*” appears in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (inquirer.net) every Saturday.

## 2. LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED FOR THE REPORT

The Asia Foundation  
Beyda Institute  
Educational Initiatives  
IMG/EU Election Support Project  
International Federation for Electoral Systems  
International Republican Institute  
Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability  
Myanmar Development Resource Institute,  
Centre for Economic and Social Development  
Myanmar Egress  
Myanmar Market Research and Development Co.  
Myanmar Scholarship Alumni Association  
Myanmar Survey Research  
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs  
National League for Democracy Central Committee  
for Research and Strategic Studies  
Office of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi  
Open Myanmar Initiative  
People's Alliance for Credible Elections  
People's Assembly  
Pyidaungsu Institute for Peace and Dialogue  
Renaissance Institute  
River Orchid Insight

Salween Institute for Public Policy  
Sandhi Governance Institute  
TNS Myanmar  
United States Department of State  
United States Embassy, Myanmar  
Union Election Commission  
Union Solidarity and Development Party  
USAID  
Vriens & Partners Myanmar  
Yangon School of Political Science

