

Burma's first election in 20 years - Coloring Between the Lines

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The chances that Burma's first election in 20 years will be free and fair are looking increasingly slim, but for ethnic leaders determined to make the most of the polls, the outcry from many in the democratic opposition and the international community is falling on deaf ears.

More than half of the parties planning to run in the Nov. 7 election—22 out of 37 parties approved by the junta-appointed Union Election Commission (EC)—are ethnic parties, most based in the predominantly ethnic areas that form Burma's political periphery. In most cases, however, these parties are led by figures whose ties to the ruling regime are at least as strong as their connections to the people they claim to represent.

But not all of the ethnic parties taking a shot at winning seats in November are puppets of the generals. Some see the election as a genuine opportunity to create some much-needed political space for Burma's long-marginalized ethnic minorities.

"We are working with our hearts full of patriotism," said Sai Aik Pao, the chairman of the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP), the strongest and arguably most independent of the ethnic parties. "If we don't contest, who will speak for Shan State?"

Like the National Democratic Front (NDF), a party that broke away from Aung San Suu Kyi's disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD) to run in this year's election, the SNDP was formed by former members of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), the party that won the second largest number of seats after the NLD in Burma's last election in 1990.

Far from seeing the election as a sham designed to keep power in the hands of Burma's current rulers, Sai Aik Pao said that this year's election would actually be more meaningful than the one in 1990 because this time around there is a constitution in place to ensure that the results are respected.

He also made it clear that he was taking his party's campaign seriously, despite the many obstacles hampering parties not under the direct control of the regime—including recent claims by SNDP sources that some members of the party have resigned due to harassment by the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

"I can't say we will win in every constituency we contest," he said. "It is rather like playing football: We are playing in the hope that we will win."

With 45 candidates running for seats in the People's Parliament, 15 for the Nationalities Parliament and 96 for the parliaments of Shan and Kachin states, the SNDP is the fourth largest party in the upcoming election, after the USDP, the National Unity Party (NUP), formerly the Burmese Socialist Programme Party founded by Burma's late dictator Ne Win, and the NDF. According to Sai Hla Kyaw, an SNDP central executive member, the party may also seek seats in Karenni State, where many Shan people reside, as well as Mandalay and Rangoon divisions.

Most of the other ethnic parties are much smaller and less well-known. They include the Kayin Peoples Party (KPP), the Chin Progressive Party (CPP), the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) and the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP). Most are fielding candidates only in their respective states. A notable exception is the KPP, an ethnic Karen party that will focus on contesting seats in Irrawaddy and Rangoon divisions, which have sizable Karen populations, but will skip Karen State completely.

The secretary-general of the KPP is Saw Say Wah, a former police colonel with ties to the Burmese junta. Like Sai Aik Pao, he has spent as much time trying to drum up enthusiasm for the election as he has seeking support for his party.

"We want to tell people not to boycott the vote," he said. "Please make the right choice for the right person. That's our message to the people."

Despite the fact that the party will not be running in Karen State, which has the largest proportion of ethnic Karen in the country, Saw Simon Tha, one of the KPP's founding members and a prominent figure in efforts to broker a cease-fire between the Burmese regime and the insurgent Karen National Union (KNU) in 2004, insists that it "will represent all of Burma's Karen people."

Another prominent pro-junta Karen figure who may assume a higher profile after the election is Saw Khin Soe, a former military attaché at the Burmese embassy in Tokyo. The retired former army colonel, who has campaigned on behalf of the USDP, is believed to have the trust of the Burmese regime and could be given the post of chief minister of Karen State after the election, according to Karen sources.

The KPP will field a total of 41 candidates—slightly fewer than the RNDP, which is fielding 44 candidates to contest two-thirds of Arakan State seats in the national and regional parliaments. The CPP will have 41 candidates contesting in almost every constituency in Chin State, while the AMRDP will field 33.

These numbers are dwarfed by the more than 1,100 candidates that the USDP plans to field, contesting in virtually every one of the 1,163 seats in the national and regional parliaments, excluding the 25 percent of seats reserved for military appointees. The NUP, which suffered an overwhelming defeat in the 1990 election, will run 999 candidates, while the NDF will field 163 candidates, mainly in Rangoon and Mandalay divisions.

While the odds of non-regime-supported parties actually winning seats are very small, simply reaching the stage where they will be able to compete can be seen as a major accomplishment given the highly opaque process by which parties were approved by the EC. Many parties have not gotten this far, for reasons that have gone largely unexplained.

Notably absent from the list of parties running in the election is the Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP), founded by Tu Ja, the former vice chairman of the cease-fire Kachin Independence Army (KIA), who was also denied an opportunity to run as an independent candidate. Two other Kachin parties—the Northern Shan State Progressive Party and the United Democracy Party (Kachin State)—were similarly shut out of the election.

"We feel upset. We feel that we're not getting equal rights. There is no equality," said KSPP Secretary Tu Raw, responding to the EC's repeated refusal to provide any explanation for rejecting the party.

However, to ensure that Kachins have someone to vote for if they decline to cast ballots for parties dominated by ethnic Burmans, the EC has approved the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State, led by pro-regime Kachin businessman Khat Htain Nan, who was quick to announce that his party would be willing to "form an alliance with others parties if we share the same policies, commitment and determination—with any kind of party, such as the USDP and NUP."

A cursory look at many of the other ethnic parties that won EC approval reveals a similar orientation. The AMRDP, for instance, is chaired by Nai Ngwe Thein, a Mon professor and former civil servant with close ties to the Burmese authorities.

According to Aye Thar Aung, a prominent Rangoon-based ethnic Arakanese politician, the problem is not just with the EC, but with the entire process leading up to the election, beginning with the National Convention that took more than a decade to draft the 2008 Constitution.

“The Constitution will not protect the rights of Burma’s ethnic minorities. That’s why we are saying that the election will grant no rights for ethnic people,” said Aye Thar Aung, who is the chairman of the Arakanese League for Democracy (ALD) and secretary of the Committee Representing the People’s Parliament, a body formed in 1998 to push for recognition of the 1990 election results. Like most parties that ran in 1990 and were never allowed to sit in parliament, the ALD has been officially disbanded for refusing to take part in this year’s election. By thus eliminating credible voices for the country’s ethnic minorities, the regime has effectively given them no choice but to accept junta proxy parties or take their chances on ethnic-affiliated parties that are, as often as not, tainted by ties to the ruling generals.

More ominously, the threat of a return to open hostilities between the Burmese army and ethnic cease-fire groups that have refused to join the border guard force scheme continues to hang over Burma’s predominantly ethnic areas. While a handful of smaller ethnic armies have acceded to the plan, the strongest cease-fire groups—the KIA and the United Wa State Army, based in northern and eastern Shan State—have refused to transform their troops into forces under Burmese command. While some ethnic leaders maintain that the election will finally give their people a long-awaited opportunity to find representation in Burma’s political affairs, others are understandably doubtful that this will happen, at least in the near term.

“Even if they win some constituencies, they will still be controlled by the Burmese regime,” said Zipporah Sein, the secretary-general of the KNU.

P.S.

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