

Burma's opposition parties say that a decision by the junta-appointed Union Election Commission (EC) to dramatically increase the number of polling stations in this year's election will make it impossible for them to monitor vote-counting in many parts of the country, raising the likelihood of widespread election fraud.

The EC announced that it would set up one polling station for every 1,000 eligible voters in the Nov. 7 election, up from one per 5,000 in Burma's last polls in 1990. However, most opposition parties lack the resources to send monitors to such a large number of locations, according to Khin Maung Swe, the leader of the opposition National Democratic Force.

"I personally raised this issue with the EC chief, U Thein Soe, because we can't send agents to so many polling places," he said. "Even though I was assured there would be only one polling place for every 3,000 voters, the proportion is now one per 1,000. So there is no guarantee that vote rigging will not occur."

Under EC regulations, each party is allowed to send two monitors to each polling station. The junta-appointed body has indicated that it will not allow foreign election-monitoring groups to observe the polls, saying that such help was unnecessary because Burma has abundant experience with elections.

Nay Yee Ba Swe, who is running as a candidate for the Democratic Party (Myanmar) in Rangoon's Sanchaung Township, said she is still trying to find volunteers to work as party agents in her constituency.

"I need more than 100 monitoring agents, but I am not even sure I can get 50," she said, adding that it was much easier to find volunteers in 1990. This time, she said, it was a struggle just to recruit enough members to legally register the party.

According to the latest data compiled by *The Irrawaddy*, opposition parties will contest fewer than 300 of the 1,163 seats up for election in the national and regional parliaments, while the junta's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, will run in all constituencies nationwide.

The opposition parties said that they were constrained by a lack of time and money, due mainly to restrictions imposed by the EC.

“Given these factors, it is not surprising that the prevailing attitude toward the election is one of indifference,” said Khin Maung Swe.

So far, however, none of the opposition parties have expressed any regret about their decision to take part in the election, which pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy have boycotted, citing unfair election laws.

“Yes, we have no breathing space. We are going through a labyrinth of steps and doing so much paperwork. But win or lose, this election will be the starting point for our country. Just look at South Korea and Indonesia,” said Nay Yee Ba Swe.