

Although Burma's election year has dawned, the country's political scene is still swathed in gloom.

Burmese military supremo Than Shwe's reaffirmation in an Independence Day speech on Monday of his plan to hold a general election this year failed to clear away any of the political fog that has shrouded Burma for months past.

Beneath the surface gloom, however, the dynamics among different political camps inside the country is in motion, even if it is only barely palpable.

While elections seem inevitable this year, many opposition groups still view them as a regime maneuver to further entrench military rule.

"If no change takes place before the election, the miseries of the country will continue for the next 20 or 30 years," said Win Tin, the outspoken leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD).

This week, other NLD officials reiterated their commitment to the 2009 Shwegondaing declaration as a prerequisite for the election. The declaration calls for a review of the controversial 2008 Constitution, political dialogue and the unconditional release of all political prisoners, including the party leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

On Monday's Independence Day, thousands of families waited in vain for a possible prisoner release. Not one was freed.

Echoing the NLD's political stand, ethnic leaders are also stressing the importance of political dialogue aimed at national reconciliation prior to the election.

"If the election is unilaterally held without national unity, then the future of the country will remain bleak," said Aye Thar Aung, an Arakanese leader who is secretary of the opposition umbrella group, the Committee Representing People's Parliament.

In the absence of electoral laws and an election time frame, Than Shwe's declaration that "the entire population has to make the correct choice" rings hollow, even for some political groups who have announced their willingness to participate in the election.

"Anyone expecting to contest the election is not allowed to do anything yet," said Thu Wai, a veteran politician and leader of the Democratic Party, who last year announced his intention to participate.

Formed a few months ago without any registration, his party has the support of three daughters of past political leaders of Burma: Mya Than Than Nu, the daughter of Burma's first prime minister, U Nu; Nay Yee Ba Swe, whose father was the late Prime Minister Ba Swe; and Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein, the daughter of late Deputy Prime Minister Kyaw Nyein.

After the 1988 uprising, Thu Wai served as the chairman of the Democracy Party, which was later abolished, and in the mid-1990s he was jailed for his political activities.

Thu Wai's Democratic Party is one of the few political groups in Burma that believe that calling for political dialogue with the regime is a pure waste of time.

"If discussions are possible, it is good. But if they are not possible, why should we be wasting time?" Thu Wai said. "Only in a legal parliament can we secure the right to criticize what we don't like and to engage in politics."

Despite tight restrictions on political movements, a few other individuals have been treated with tolerance by the military regime.

An opponent of economic sanctions, Aye Lwin, a 46-year-old former political prisoner, started his own political group in 2005, together with his two younger brothers, who also served jail terms for their views.

Diminutive and uncharismatic, Aye Lwin opened his office in the compound of Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein in Rangoon in 2005. He now claims to be carrying out nationwide campaigns with a membership of 4,000 organizers, calling for an end to economic sanctions and a smooth transition toward civilian rule. Political dissidents inside Burma regard Aye Lwin as a close political partner of Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein.

Asked why he is treated with favor by the regime, Aye Lwin said he enjoyed his special position because he avoids criticism of the country's negative aspects.

Aye Lwin said he wants the election to take place as planned this year, but shrugs off as unrealistic the demands by other opposition groups for political dialogue and the release of the more than 2,000 political prisoners.

Aye Lwin is known to be widely disliked among detained 88 Generation students and young activists alike, some of whom accuse him of having a cozy relationship with high-level military officials and enjoying their substantial financial support—allegations that Aye Lwin denied in a telephone interview with *The Irrawaddy*.

He does, however, admit having close contact with regime officials. After a meeting with Maj-Gen Aung Thein Lin, mayor of Rangoon, three months ago, Aye Lwin said he was warned to conduct his political campaigns in a controlled way because his group is not a registered organization. Aung Thein Lin pointed out that other, registered organizations were not allowed to campaign politically.

The exile media last month reported that his group had been attacked in Rangoon with stones and bamboo sticks by 200 members of the military-backed Union Solidarity Development Organization (USDA). Some activists inside Burma suggest that Aye Lwin had staged the attack, with the connivance of local authorities, in a ploy to win a better public image.

One of Aye Lwin's brothers claimed, however, that the clashes had occurred after “local authorities misunderstood us.”

Another former political prisoner, Phyo Min Thein, whose views differ from those of the mainstream political opposition, recently met with a military officer sent by Lt-Gen Ye Myint, Chief of Military Affairs Security, and he received permission to hold a pre-election political forum with a number of different political parties.

“The government seems interested in topics related to elections,” said Phyo Min Thein. “We don't take the line of confrontation, but that of negotiation.”

Both Phyo Min Thein and Aye Lwin took part as students in the 1988 anti-government demonstrations. Many of their 88 Generation political colleagues, including Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, are now serving long sentences in remote prisons throughout Burma.

An editor of a magazine in Rangoon said “old grievances” between the 1988 students had led to differing political approaches. Phyo Min Thein admits having had a disagreement with Ko Ko Gyi in the early 1990s over reforming a student union.

Phyo Min Thein said he invited many ethnic and NLD leaders, including Win Tin and Khin Maung Swe, to his political forum. More than 50 political activists have promised to join the forum, he said.

Others within the NLD are not expected to join, however.

“I said I don't condemn his idea of a political forum,” said NLD spokesman Khin Maung Swe. “But I told him we are still committed to our demands of political dialogue.”

As the first week of 2010 comes to an end, the political and economic uncertainties in Burma remain unchanged. “The blind are groping in darkness,” is how Khin Maung Swe described the political scene in Rangoon.