

Burma's political landscape ahead of the 2010 election gradually reshapes itself with more new political parties registering to contest as older parties fade away.

Burma's political landscape ahead of the 2010 election is gradually reshaping itself with more new political parties registering to contest as older parties fade away.

Only four of the existing 10 political parties have re-registered as a political parties.

So far, 25 political parties have registered with the Union Election Commission, which has approved five parties. Of the 25 parties, 15 are ethnic national parties.

At the very beginning, most of the new parties will face the task of raising campaign funds and other necessary resources to create a party infrastructure, pay candidate nomination fees and cover the cost of actual campaigning, in some cases over wide areas of the country.

Despite their claims that they will contest the election nationwide, some political parties still lack a strategic plan to raise necessary funds and have even expressed concerns about financing campaigns even in a limited number of constituencies.

Some of the parties expressing such concerns are the Union Democratic Party, National Political Alliances, Democratic Party (Myanmar), Peace and Diversity Party and Wunthanu NLD (the Union of Myanmar).

"We know some businessmen are willing to donate money to our party, but they are afraid to have a relation with a political party," Shwe Ohn, an 88-year-old veteran Shan politician and founding leader of the Union Democratic Party told *The Irrawaddy*. "For now, it's difficult to know the number of the constituencies that we will contest due to costs."

Asked if his party will form a business to raise funds, as permitted by the election laws, he said: "How can we set up a party business? We have zero investment."

Article 15 of Political Parties Registration Law permits political parties to raise party funds either

through “donations in cash or kind from the official income of an individual or organization, a company or a group of companies owned by Burmese Nationalities” or “the official income and profits of the businesses owned by the party.”

The political repression in Burma under the military junta during the past 20 years is still a nightmare for the general public, especially businessmen, because they have seen the junta's harassment, intimidation and even destruction of businesses that were involved in supporting opposition political groups.

Observers say that as long as such fear is deeply rooted in society, it will be hard to make a U-turn in the people's mindset that would allow them to get involved in politics by donating funds.

On the other hand, without donations some political parties can't afford the set-up costs for party headquarters and branch offices.

However, some parties are making inroads: “A reporter from *Pyay Myanmar* [a local news journal] asked me recently whether I received financial assistance from the government, which they heard has a plan to do so,” said Ohn Lwin, a leader of National Political Alliances. “I don't know, but we are seeking our own funds. One fertilizer distribution company supports us, and we plan to get a sale contract from the company to distribute fertilizers in Irrawaddy Delta and the profits will go to the party fund.”

Members of the Peace and Diversity Party (PDP) said they seek cost-cutting wherever they can find it.

“The country is poor and we are poor, too,” said Nyo Min Lwin, the chairman of the PDP based in Rangoon. “We stepped into politics because we are not satisfied with the current situation and what we really have is just political will. Therefore, to reduce the costs, we use Internet technology for political activities such as meetings, discussions and sharing information.”

Nay Myo Wai, PDP secretary, has a web blog where he posted the party's constitution.

Nyo Min Lwin said his party will contest the election nationwide, but currently they have opened only one office, at party's headquarters which is located in Nay Myo Wai's house in Htauk Kyant on the outskirts of Rangoon.

Meanwhile, the junta's Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein and about 20 other ministers have resigned their military posts to take on leading roles in a new junta-backed political party and contest in the election.

The Union Solidarity and Development Association, which claims a membership of more than 24 million people, will be a backbone of the junta's new political party. Moreover, the junta's economic arm such as Union of Myanmar Economic Holding Ltd. (UMEHL) is likely to be a financial ally for the pro-junta party, although election laws stipulate that parties may not receive funds from the government.

"In 2007, UMEHL had an authorized capital of 40,000 million kyats (US \$40 million) and an allotted capital of 39,000 (\$39 million)," said Maung Aung Myo in his book *"Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948"*, published in 2009.

The National Unity Party (NUP), transformed from the former ruling socialist party called the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), is expected to be the second strongest party in terms of funding.

In a recent interview, Han Shwe, an NUP executive committee member, said that he expects to field more than 200 candidates in the election, and the party has funds to cover the cost of candidate fees.

Each candidate must pay a 500,000 kyat (\$500) non-refundable deposit. For more than 200 candidates, the fees would total 100 million kyat (\$100,000).

In the 1990 election, the National League for Democracy (NLD) faced a shortage of campaign funds and its supporters were afraid to donate money to the party for fear of government

reprisals, while, its strongest competitor, the NUP, had access to vehicles and venues which were controlled by the former socialist government.

With the absence of the NLD, there is no strong opposition party to compete against junta-backed parties.

That factor, coupled with the disparity between funding sources for regime-backed parties and middle and smaller political parties, ensures that the election is tilted in favor of the military regime.