

Reports coming out of Shan State in northeast Burma suggest the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the authorities are collecting advance pro-USDP votes through intimidation in many rural area across Shan State.

According to the Shan State election watch group, the authorities are forcing villagers to vote in advance in villages near Kyethi, Lashio, Mong Ya, and Tang Yan Townships.

“Township sub Election Commission (EC) and authorities have collected advance ballot papers from the chief poll officer, but when villagers went to vote authorities got their signatures on the voter list and marked the ballot papers themselves,” said a member of the watch group speaking on condition of anonymity.

The Shan National Democracy Party (SNDP), the largest ethnic party contesting the election in Shan State, complained to the EC about the cheating in advanced voting but no action has been taken yet.

“The Sub EC tried to get everybody to vote for the USDP,” said Lote Paung, leader of the Wa National Unity Party that will contest in Tang Yan Township in Northern Shan State. “The abuse was so flagrant despite the fact that the USDP is the most likely to win in any case.

“They planned the advance vote tactic long ago and there was nothing we could do,” he said.

In one village near Lashio Township, USDP candidate Sai Kyu has been collecting the names of residents and their signatures to back the USDP since November 3, using the village headman who is his son-in-law.

USDP candidate Sai Myint Aye who will contest a seat in the National Parliament in Lashio Township called 300 villagers to the temple in Tarpon village monastery and forced them to vote for the USDP.”

“He [Sai Myint Aye] threatened them even though the villagers didn't want to vote,” one poll-watcher said.

In an incident during collection of advanced votes in Tigyaing Township, a villager called Hla Pe voted for the SNDP, whereupon the township judge threatened him with jail and the ward chairman wanted to physically assault him.

“Hla Pe held out his hands to be shackled, but there were many witnesses and the authorities decided to do nothing,” said a local resident.

Meanwhile, a group of Wa National Unity Party supporters who had been campaigning for two days around Panghsang Township were driven from the area by the United Wa State Army, which is not allowing election campaigning in that area, sources said.

The Taaung (Palaung) National Party (PNP), the second largest ethnic party in Shan State, claims it will win in Namhsang and Mongton Township constituencies in Northern Shan State because there are no rival Parties, said PNP Chairman Eik Mone.

“At first the USDP was going to run against us but when they reviewed the situation, they gave up,” he said.

The Inn National Development Party also seems assured of a solid vote from Inn ethnic people living near Burma's famous Inle Lake in Shan State. “We will be voting only for our ethnic party,” a villager said.

Speaking to The Irrawaddy on Friday, Win Myint, leader of the Inn National Development Party based in Nyaung Shwe in Southern Shan State said police and government personnel in the area had to vote in advance and the USDP is paying 5000 kyat [US \$5] to each of their agents who are monitoring polling stations.

“Our members will monitor the polling stations out of a sense of duty,” said Win Myint. “We have already complained that the USDP is using our logo on their sample ballot paper and we are watching closely to see whether USDP polling station monitors will wear campaign T-shirts on election day in violation of EC rules. We shall complain if they do.”

Many local residents in Taunggyi Township in Shan State say they have little time to care about the elections, however, as Nov. 7 coincides with the annual Festival of Light when residents launch hot-air balloons into the night sky.

“We are so busy making balloons that we have no time to care about the elections,” said one resident.