

Burma's military supremo has reiterated his determination to press ahead with this year's planned election.

In his message on Burma's Independence Day on Jan. 4, junta supremo Snr-Gen Than Shwe promised elections would be held this year as planned. "Plans are underway to hold elections in a systematic way," he firmly stated.

Although no dates have been set, a Japanese newspaper, the Asahi Shimbun, quoted a military regime source as saying that the election would be held on Oct. 10. Prior to this, many incumbent ministers plan to resign their posts and announce their candidacy by April, giving them around six months to campaign, the report said.

Other issues, such as how the regime intends to carry out the election—a subject that many in the international community, including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, have expressed a strong interest in knowing—remain unanswered.

There is no reason to doubt, however, that Than Shwe will keep his word about holding the election. But far from demonstrating his sincerity, this just shows how determined he is to go ahead with his plans without regard for the concerns of others. He is clearly intent on ignoring calls for a meaningful political dialogue with the democratic opposition and ethnic minority leaders, without which there can be no realistic chance of achieving national reconciliation or genuine political reform.

Whether the opposition, led by detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, boycotts the election or not, the junta's handpicked candidates will be ready to enter the race when Than Shwe announces the date of the election.

Needless to say, the regime will be equally selective about which foreigners it allows to be in the country during the election. The contracts that international humanitarian and relief organizations have with the regime will end in June this year. Renewal of these contracts is not expected.

If all goes according to plan, a new government will be formed in accord with the 2008 Constitution, which reserves 25 percent of the seats in parliament for the military and allows the

commander-in-chief to assume full legislative, executive and judicial powers in the event of a “state of emergency.”

Than Shwe's plan to “transform” Burma does not stop at politics; it also includes major changes that will ensure his clique maintains its grip on the country's economy.

In the past few years, Than Shwe has turned increasingly to crony capitalism—rewarding personal friends and family members of his military administration with preferential treatment—as a means of strengthening his hold on power. According to business sources, certain companies owned by close associates—such as Tay Za, Burma's richest businessman—have been given special import permits, preferential lending and ownership of state firms in the name of “privatization.”

Recently, Tay Za won a major contract for construction of two hydro-power plants.

Privatization of Burma's natural resources will help to ensure that those close to Than Shwe's family are able to retain control of key sectors of the economy after the election, when, under the new Constitution, some state enterprises will come under the partial management of elected local governments.

By transferring ownership of key state enterprises to Tay Za, Than Shwe is trying to make sure that they are firmly in his grip before and after the election. As one Rangoon-based businessman put it: “Than Shwe is the invisible hand that controls Htoo Company. Tay Za is just serving as a representative of Than Shwe's family.”

Than Shwe intends to proceed with his seven-step “road map” to democracy, which he calls “the sole process for transition,” because it is the only way he can retain the enormous wealth and political influence he has accumulated while in power. But he also knows that there are many, including some within the military, who do not like him. That is why he always fears that even a modest devolution of his powers could make him vulnerable.

Than Shwe has instructed the entire population to make the “correct choices” in the coming election. As if to warn everyone of the consequences of defying his will, a young video reporter was recently sentenced to 20 years in prison for sending information to the exiled media, and a

retired military officer and a Foreign Ministry official were given death sentences for leaking details of a secret trip to North Korea.