

Burma's state-run media has announced that registration has begun for parties planning to participate in this year's election.

RANGOON — Burma's ruling junta opened the registration period on Thursday for political parties planning to take part in this year's election, in what the regime bills as a key step toward democracy but which critics suspect will entrench the country's military rulers.

State radio and television announced that new and existing parties can register at the Election Commission office in the administrative capital of Naypyidaw. The government also published texts of new bylaws for party registration and polling.

Under an election law announced earlier this month, parties must register by May 7.

This year's planned election is part of the junta's "road map to democracy," but critics say the military shows little sign of relinquishing control and note that the regime has made every effort to prevent opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from taking part in the polls.

Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), has said it will decide by the end of this month whether to take part in the election—the first since 1990, when the NLD won overwhelmingly, but the regime refused to hand over power.

The junta has not yet set an exact date for the polls. The newly released laws set deadlines for legal actions by parties that seem to imply the polls will be held no earlier than November.

One recently enacted electoral law prevents Suu Kyi from running in the election and forces the Nobel Peace Prize laureate out of the party she helped found because of her conviction on charges of violating her house arrest when an American man swam uninvited to her lakeside property.

Suu Kyi is currently serving an 18-month term of house arrest. Many other top members of her party and ethnic-based parties are also serving prison sentences. Suu Kyi has spent 14 of the past 20 years in detention.

The new bylaws tighten electoral registration rules, with a new 1,000-person minimum for parties and higher fees for parties and candidates.

Parties now must pay a registration fee 300,000 kyat (about US \$300) compared to the 500 kyat (\$5) fee required for the election in 1990. Candidates must deposit 500,000 kyat (\$500), compared to 10,000 kyat (\$10) in the last election 20 years ago.