

With a series of visits by Asian leaders lined up, Naypyidaw faces rebukes and criticism over its handling of the election process.

The Burmese military junta could be facing a diplomatic showdown with its Asian allies such as China and Japan after it rejected the international community's calls for an inclusive political process by marginalizing the opposition in its Political Party Registration laws.

Japan is due to raise Burma's current political situation on the sidelines of the G-8 foreign ministerial meeting in Canada, which kicks off on Monday, said Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada at a press conference on Friday.

He warned that Japan will not expand its economic aid to Burma if pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is still barred from the election which due to take place this year. He said that he had made Tokyo's stance clear to Burmese ambassador Hla Myint.

"This clearly differs from a free election where all stakeholders can participate, such as Japan wishes," said Okada at the press conference.

Tokyo is one of Burma's largest donors. According to the Japanese Overseas Development Assistance's Web site, Japan granted more than Yen 1.5 billion (US \$16 million) to the country in 2009. Like other countries in Asia, Japan repeatedly called for inclusiveness in the Burmese election.

Other Asian countries, such as China and some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), spoke of their frustrations at Burma's political process last week at the United Nations during a meeting of the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar [Burma] in New York.

"The group stressed the need for elections to be inclusive, participatory and transparent in order to advance the prospects of stability, democracy and development for all the people of Myanmar," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The group includes Australia, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, the UK, the US, Vietnam and the president of the EU, a position currently occupied by Spain.

Perhaps highlighting Beijing's concern over potential political instability in Burma, the Chinese state-run Xinhua news agency reported the group's call.

Ruling generals in the remote capital of Naypyidaw are still likely be under diplomatic pressure in the coming weeks over the divisive electoral laws during foreign visits to the country.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa is scheduled to visit Burma on March 30. Natalegawa's main agenda is likely to include explaining international concerns over Burma's political situation to the military generals.

His visit to Burma comes a few days before Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao travels to Indonesia.

Diplomatic sources said the Chinese leader is also expected to visit Burma in the near future.

Both Wen and Natalegawa are expected to raise their concerns with Naypyidaw over Burma's electoral process and other issues, such as tensions with ethnic cease-fire groups.

Although Beijing rarely criticizes the Burmese regime publicly, Chinese officials have reportedly aired their concerns during bilateral talks, particularly after mass demonstrations were violently suppressed in Rangoon in September 2007, Chinese analysts have said.

The Indonesian minister's trip to Burma precedes the 16th Summit of Asean on April 8-9 in Hanoi. With growing international condemnation of the electoral laws, Burmese politics will likely once again be a hot issue at the Asean summit.

The Burmese junta could also face an international dressing down from Vietnam in its position as Asean chair and a member of the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung will visit Burma on April 2-4. Dung is scheduled to meet junta supremo Snr-Gen Than Shwe and Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein.

However, Than Shwe warned the international community to distance itself from Burma's election during a speech before 13,000 troops marking the 65th anniversary of Armed Forces Day in Naypyidaw.

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