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NAYPYIDAW — Burma's junta chief warned political parties to behave while campaigning for historic elections later this year, noting Saturday that the armed forces can take part in politics “whenever the need arises.”



In his annual national address, Snr-Gen Than Shwe maintained his silence on when Burma's first election in two decades will actually take place.

No date has been announced for the upcoming polls, which critics have called a sham designed to keep the military in power with the facade of an elected government.

The reclusive 77-year-old Than Shwe rarely says anything in public except at the annual Armed Forces Day parade, which lavishly showcases the military's might in the remote capital Naypyitaw. His seven-minute speech focused on the elections and the role of the army —

known as the Tatmadaw — in politics.

"We, the patriotic Tatmadaw, not only defend and protect the nation and the people with our lives but take part and serve in national politics whenever the need arises," Than Shwe said, after reviewing more than 13,000 troops from inside a slowly moving convertible.

"This year's elections represent only the beginning of the process of fostering democracy," he said. Burma has been under military rule since 1962.

The polls will be the first since 1990, when the opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a landslide victory. The junta ignored the results of that vote and has kept the Nobel Peace laureate jailed or under detention for 14 of the past 20 years.

The junta recently enacted five electoral laws widely criticized as designed to keep Suu Kyi out of the race. One of the laws prohibits anyone convicted of a crime from being a member of a political party, and instructs parties to expel convicted members or face de-registration.

Speaking through her lawyers, Suu Kyi called the laws "unjust" earlier this week and said she would "not even think" of taking part in elections, but she will let her National League for Democracy party decide for itself.

The NLD plans to meet Monday to decide if it will register for the elections.

Than Shwe warned political parties to be courteous.

"Improper or inappropriate campaigning has to be avoided — such as slandering fellow politicians and parties in order to achieve election victory for one's own party," he said.

Than Shwe reiterated concerns that foreign countries might seek to interfere in the elections — usually a reference to Western countries.

"During the transition to an unfamiliar system, countries with greater experience usually interfere and take advantage for their own interests," he said. "For this reason, it is an absolute necessity to avoid relying on external powers."

The United States, the United Nations and international human rights groups have called on Burma to free Suu Kyi and to let all political prisoners take part in the elections. The junta is believed to have jailed more than 2,100 political prisoners.

Suu Kyi's house arrest was extended last year after she was convicted of violating the terms of her detention when an American man swam uninvited to her lakeside property. She is serving an additional 18 months of house arrest, which would keep her detained through the elections.

The elections are part of the junta's long-announced "roadmap to democracy." As part of its roadmap, the junta drafted a new constitution that enshrines the military's leading role in politics. It allots 25 percent of parliamentary seats to the military and stipulates that no

amendments to the charter can be made without the consent of more than 75 percent of lawmakers.