

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) said on Thursday that the directive released by Burma's election commission (EC) which prohibits political parties from marching in procession to designated gathering points or venues while displaying party flags is a violation of human rights.



ANFREL media officer and political columnist, Bidhayak Das, told The Irrawaddy, “This is a total violation of Article 21 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.”

“The ruling side is trying to use this regulation to prevent people, political parties and candidates from expressing their agenda. They don't want people to know what is the political agenda of other parties,” he said.

The EC directive, which was published in Burma's state-run newspaper, also prohibits the act of marching and chanting slogans in procession, and parties must disperse without any slogan-chanting march at the end of an assembly or speech.

The international standard is for governments to allow political parties to march, wave flags and chant slogans up to 500 meters away from parliament and other government buildings, Bidhayak Das said.

Also according to the EC directive, political parties in Burma must apply to the EC for permission to hold political gatherings and to give speeches at least seven days prior to the event.

Phyo Min Thein, chairman of the Union Democratic Party (UDP), said that the circumstances under which the government would allow political parties to give a speech is very strict, but he welcomed the fact that they would give permission for assemblies and speeches at all.

“In our country, assembling and giving speeches was never before allowed by the government. If we are allowed to assemble in public in the future, we can create the change that the public can participate in politics,” he added.

The EC directive also prohibits the use of flags when party members are traveling to a speech or assembly. Aye Lwin, the chairman of the Union of Myanmar Federation of National Politics, said that party movements need party flags, and prohibiting the use of party flags is not realistic.

“If parties are not allowed to fly their flag it means the Election Commission is pessimistic about the political parties. Unrealistic regulations are a kind of political suppression,” he said.

The regulations are more strict than those issued during the last election in 1990, but political parties will proceed under the given circumstances, said Dr. Than Win, one of the founders of the National Democratic Force (NDF).

“It is very important that the regulations are applied with equality,” said Than Win.

Meanwhile, the US State Department said on Wednesday, “The US believes elections planned for this year in Burma will not be free or fair and will lack international legitimacy.”

Thus far, 42 political parties have applied to the EC for party registration and 33 have been accepted.

ANFREL, established in 1997, is a regional network of civil society organizations that strives to promote and support democratization at national and regional levels in Asia.