

BANGKOK—Burma's military government has pledged to hold elections sometime in 2010. But far from energizing the long-oppressed opposition and ethnic groups, the prospect of

a rigged election has left them divided and apparently confused about what to do.

While nobody ever expected a totally free and fair election process, the regime made that doubly sure with the deviously thought-out electoral laws it announced recently. Among other notable implications, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), must expel its own leader if it wants to take part.

More generally, it appears that the election has acted like a time-bomb within and between Burma's opposition and ethnic groups, with some opposed to taking part, others unsure and still others keen to get involved.

Muddying the waters further, ethnic parties are springing up to take part in the elections, with ethnic representatives likely to also run in military-linked parties. As Machiavellian divide-and-conquer strategies go, the junta appears to have played this one well so far.

The electoral laws are really just the latest stage in a long-running effort to overpower and outwit the opposition groups, however, according to Benedict Rogers, who has written a biography of Sen-Gen Than Shwe and is East Asia team leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide. The polls take place in the context of a controversial 2008 Constitution, which was approved in a rigged referendum held just days after Cyclone Nargis killed around 140,000 people. That document means that military rule will be maintained, regardless of the election outcome.

Meanwhile, the regime has sowed division and confusion with its border guard force demand, which requires ethnic militias to stand down and become part of the regime's border security system. By moving troops close to regions held by rebel groups, the junta threatens renewed war in ethnic areas, and perhaps hopes to deepen divisions between some of the militias and people, hinting that the best option is to go along with the regime's wishes if renewed war is to be averted. But in any case, the electoral laws allow for a suspension of polling in regions where

there is “insecurity,” according to the junta, meaning that these regions might not get to vote in any case.

A decision on participation is due from the NLD on Monday or Tuesday. The junta has so far denied requests to allow the NLD central committee to meet with Suu Kyi, who is under renewed house arrest after the absurdly-Kafkaesque conviction for harbouring a foreign guest last year, when American John Yettaw swam across a lake to her home in Rangoon.

While many opponents of Burma's military rule are in jail, others work from outside the country. A group of academics, activists, diplomats and journalists discussed the election in Bangkok last week. Opinions were divided, with some groups advocating participation.

Dr. Nay Win Maung from EGRESS, a NGO based in Burma, said that “those of us inside the country do not have the luxury of opposing the elections,” an implicit criticism of exiled Burmese activists who have begun a worldwide petition opposing the polls.

Zoya Phan, an ethnic Karen who fled Burma after her village was attacked by the Burmese Army who is an international co-ordinator at the Burma UK Campaign, told The Irrawaddy that “actually most people in Burma see the election as irrelevant to their lives. They don't think it will bring any change; they know the generals won't willingly give up power. While Burmese political activists and the international community focus on the election, the people of Burma don't see the elections as bringing any hope of change. ”

There are others who do not have any choice about taking part. There are more than 2,100 prisoners of conscience in the country and the regime has barred anyone with a criminal conviction from running, which of course includes people locked up for their political beliefs. These dissidents—who include pro-democracy protestors from the 2007 Saffron Revolution—will not have the luxury of participating.

Some NLD members want to take part, while the country's ethnic minority groups are splintering into factions, with some supporting the elections and others against. Some of the pro-participation groups are doubtless fronts for the regime, while others are genuinely confused about what to do. Looking at the parties lining up to take part so far, Benedict Rogers said, “Many are military front parties, but there may be some who are genuine new parties. It is

unclear at this stage."

Prior to the 1990 election, the NLD was unsure whether or not to take part, but ended up with a landslide win. Some Asean member-states have spoke out against the electoral laws, but the organization has a history of resorting to the lowest common denominator when it comes to Burma. An Asean summit looms in Vietnam, but it seems that the countries bordering Burma hope for little more than that the 2010 elections will be "somewhat fair," along the same lines as 1990. That is, the voting day and count will be fine, even if the whole game is weighted toward maintaining military rule. That will allow countries to pass off the elections as legitimate, and allow them to dodge the bullet of harshly criticising a regime with whom they have lucrative trade and investment links.

Within Burma and outside, some see a chink of light. If the vote can be somewhat fair, they can get some seats in the parliament, and the system may open up, from outright dictatorship now, to form of "liberal authoritarianism" after the elections—and presumably be the first tentative step on a long and arduous unraveling of military rule.

The hope is that a sort of alliance for change could be fostered between reformists in the military and the newly elected civilian component of the legislature, while the hard-core hardliners around Sen-Gen Than Shwe relax their control as old age looms and retirement beckons.

Rogers thinks that some in Burma "genuinely believe that they can take advantage of the elections to create more 'space' for debate, discussion and political activity."

But could it be that one of the world's most repressive regimes—a military government—is legislating itself out of existence, or allowing itself to be voted into history? The same regime that is canny enough to play China and the USA and India against each other? Or ruthless enough to carry out rape, displacement and death on a scale to possibly merit an international war crimes investigation? Hari-kari in Naypidaw seems like an unlikely tale.

Zoya Phan warned, "Some people may be genuinely thinking that they will be able to bring some change by setting up parties to take part in elections, but they are being fooled by the generals. MPs can be arrested if they call for democratic change, the Constitution bars any

record of it in Parliament, and the censored media would not be able to report it anyway."

In 1990, the NLD agonized over whether or not to take part in the election. Optimists were proved right, albeit temporarily, when the party won its stillborn landslide victory.

This time around, it seems fanciful that the junta will be as complacent as it was 20 years ago when it expected its own front candidates to win easily. Now bouyed by massive oil and gas revenues, a 400,000-man army and commercial and diplomatic relationships provided by China, India and the rest of southeast Asia, it is doing its utmost to divide the opposition and keep its prominent leaders out of the election. So far it seems to be working.