

The junta chief's speech on March 27 indicates he is unwilling to allow international observers to monitor Burma's election process.

First it was the election law, which flouted all international norms of a participatory democracy. Now, Burmese military strongman, Snr-Gen Than Shwe has apparently delivered another killer blow as he sends out clear signals that the junta will not allow international observers to monitor the electoral process.

If the general's seven-minute speech—which he made in Naypyidaw on March 27 to mark the country's Armed Forces Day—is anything to go by, then it is almost certain that the election will be controlled without any presence of foreign groups and election monitors.

“During the transition to an unfamiliar system, countries with greater experience usually interfere and take advantage for their own interests,” he said. “For this reason, it is an absolute necessity to avoid relying on external powers.”

To many observers and political analysts, Than Shwe's remarks indicate a closing of doors to international election observers.

Altafur Rahman, the executive director of the Bangkok-based NGO Human Security Alliance, said, “The tone in the speech strongly suggests that the junta will control every step in the process and ensure that political affiliations, especially the opposition, do not manage to muster up enough support from the international community to derail its plans of entrenching itself in the new order for a long time to come.”

For now, that looks like being a high possibility.

“Without international monitoring of the Burmese elections, these elections cannot be considered legitimate,” said an election monitor who did not want to be identified for reasons of security.

Many international observer groups are keen on observing the Burmese general election, even

though there has been a general acceptance that it will be a sham. “It is important to see how a process is manipulated so that it is recorded and documented,” said another international election monitor.

Some of the key international groups that have been following the developments regarding the proposed election, likely in October or early November, are: the European Union; the National Democratic Institute; the Carter Center; and the International Republican Institute (IRI). Regionally, the most prominent observer would be the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), which is based in Bangkok.

Several Western embassies have taken a keen interest in the election monitoring of emerging democracies in Asia. Perhaps Burma is on their radar.

Meanwhile, what is worth noting are the carefully chosen words that Burma's military ruler used to articulate his thoughts on “the process of fostering democracy.” He said that “improper and inappropriate campaigns” would not be allowed. This is subject to interpretation: during “normal” election campaigns, candidates and parties are expected to be critical of each other, especially in cases where the incumbent parties have not lived up to expectations.

It goes without saying that in any democracy, or any experiment with democracy, there must be sufficient space for engaging in debates and constructive arguments in order to keep the public more awake to policies and issues concerning the country and its people.

In Bangladesh and India—both Burma's neighbors—verbal assaults by the opposition against ruling parties are a common feature of elections.

But in Burma's case, where the military is in control of every aspect of society, even the Election Commission, it would be anyone's guess as to what may be regarded as an election offense. “Talking about the political rights of prisoners and the rather abysmal human rights record of the present government would be easily branded as 'offensive' and even considered as slander against the junta and its allies,” said Peng Soe, an exiled Burmese election observer.

Bangkok-based analysts on Burma see very little hope in the election. Most believe that the Than Shwe administration is guided by the thinking that transforming to a civilian rule with control remaining within the military would help the junta to achieve two things: it would legitimize the election; and it would promote Burma in international circles as a democracy in transition.

In his Armed Forces Day speech, Than Shwe said that many members of the military were once politicians, and that election would make them civilians once again. Most observers took the statement to be a warning that the military can intervene to stop an election campaign at any time.

This is tantamount to a blatant violation of all international norms and practices of how democratic elections should be managed and run.

Perhaps the junta leader needs to be reminded about minimum internationally recognized benchmarks that a country is expected to follow to conduct a credible electoral process.

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