

Burma's military authorities try unsuccessfully to pressure Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi into accepting the government's election process in return for their release.

Burma's military authorities have recently tried unsuccessfully to pressure jailed members of the 88 Generation Students group into accepting the government's election process in return for their release, according to one of their colleagues.

"I can confirm that an exchange took place between military authorities and 88 Generation Student leaders Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi," said Soe Tun, a 39-year-old former political prisoner and a leading member of the 88 Generation group who is now in hiding. "However, they didn't cave in to any form of pressure."

Last week, the 88 Generation Students group issued a statement calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners so that all stakeholders can participate in the political process. The statement also urges the regime to seek peaceful ways in resolving the conflicts with armed ethnic groups.

Speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Monday, Soe Tun said that Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi refused the regime's offer to "sign a 401," which would effectively suspend their sentences and allow for their release. The offer was on the condition that both leaders accept the junta's election process, which is due to be held this year.

Section 401 of the Burma's Criminal Procedure Code is a mechanism used by the Burmese regime to provide suspended sentences to jailed political activists.

"Their response, as far as I know, was that they want to see a dialogue between all the political stakeholders and the regime," said Soe Tun, who went into hiding after the 2007 Saffron Revolution was brutally suppressed by the Burmese junta. He added that both student leaders refused to sign a 401 during their previous periods of incarceration.

Both Min Ko Naing, 47, and Ko Ko Gyi, 48, spent nearly 15 years in jail as political prisoners until they were released in the years 2004 and 2005 respectively. The two student leaders were rearrested in 2007 for taking part in demonstrations against a hike in fuel prices and are currently serving 65-year sentences in different prisons in Shan State in northern Burma.

In a letter from his prison cell late last year, another imprisoned 88 Generation Students group leader, Hla Myo Naung, called for a blanket amnesty for Burma's political prisoners before this year's election and an inclusive political process, and said these were two of the cornerstones of the group's election policy.

Asked to clarify his group's stance, Soe Tun said, "We are not rigid. We are ready to accept the best options for the sake of the country."

Meanwhile, the British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Ivan Lewis said that "as long as the elections are contested on the current Constitution, whatever the outcome they cannot be recognized by the international community."