

# How Will the Burmese Armed Forces Vote in the Referendum?

Monday 24 March 2008, by [Min Lwin](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2008).

The Burmese military rank and file may not vote as a solid block in the May constitutional referendum, even though officers have ordered the troops to vote "Yes," according to military sources.

An order has been issued informing members of the military and their families—estimated to number about 1.2 million—to vote "Yes," but many will vote "No" if they are allowed to vote at polling stations outside military compounds, sources say.

Burmese soldiers march and sing at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremonies of Armed Forces Day. (Photo: AP)

Referendum observers say the May vote may not provide the approval the junta is counting on to continue its rule, and the armed forces vote could be crucial.

A sergeant stationed with the Central Command in Mandalay said, "Our officers have ordered us to vote 'Yes,' and they have taught us how to vote in the referendum."

"If I have a chance to go to a polling station out of the army compound, I will vote 'No,'" he said, "but if the voting is held in my battalion, I have no choice but to vote 'Yes.'"

Observers in Rangoon noted that Burmese military personnel, like the general public, have almost no detailed knowledge about the draft constitution. In addition, many in the military are involved with businesses, often illegal, run by ranking officers, or they are involved in kickbacks or bribes, which can create loyalty within the ranks.

Another factor is income and priorities. "The lower ranks in the military earn too little to provide even a meager living for a family," said a source. "And Burmese soldiers who work with outlaw businesses, I don't think they will make their bosses angry by voting 'No.'"

The son of a Warrant Officer 1<sup>st</sup> Class at Rangoon Command said, "I am thinking of which way to vote, but actually I have not read about the draft constitution yet." Actual details of the constitution have still not been published, and the exact date of the election has not been announced.

"I just want changes," said the officer's son. "We have suffered for years under the military dictatorship, and recent generals haven't taken real responsibility for the troops. They are below standard."

A doctor who has a clinic located near a battalion stationed in Rangoon told The Irrawaddy on Sunday that he sees little interest in politics among the military.

"They are not interested in the referendum as much as they concerned about the struggle to provide for their family because of low incomes," he said.

Of all the branches of the armed forces, the air force may have the most independent-minded troops, say observers.

"The officers' orders on how to vote are not as important as our discussions with one another," said a corporal at Meikhtilar Air Base in Mandalay Division.

Speaking for many of his comrades, he said, "We can not accept the draft constitution which, if approved, would result in a long-term guarantee for military rule."

During the 1988 uprising, some troops stationed at Mingaladon Air Base and Hmawbi Air Base took part in demonstration, and they were active in the 1990 election, voting for National League for Democracy (NLD) candidates. Troops stationed at Mingaladon, Hmawbi, Dagon, Maymyo, Meiktila voted in favor of the NLD, but the junta ignored the 1990 election results when it was clear the NLD had won by a landslide.

A retired sergeant in the Burmese navy, said, "I understand the referendum will allow the Snr-Gen Than Shwe to become U Than Shwe (U designates a civilian)." Many people believe Than Shwe will assume the leadership role in a civilian-led government, although it is expected to be packed with former military officers who would hold key posts.

"I think it [a civilian government] would not be different from what we have now," he said.

Observers speculate that Snr-Gen Than Shwe's speech on Armed Forces Day on March 27 could include important comments about the referendum and the general election.

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\* From the Irrawaddy:

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