

BBMEIKHTILA, Mandalay Division—While weeding at a farm 20 miles from Meikthila in central Burma, Khin Mar Tin said she has no idea about any political developments in Burma and has zero knowledge about the political parties in the November election.



Khin Mar Tin is one of 30 million eligible voters whose vote could change the political landscape of the country when the first election in 20 years is held on Nov. 7.

A mother of four, she admits she and her friends who live in the area have very little knowledge about recent political developments in the country and no access to journals and newspapers.

“I am not interested in politics and don’t know which party to vote for,” she said, toiling furiously in the 35-degree heat.

Similarly, several farmers in Tadaroo Town in Mandalay Division said they are not interested in the election and have not yet decided whether to vote on Nov. 7.

“We don’t know anything about the election,” said a farmer who declined to give his name. “We don’t know what the parties’ policies are and don’t even know which parties will run in our district.”

“People are disinterested because they know nothing will happen,” said Cho, a farmer in Mandalay Division. He said farmers like him think that any changes that come from the election will bring no benefits to them—only to the country’s elite.

“We also want change, but any changes that happen will not help us,” he said, adding that he believes the rural population will stay away from the polls in November.

Cho said that people are not interested in politics because they feel they are not being kept informed. He said that of the little he has heard about the election from foreign radio programs, he knows that only a few parties will run.

The 50-year-old graduate farmer said he spends three hours every day listening to the *BBC*, *V*

OA
and
RFA

[Radio Free Asia] that broadcast in Burmese. He said he does not trust local programs.

Cho said he will vote in the election but has not decided which party he will cast his vote for.

Somewhat less educated, Khin Mar Tin said she will listen to the advice of her friends when she decides how to vote. "I was told to put a tick on the right side of the ballot paper at the referendum in 2008. I will probably just do what I am told again," she said disconsolately while weeding a field, a job that earns her 1,500 kyat (US \$ 1.50) a day.

The Burmese military government in 2008 held a nationwide referendum to get public support for the constitution it drafted—a constitution that reserves 25 percent of seats in parliament for military personnel. Although the international community severely criticized the referendum and much of the Burmese public dismissed it as a sham, the government went on to claim that 92.48 percent of eligible voters endorsed the constitution.

Khin Maung Swe, one of the founders of the National Democratic Force, a party that split from the National League for Democracy (NLD), said the lack of information about the political parties and their policies will only deter voters from participating in the election.

He said all the pro-democracy parties face difficulties in reaching rural people as the government controls all forms of media, including journals, FM radio and TV channels.

According to a 2007 fertility and reproductive health survey, 69 percent of the Burmese population lives in rural areas.

When Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won the 1990 election by a landslide, all the political parties had a chance to air their policies and opinions through state TV and radio. However, the junta appears to be reluctant to make that mistake again.

A staffer at a private FM radio station said they had received no instructions from the government on whether they will be allowed to broadcast election coverage or interview party representatives.

"We are considering whether or not we should broadcast election news and the policies of the parties," he said.

Khin Maung Swe said he agreed that the media are restricted in their ability to educate and inform the public with regard to the election process.

The chairman of Union Democracy Party, Phyo Min Thein, on Aug. 5 resigned from the party complaining that the parties are prohibited from campaigning freely.

"I will not participate in the 2010 election because it will not be free and fair," he said. "There is

no media freedom and political parties cannot campaign freely.” He accused the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) of getting preferential treatment as many USDP members are senior government officials.

The resignation of Phyo Min Thein was a signal to the international community that the planned election will certainly be flawed. To the general public, however, the expectations of an election being free and fair were but a distant pipe dream anyway.