

Citing strong objections over the reported cases of advance voting abuses by officials ahead of Sunday's general election in Burma, two major ethnic political parties declared on Friday that they will most likely contest the elections results.

Several reports have come out of Burma in the final week before the election that large swaths of the Burmese electorate—ranging from teachers to students and from civil servants to factory workers—were being forced to cast advance ballots for the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) by a collaboration of USDP representatives and local authorities.

On Friday, two major ethnic parties, All Mon Region Democracy Party based in Moulmein Township in Mon State, and Rakhine [Arakan] National Development Party (RNDP) based in Arakan State, said that they will not recognize the election results if the returns were overwhelmingly lopsided in favor of the USDP, which is led by Prime Minister Thein Sein and other top junta officials.

“If the USDP wins the polls due to the influence and resources of the government, then ethnic and other pro-democracy parties will boycott the election results,” said Dr. Aye Maung, the chairman of RNDP, which is contesting 44 parliamentary seats, mainly in Arakan State.

He said that the election commission officials in Arakan State are “totally toothless” and that USDP leaders are abusing their powers to secure advanced votes for themselves.

Naing Ngwe Thein, the chairman of the All Mon Region Democracy Party, based in Mon State, said that the election results will be “void of validity” in the event of extreme abuse of the voting system. His party will contest 50 constituencies in Mon and Karen states on Sunday.

Speaking to The Irrawaddy, leaders of Rangoon-based opposition parties said that they have received no response from the junta-appointed Election Commission about their complaints over the cases which they said are aimed at winning a landslide victory for the USDP.

“What these ethnic leaders are saying is completely true,” said Khin Maung Swe, the leader of National Democratic Force. “This is going on a large scale. Just today, one of our candidates told us all the voters in Lay Khite village in Kengtung in Shan State are being forced to cast early ballots for the USDP.

“He called us for help. But we are helpless,” he said. “We can do nothing. Possibly, there will be a boycott of the poll results due to these incidents.”

Having faced a series of restrictions on their activities imposed by the regime for several months, several party leaders in Rangoon said they are in a “wait-and-see mode” without giving away any hint of whether they will withdraw from the polls or contest the results.

According to the latest reports, most of the incidents of forced advance voting are attributed to a collaboration of USDP representatives and local authorities, and are being staged at different regions across the country outside the main cities of Rangoon and Mandalay.

Observers say that the polls in such areas are virtually concluded, whereas in major cities such as Rangoon and Mandalay, those cases occur at a more indirect and subtle level. In those cities, observers say, such election scenes will be witnessed.

The regime has rejected offers of assistance at the polls from the United Nations and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, saying that Burma needs no such help since it has “abundant experience” with elections.

Instead, the regime said it will arrange for foreign diplomats and UN representatives in the country to make a tour of polling stations on election day. According to diplomatic sources, US embassy officials in Rangoon might not participate in the election tours and intend to make their own arrangements to observe polls.

Opposition parties say they do not have enough manpower to send election observers to all the polling stations they contest—Rangoon Division alone has more than 6,000 polling stations.

Rangoon sources have said that members of Swan-Arr-Shin—an organization of hired thugs used by the regime to crack down on dissidents—will be present at polling stations alongside the security forces to prevent any serious scrutiny of the voting process.