

Despite the fact that the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is collecting advanced votes using controversial methods and is engaging in other forms of vote manipulation, ethnic political parties still believe their candidates have a chance to win in Sunday's election.

Speaking to The Irrawaddy on Saturday from the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) headquarters in Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State, campaign organizer Kyaw Maung said that although the USDP is pushing to collect advance votes from local people, 80 percent are still supporting the SNDP.

"Today, authorities distributed to every home the card to take to the polling station while voting," said a local resident from Taunggyi. "I made an advance vote for the SNDP already because I will be monitoring a polling station on election day."

Sai Tin, a SNDP candidate from Lacha Township in southern Shan State, also said that although the USDP is collecting advance votes from villagers, the SNDP will win in his township.

However, a Shan State election watch group said that, while it is hard to predict, the SNDP will most likely not be able to win more than 20 townships in the state because many government personnel live in townships like Namkhan and Taingying.

"The winner will not have a large margin. The USDP has targeted certain areas that they would like to win. They do not want to share those areas with ethnic parties, and they will win those constituencies by hook or by crook," said an election observer in Shan State.

Aye Maung, the chairman of the Rakhine (Arakan) Nationalities Development Party, said that USDP is misusing its power.

"If the election is fair, we will win. And if the USDP wins by using illegal or unfair methods, we will complain," said Aye Maung.

In Arakan State, although residents of the Cyclone Giri affected area are more focused on rebuilding their homes and lives than on the election, the USDP is forcibly collecting advance votes in that area, according to a local resident.

In Taunggok Township in Arakan State, most local people do not intend to vote because there is no ethnic party that represents them, said a resident of the township.

Nai Ngwe Thein, the chairman of the All Mon Region Democracy Party, predicted that his party will receive many votes in Mon State. "If the USDP do not use dirty tricks, Mon people will vote for their Mon party and we will win," he said.

In Moulmien, the capital of Mon State, when local people saw the photos of the USDP and National Unity Party candidates on pamphlets that were handed to them, some threw the pamphlet on the ground, said a local resident.

“The Election Commission broke the law—members of the sub-election commission have distributed pamphlets for USDP,” said another Moulmien local who will serve as a poll monitor. “If people must vote in the election, they will vote for the Mon party. I’ll also vote for the Mon party.”

He said that many locals loathe the USDP because they are aware that it is backed by the military regime and its predecessor, the United Solidarity and Development Association, was involved in the government crackdown during the monk-led “safran revolution” in 2007.

“If there is no pressure from the army, we can compete with them [the USDP], although we are a sleeper party,” said Khin Maung Myint, the chairman of the Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party in Kayin State.

Many local residents similarly support their ethnic party in Chin State and Kachin State. But in Kayah State, there is no ethnic political party.