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DANANG, Vietnam — Burma's first general elections in two decades will be free, fair and credible, the country's foreign minister told his Southeast Asian neighbors at a regional conference in Vietnam on Thursday.

Burma's ruling junta has promised to hold the elections this year but has yet to set a date. Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi will not be allowed to participate, and critics have argued that the balloting will only extend the military's authoritarian leadership.

At a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Burmese foreign minister Nyan Win reiterated his government's stance that elections will be held this year and are part of its "roadmap" to democracy, said Surin Pitsuwan, the group's secretary-general.

"The Asean ministers have expressed their high hope that the issue of Myanmar [Burma] will be resolved this year and then we can move forward to a new era of Asean's relations and cooperation with international community," Surin said.

Indonesia has been outspoken about the need for Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy, or NLD, to be allowed to participate in the elections. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate has been detained for 14 of the past 20 years, mostly under house arrest.

"We want to be sure that Aung San Suu Kyi has the possibility and opportunity to interact with her party colleagues," said Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa. "This is for the NLD to decide how they will approach the elections, whether they will participate or not participate."

Burma's dismal human rights record and the ruling generals' tightfisted hold on power have been a thorny issue among the members of Asean, which is built on a foundation of noninterference. Western countries, including the US, have urged Asean leaders to pressure Burma to move forward with democratic elections.

Natalegawa said he felt the situation with Burma had improved over last year because at least now the generals are engaging with the US and the European Union.

"How the election is conducted and how it is perceived will mean a great deal in shaping the international perception about our region," he said.

Last month the United Nations General Assembly called on Burma to hold free and fair elections that allowed all political parties to participate.

Suu Kyi's party won the last elections in 1990. The results were never honored by the junta, which has ruled the country since 1962.