

Snr-Gen Than Shwe's election forces him to make important choices about his own future.

Than Shwe issued his long awaited election laws last week and pundits are now wondering whether he will vacate his throne when the voting is over. The fear is that he won't be willing to give up politics and power any time soon.

Sources with access to the top leaders in Naypyidaw say some officials believe Than Shwe is reserving for himself the position of president in post-election Burma, even though he is reported to have told United Nations officials that he planned to retire soon.

Military officers and senior civilian officials in Naypyidaw say some factions within the regime want Than Shwe to remain in power indefinitely and have even asked him to “sacrifice” his life by serving the country until the end.

It's no joking matter—Than Shwe will indeed probably consider this proposal and give it his nod.

Last year, it was rumored that Than Shwe had endorsed the junta's No 3, Gen Thura Shwe Mann, joint chief-of-staff in the armed forces, to become president of post-election Burma. Shwe Mann and his wife are close to Than Shwe and his family, and they are known to go on shopping trips together to Singapore.

However, military sources say Shwe Mann may be now just a spent bullet. One reason being advanced is that Than Shwe promoted Shwe Mann, the former commander of the Irrawaddy division to the War Office in Rangoon in the early 2000s just to counter the growing influence of Gen Khin Nyunt. The feared spy chief and former premier was eliminated, together with his entire intelligence structure, in a 2004 purge, and Than Shwe erased one of his potential rivals.

Shwe Mann was one of several young officers elevated by Than Shwe over the years to top positions in the armed forces and the cabinet. Others included Gen Thein Sein, Lt-Gen Myint Swe, head of the Bureau of Special Operations (5), and Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation Maj-Gen Htay Oo, who is now head of the Union Solidarity Development Association.

Sources suggest that although Shwe Mann is considered to be down-to-earth he hasn't gained as much of Than Shwe's trust and confidence as he needs. Htay Oo and Myint Swe have become Than Shwe's favorites following the loss of his trusted general, former Prime Minister Soe Win, who died in 2007.

It will be hardly surprising if Than Shwe chooses to cling to power after the election, considering the financial benefits and security of office. The members of Burma's junta have deep pockets, fat foreign currency bank accounts and lucrative business interests that would assure them of a comfortable existence for years to come.

But how can he remain in power as president?

The military will receive 25 percent of the seats at the village, township, state, regional and district levels in the new governing body, according to the 2008 Constitution. There will be three nominees for the presidency—one from the Amyotha Hluttaw (Nationalities Parliament or Senate), one from the members of the Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Assembly or House) and one from the military contingent of the two Hluttaws. The Senate and the House will then vote to choose the president.

Than Shwe can be nominated by the representatives of the military in the future Senate and House, to be formed after the planned 2010 election.

According to the Constitution, one of the duties of the new president will be to head the National Defense and Security Council, which will have the power to declare a state of emergency and nullify the Constitution.

Than Shwe currently holds Burma's most powerful position in the armed forces and analysts say he will hand this position over only to his most trusted ally. Myint Swe, who is in his mid 50s, could assume this position.

Shwe Mann now oversees regular meetings on political and security affairs with high-ranking military officials in Rangoon and Mandalay, although Than Shwe still calls the shots.

The question now is who will be commander in chief of the armed forces?

Myint Swe, a protégé of Than Shwe and close associate of the general and his wife, is a prime candidate for the job.

One interesting theory is that after claiming to build modern and strong armed forces, Than Shwe will be reluctant to let a strong army leader now take over. Knowing full well the infighting and power struggles among his top commanders, Than Shwe fears that he might not be able to pull the strings when he's no longer in control.

Indeed, as things stand now at this time of “political transition” in Burma, Than Shwe’s real concern is not detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi but young army officers and cabinet ministers who have become increasingly powerful and wealthy in the last decade.

It's not Suu Kyi who keeps him awake at night, but the question of how his trusted officers can ensure his future security and that of his family.

Than Shwe will have to live with the *kharma* of having imprisoned or put under house arrest several subordinates, including Khin Nyunt, who harbor no good will for him or his family.

For that reason, Than Shwe's exit strategy is likely to restrain him from giving up total power.

If he changes his mind, Shwe Mann or Htay Oo could be candidates for the top job.

Likewise, if Than Shwe feels insecure about appointing Myint Swe to head the army he has several younger officers to choose from—including Lt-Gen Hla Htay Win, Maj-Gen Ko Ko, Maj-Gen Tin Ngwe and Maj-Gen Kyaw Swe.

So, for now, good luck with your election, Mr President-in-Waiting Than Shwe!