

It is now more than three months since the unveiling of electoral laws on March 8, but the Burmese military junta has yet to announce an election date. Political parties that registered are still waiting to hear if they have been accepted.

Once a party has been accepted, it has 90 days to submit a party membership list. Even if all parties have all their member lists verified within that time frame, it will already be well into September and no party will have been allowed to campaign.

The junta formed the 18-member Union Election Commission (EC) on March 12. Its members were handpicked by the military generals; it is led by a former judge advocate general, Maj-Gen Thein Soe.

The junta and the EC have had ample time to implement the preparatory steps for an election, but it is increasingly evident that no polling day can be set before November.

In the meantime, the registration process for political parties continues with no deadline (May 6 was the deadline for existing parties, such as the NLD, to register, but new parties can still apply for registration).

Speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Wednesday, an official at the EC office in Naypyidaw said, "Party registration still remains open. Formal notification will be announced one week before the deadline."

Even parties whose registration has been approved cannot officially open offices or a headquarters nor hoist flags or place signs on their doors. New political parties are afraid of doing something wrong or committing an unwitting mistake in case the authorities harass them or take action against the party.

"Please don't forget we are still under military rule," said Ohn Lwin, the leader of the registered and approved National Political Alliances. "We are conducting our political activities very

carefully.”

Because the Political Parties Registration Law was strictly designed to reduce the proliferation of too many political parties (as in the 1990 election), each registered party must submit a list to the EC within 90 days of the party's acceptance with details of a minimum number of party members—1000 members for a party that plans to contest the election nationwide, and 500 members for regional parties.

The EC will scrutinize the membership details submitted by the political parties and retain the power to disband any party who can't record the minimum number of party members or whose members fail to meet the requirements of the military junta's Constitution and election laws.

On top of that, the EC approves the registration of parties on different dates. For example, as the registration of the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was approved by the EC on June 8, the deadline for the party's membership recruitment will be on Sept. 6. Parties not yet approved will be later, perhaps weeks later, than that. Only after the completion of the process will the EC announce the number and names of political parties to contest the election.

The next step is the candidate nomination process. In 1990, the former EC announced an election date as soon as it initiated the period for candidate nomination. If we are to follow this precedent, we can assume this will happen no earlier than mid-September.

The EC will then receive and scrutinize candidate lists from all parties for all constituencies they wish to contest for all three parliaments: the People's Parliament (*Pyithu Hluttaw*); the Nationalities' Parliament (*Amyotha Hluttaw*); and the state and regional parliaments.

Taking into account the Burmese military establishment's fastidious surveillance of political aspirants and its notorious red tape, it is likely to be well into October before this process is finalized and the campaign is finally able to begin.

To date, the EC has failed to provide a specific time frame for any of these processes, all of which are handled by most countries in a relatively short period, sometimes even just a few weeks.

On top of that, the EC will not open a process of voter registration, relying instead, we assume, on its 2008 constitutional referendum list. Neither has there been any announcements regarding out-of-country voting or postal voting, two common democratic options that would require opening a pre-election window of several weeks.

Moreover, the EC has failed to conduct any of its activities in a transparent manner. The public has no idea what to expect, and the parties are unable to work out a time frame or strategy toward the election.

Some political parties have expressed concern that they will not have enough time to campaign if the election is set for the widely predicted month of November.

“If the election is held in November, we estimate that the maximum campaign period will be one month,” said former premier U Nu's daughter, Than Than Nu, who is the general secretary of the Democratic Party (Myanmar).

Election observers inside and outside the country are finding it impossible to evaluate the degree of the EC's independence and impartiality—the two core values accepted internationally—in the party registration process, not to mention its duty to appoint the election sub-commissions, returning officers and polling officers across the country.

We are told that the EC has been busy with political party registration, as well as forming district and township sub-commissions and training the staff.

During the 1990 election, the political parties had a three-month campaign period. That will not happen this time. The junta will abide by its strategy to curtail the activities of pro-democracy parties while allowing the USDP to campaign openly and exploit the electoral laws and loopholes.

Come election day, the military assumes that with the additional assistance of voter intimidation, fraud and ballot-rigging, it can confidently expect the USDP to win a landslide victory in each of the three parliaments.

*Htet Aung is the chief reporter of the Election Desk at The Irrawaddy.*