

An official at the US embassy in Bangkok says Burma's election law must be amended, and reiterated calls for the release of political prisoners and an inclusive dialogue.

An official at the US embassy in Bangkok has said that Burma's recently announced election law must be amended, otherwise the scheduled 2010 polls will be “very difficult to judge as free, fair or credible.”

Addressing a forum on Burma at Chulalongkorn University on Monday, George Kent, who is Political Counsel at the US embassy in Thailand, compared the military junta's handpicked Electoral Commission—which has veto powers over candidates—to a similar system used by the rulers of Iran. He said that although the US is “trying to take advantage of any potential openings presented by the election period,” the electoral laws and bylaws indicate that “the government does not have the intention to respond.”

He reiterated calls for the release of all political prisoners and the holding of an inclusive dialogue process in Burma before the election is held.

Kent added that the US is “closely considering” the recent report and recommendations made by UN Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana, including the suggestion that the UN Security Council discuss the possible establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma.

Earlier an array of activists, journalists, academics and civil society groups discussed the proposed election, with divisions emerging over whether the polls represented a real opportunity for change in Burma.

The main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), is due to announce on March 29 whether or not it will participate in the election, with political prisoners including its leader Aung San Suu Kyi barred from running. The NLD will have to expel Suu Kyi if it wants to participate, according to the election law.

Dr. Nay Win Maung, the co-founder of Rangoon-based NGO EGRESS, said, “Those of us inside the country do not have the luxury of opposing the election,” which he said he believes will lead to a form of “liberal authoritarianism,” which, though imperfect, will be better than the

status quo, he said.

“If we do not go through with the election,” he said, “we are choosing to push continued military rule.”

That viewpoint runs counter to the view that by participating in an election, the opposition parties would lend credence to the process that “leads to a ‘civilianization’ of government, rather than a civilian government,” said Larry Jagan, a Burma expert and former BBC correspondent covering Asia.

Dr. Maung Zarni, now a visiting fellow at Chulalongkorn University, paid tribute to the dissidents and more than 2,100 political prisoners inside Burma. Dr. Zarni said he believes that many of the political prisoners could secure their release by swearing their loyalty to the regime and co-operating with its self-described “Roadmap to Democracy.”

“But they decide to stay in jail, for what they believe in,” he said.

Burmese activists in exile have asked that the international community to refuse to recognize the upcoming election, and groups such as the Karen National Union have already declared that they will not participate.

Thein Oo was elected as MP for the NLD in the 1990 election, which the military overturned after a resounding NLD victory. Speaking last week at the launch of a petition to oppose the election, he said that “parties cannot campaign or participate when the law obliges them to kick out their leadership or many of their key members in advance.”

Advocating optimism, Aung Naing Oo of the Vahu Development Institute said that people need to “think outside the ballot box.” Ethnic minorities will have some devolved powers, he said, and should avail of this new opportunity to acquire a greater say in how Burma is run.

“There are some good generals, from the various ethnic groups, who may decide to run for parliament,” he said. “We should be trying to support those people.”

However the decades-old, on-off fighting between the Burmese-dominated military and the ethnic groups will not be resolved by this election, according to *The Irrawaddy* editor Aung Zaw, who said that without any reconciliation there will not be any positive political change in Burma.

The Burmese army is reported to be sending reinforcements to ethnic minority strongholds after ethnic militias defied four deadlines to stand down and become part of the state border guard forces.

Director of the Brussels-based Euro-Burma Office, Harn Yawngkhwe comes from the Shan region of Burma. He recalled that military concerns about possible separatism among ethnic groups motivated the 1962 coup, when the military took power in Burma. “They may offer some concessions,” he said, “but will not negotiate on key issues that the ethnic representatives want.”

Other potential chinks of light, according to some observers, include the recent spate of privatizations undertaken by the junta. Dr. Nay Win Maung believes that by changing the relationship between the state and market, the regime is facilitating what could be a different engagement between government and civil society.

However, Canadian Ambassador to Thailand Ron Hoffman said that his government was concerned at the “moribund services and lack of transparency” in the privatization process, which Dr. Zarni compared with the firesale of Russia's economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when state assets and resources went for a relative pittance to former regime insiders turned entrepreneurs.

“All this will do is expand and deepen the regime's economic comfort zone,” he concluded.