

UNITED NATIONS — On May 30, 2003, the Depayin Massacre in Burma left at least 70 people dead. A failed attempt to assassinate opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the attack was carried out by the pro-junta political militia, the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA).

On Wednesday, that same militia, under the alias of the Union Solidarity Development Party (UNDP), announced a landslide victory in Burma's first election in 20 years.

International observers, human rights groups and civil society organizations inside Burma have called the election a sham and mourned the transfer of power from military generals to dictators in civilian clothing.

According to a report by the British-based Burma Campaign, the Nov. 7 elections were the fifth part of a seven-stage "roadmap to democracy" designed by the junta to ward off strict international sanctions following the 2003 massacre.

However, critics say the months leading up to the election were an assault on democratic processes, making the election result something of a tragicomedy.

The pre-election period saw a doubling of political prisoners, total censorship of the independent press, violent intimidation of opposition parties, a wave of extrajudicial killings in minority provinces across the country, and countless election laws restricting freedom of speech and political affiliation.

The new constitution, drafted by the old generals, quashes all possibility of equal participation or democratic change in the country. It places all political power in the hands of the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) rather than in the parliament.

The military remains above both president and parliament. A quarter of the seats in both the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament, as well as in all state and regional assemblies, have been reserved exclusively for the military.

On Nov. 9, just two days after the election, an exodus of 20,000 Burmese refugees fled the Myawaddy region to Thailand. The villagers were forced to leave their homes, some barefoot, following clashes between government soldiers and troops from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) who are outraged at the legitimization of military rule in Burma.

Zipporah Sein, general secretary of the Karen National Union, told a press briefing of UN correspondents on Nov. 9 that the events on the border prove that the election will do nothing but ripen the country for civil war.

Sein stressed that "democracy in Burma can only be achieved through the participation of all ethnic groups."

Khin Maung Nyein, a correspondent from the Burmese Service of Radio Free Asia (RFA), spoke to UN correspondents by phone from Burma. He expressed a deep sense of despair

about the situation on the ground, and lamented the vacuum of independent journalism in the country.

"Editors, reporters, TV and radio personnel were not allowed into polling stations, except on guided tours," Nyein said.

Such censorship is extremely dangerous for a transitioning country and portends a macabre future for journalists under the newly "elected" government, he said.

Bob Dietz, the Asia program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), told IPS that the election will not bring about any meaningful changes in the country.

"The media environment in Burma is the same now as it has been for years under this government," Dietz said. "Reporting is extremely limited, the same censorship regimen has been in place for years, foreign reporters are excluded."

"The people who were in power simply took off their military clothes, put on civilian clothes and maintained the reins of political power," Dietze added.

Meanwhile, the UN has come under a deluge of criticism from the international community for failing to act decisively and ignoring the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Burma.

Speaking on behalf of Burmese political prisoners at the UK Labour Party Conference in September, Waihnin Pwint Thon blasted Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his inability to hold Burma accountable for its crimes against humanity.

The daughter of Ko Mya Aye, a political activist who has been imprisoned for 65 years for mobilizing students in non-violent protests against the regime, Thon says she is weary of waiting any longer.

"Again and again the regime in Burma makes promises of reform that they never keep," Thon stressed. "Again and again the United Nations says 'let's wait and see if they'll change.' But while they wait and see, political prisoners die in prison. While they wait and see, women are raped. While they wait and see, more villagers are burned."

"The UN seems content to sit back and do nothing, but these things cannot be allowed to continue." Thon said.

Gum Sang Nsang, a representative of the Kachin National Organisation, urged the international community to reject the election result and refuse to engage with the new government.

Human rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have, for months, been calling for a Commission of Inquiry (CoI) into war crimes in Burma and have asked the UN secretary-general to use his mandate to act independently of the General Assembly in this regard.

The Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic has found extensive evidence of both war crimes and crimes against humanity and has urged the UN to act upon its findings.

Thaung Htun, director of the Burma Fund at the United Nations, implored the Third Committee of the General Assembly to review its resolution on Burma.

"Looking at the urgency at the Thai-Burma border and the possibility of the exacerbation of violence in ethnic areas, UN member states should reconsider their position," Thaung told IPS.

"We need an urgent response to deter further violations," Thaung stressed. "Any kind of delay will send the wrong message to the regime that they can pursue their policies without any international humanitarian action."

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for the nearly 20 years, is due to be released on Nov. 13, a promise that Burmese authorities are unlikely to keep.

"All heads of state should pressurise the Burmese government for her release," Thaung told IPS.