

Do Burma's rulers care if this year's election is free and fair? Of course not. Why should they?

It's not as if holding a sham election will make them the black sheep of the regional family. The political systems of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are not even remotely democratic. Even Thailand, long seen as a beacon of democracy, barely gives off a faint glow these days. And while China's development over the past three decades puts Burma's once vibrant economy to shame, Beijing is almost as politically backward and ideologically bankrupt as Naypyidaw.

Why should the generals care about a free and fair election when even many in the West have decided that a grotesque parody of the democratic process should be good enough for the Burmese people? "It's better than nothing" has become the new mantra in more than one capital, and some long-suffering diplomats, tired of backing the losing side in the struggle for Burma's political future, seem perfectly happy to endorse the junta's vision of a "discipline-flourishing democracy."

Even governments that are committed to pushing for genuine political reform in Burma have made it clear that the Nov. 7 election—no matter how farcically unfair it has already proven to be—will not stand in the way of their efforts to engage the regime. But at least they have been honest about the actual facts on the ground, even if they seem to lack any real plan for what is likely to come after the election—continuing political oppression, a resurgence of ethnic conflict and a steady throttling of the domestic economy at the hands of greedy cronies and junta-friendly foreign investors.

"I think everything today suggests that the November elections will be without international legitimacy—no observers, none of the internationally accepted norms, steps that one wants to see before this election that is taking place," Kurt Campbell, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said last month, citing just one of the election's many flaws.

More recently, however, Campbell said that the election will bring new players onto Burma's political stage, suggesting that there might be some among them who are more amenable to meaningful engagement with the West than the country's current rulers. This view was later echoed by State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, who said: "We will watch events as they unfold in Burma and hope that a new government will take a different approach than it has in the past."

These comments must have been music to the ears of Burma's generals, who have become masters of manipulating the West's penchant for wishful thinking.

But if Campbell's remarks hardly struck fear into the hearts of the generals, the recently uttered words of Surin Pitsuwan, the secretary-general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), must have sounded like a lullaby to Snr-Gen Than Shwe, the junta strongman who probably sleeps like a baby thanks to the gentle cooing of support coming from the regional bloc.

"Myanmar [Burma] has been a major issue for Asean in its cooperation, interaction with the global community," said Pitsuwan. "We would like to see this issue behind us. And the only way

that that can be done is to make sure that this election is going to be a relatively effective mechanism for national reconciliation.”

Translation: “We hope the election will finally silence the West's criticism of Burma and, by extension, of Asean. And to that end, we will do everything we can to convince the world that the election has actually accomplished something besides cementing the generals' hold on power.”

Notably absent from Pitsuwan's remarks was any mention of Burma's more than 2,000 political prisoners, the exclusion of main opposition and ethnic leaders from the election and growing international calls for a UN Commission of Inquiry into the junta's alleged crimes against humanity—all issues that ensure the election won't be “a relatively effective mechanism for national reconciliation.”

Inside Burma, too, some have decided that the election is the only game in town, so they might as well play along. Even more than the international community's soft response to a slew of reports of electoral irregularities, the divisions within Burma over how to deal with the election have made the generals very happy.

While the regime has made only the weakest of efforts to win international legitimacy over the past two decades, it has been absolutely relentless in its determination to neutralize the domestic opposition. It is now closer to that goal than ever before.

In stark contrast to the struggling, divided opposition parties, the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is riding high. It has already locked in a victory that should make any election-day violence or vote-rigging unnecessary. But there is still simmering resentment against the party, especially in urban areas, even as it seeks to woo rural voters with rice donations and promises of cheap loans, free medical care and free national registration cards. Where these things have failed to win support, the party has reportedly resorted to outright vote-buying, offering up to 10,000 kyat (US \$10) for an advance vote, or simply threatened violence or imprisonment.

So why should Burma's generals care if their election is “free and fair,” as long as it delivers the results they want?

At this point, the only thing that would make them care is if they saw their gains slip away, as they could very precipitously if tensions continue to rise inside the country and unrest erupts either before or after the election. Both domestically and abroad, the regime would never be able to redeem itself if it carried out another vicious crackdown like the one the world witnessed in September 2007.

But what would trigger renewed protests? The junta's instinctive need for control could result in some last-minute intimidation, sparking an explosion of pent-up rage. There have already been reports of deadly attacks on USDP campaigners in Shan State, which could be a sign of things to come.

Is a full-blown uprising a likely scenario? It is, of course, impossible to say. But as long as the regime is betting its future on an election that will rankle in people's memory for years to come, it will never be able to end its repressive ways, and this can only mean trouble somewhere on the horizon.