

Several ethnic leaders reaffirm that they will not participate in the election without a review of the 2008 Constitutional and the release of all political prisoners.

Several ethnic leaders elected in Burma's 1990 election reaffirmed this week that they will not participate in the planned election this year without a review of the 2008 Constitutional and the release of all political prisoners—two major demands they have been pressing for since early last year.

“We will not found any political party if the 2008 Constitution cannot guarantee us equality and autonomy,” said 76-year-old Thar Ban, the acting chairman of the Arakan League for Democracy.

Pu Cin Sian Thang, a spokesman for the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), a coalition of 12 ethnic parties which contested and won 67 seats in the 1990 election, said that the alliance's attitude toward the planned election is not much different from the National League for Democracy's (NLD) Shwegondaing Declaration.

The Shwegondaing Declaration, released by the NLD in April last year, calls for a review of the controversial Constitution, political dialogue and the unconditional release of all political prisoners, including its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

“The reason for this stand is that we contributed to the Shwegondaing Declaration even though it was not publicly known,” said Pu Cin Sian Thang, who is also the chairman of the Zomi National Congress, an ethnic Chin political party.

Many of the 12 parties comprising the UNA were abolished after the 1990 election by the military regime, which cited various reasons—one of them for not having enough membership on their central executive committees.

In February last year, the UNA issued a statement condemning the Constitution as a means to make Burma's ethnic nationalities subordinates to the Burman majority, and because it hands “supreme power” to the military's commander in chief.

“Our participation in the election without changing the undemocratic elements of the Constitution would validate this whole Constitution as soon as the first session of parliament is held,” said Pu Cin Sian Thang in a telephone interview with *The Irrawaddy*.

He said the Zomi National Congress will base its decision on how the NLD responds at that time. However, soon after the regime announces the electoral law, many political groups including the NLD and the UNA will have to announce their final decision on whether to participate or not.

“We will not follow exactly what the NLD does,” he added. “But we have to look at its responses since it represents the majority of the people.

“However,” he added, “if the Constitution remains unchanged, we will in no way join in the election.”

Another ethnic leader, Naing Ngwe Thein, who is the chairman of the Mon National Democratic Front, said his political party's position on the election is the same as the UNA's.

But while a stalemate remains between the regime and several ethnic cease-fire groups, such as the United Wa State Army and the Kachin Independence Army, over the Border Guard Force proposal, other ethnic leaders like Dr. Tuja, the former vice-president of the Kachin Independence Organization, have stated their willingness to participate in the election.

“We have no objection if anyone wants to join in the election,” said Naing Ngwe Thein. “But history will judge who is on the right side and who is on the wrong side.”