

Burma's Rohingya community are reportedly forming a political party and intend to contest the upcoming elections.

The Rohingya, the Muslim minority living primarily in Burma's western Arakan State, will form a political party and contest the upcoming elections although most Rohingya are not currently Burmese citizens, according to sources close to prominent members of the Rohingya community.

"They [the Rohingyas] will form a party. They contacted us so we could help each other," said Ohn Lwin, the leader of a separate party called the National Political Alliance. Ohn Lwin said the leader of the new Rohingya party will be Ohn Tin, a Rohingya living in Rangoon.

The new Rohingya party has not yet registered nor chosen a name. "They won't put the word 'Rohingya' in the name of their party because the current regime does not recognize them as an official ethnic group," said Ohn Lwin. Some sources said the new Rohingya party would be named the "Myanmar Bengalis."

Despite the fact that a vast majority of the Rohingyas in Burma live in Arakan State, according to Ohn Lwin, the new Rohingya party plans to contest nationally in constituencies such as: Sittwe, Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Rathedaung in Arakan State; Kyaukse, Meiktila and Yamethin in Mandalay Division; Mingalar Taung Nyunt, Thingangyun and Tamwe in Rangoon Division; and Moulmein in Mon State.

Although it would appear difficult for the primarily non-citizen Rohingya community to form a viable political party, the Burmese military regime, who in the past have ruthlessly oppressed the Rohingya, appear to be aiding the process and solving the citizenship problem, at least for purposes of the election.

According to the new electoral law, people holding a temporary identification card may vote if they are 18 or older.

In early February, local immigration officials in Arakan State reportedly issued temporary ID cards to adult Rohingyas with the help of the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and National Unity Party (NUP) to make them eligible to cast ballots in the upcoming election. According to sources, each Rohingya had to pay 3,500 kyat (US \$3.50) for the temporary ID cards and approximately 60 percent of the Rohingya living in Arakan State now have cards.

Sources also told *The Irrawaddy* that in mid-March, Brig-Gen Phone Swe, deputy minister for home affairs, joined some Rohingya businessmen on a one week campaign trip to Rohingya regions in Arakan State such as Buthidaung and Maungdaw.

So although it remains to be seen what direction the new Rohingya party will choose, observers say the regime appears to be enlisting the Rohingya on its own behalf.

In fact, Aung Zaw Win and Aung Naing, two Rohingya businessmen who live in Rangoon, will reportedly contest the elections as a separate proxy party of the Burmese regime. They have already campaigned together with pro-junta groups such as the USDA and NUP, according to sources close to the Rohingya community.

The Rohingya are the second largest ethnic group in Arakan State, after the Rakhine. Rohingya are in the majority in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships, in the northern part of the state. They comprise nearly 30 percent of the state's population of 2.75 million people.

The Rohingya face harsh treatment by Burmese authorities. They are prohibited from traveling outside Arakan State and are further marginalized by other discriminatory laws. Normally, Rohingya people are not recognized as citizens of Burma even though many were born there and have lived in northwestern Arakan State all their lives.

Despite this historical oppression, from the beginning of the Burmese state, in 1948, the government has brought the Rohingya into the fold when it served its purposes.

The Rohingya people were first recognized by U Nu, Burma's first prime minister.

U Nu and his colleague, Ba Swe, of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), publicly stated in their campaign speeches that the "Bengali Muslims" were recognized among Burma's ethnic races under the name of "Rohingya." Then some AFPFL leaders in the area granted instant citizenship to the new influx of Bengalis to allow them to cast votes for their party.

This trend of allowing Rohingyas to vote has continued under the current military regime, despite the fact that the regime officially declared the Rohingya stateless in 1982.

In the 1990 general election, Rohingya were allowed to vote and four Rohingya won constituencies in northern Arakan State such as Buthidaung and Maungdaw. In 2008, the Rohingya were allowed to vote in the referendum using the same type of temporary ID cards currently being issued.