

Burma's Union Election Commission (EC) has given the green light to 38 out of 42 political parties to contest the general election later this year.

The EC now needs only approve the applications of the four remaining parties in order to fulfill its obligation under the party registration law and move the faltering process along. However, it is worth noting that of the four parties awaiting confirmation, three are ethnic Kachin parties: the Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP); the Northern Shan State Progressive Party; and the United Democracy Party (Kachin State). These parties submitted their applications on April 5, 23 and 30 respectively.

The EC has neither approved the applications of these parties nor has it rejected them. The EC has simply delayed making a decision.

So, why would the EC delay the entire electoral process over some relatively insignificant regional parties? The reason lies in the gray shade of the relationships between the Kachin parties and the armed Kachin groups.

The KSPP was formed by former leaders of the rebel Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), which signed a cease-fire agreement with the military junta in 1994. One of those leaders is Dr. Tu Ja, a prominent figure in Kachin State who was once vice chairman of the KIO and who now leads the KSPP.

Similarly, the Northern Shan State Progressive Party was formed by a handful of Kachin leaders under the influence of the KIO.

The United Democracy Party (Kachin State) was formed by former leaders of the New Democratic Army–Kachin (NDA-K), another Kachin cease-fire group.

Just as the regime's Prime Minister Thein Sein and other cabinet ministers resigned their military positions to form a political party called the Union Solidarity and Development Party

(USDP), Tu Ja and some senior leaders resigned from their positions in the KIO to form the KSPP.

The KSPP leaders' move to sever ties with the KIO is an overt statement that they no longer belong to the KIO, and clears the way for them to form a political party in accordance with the law. But although the KSPP and the USDP share this distinction, the KSPP will not share the same advantages as the USDP during the election process.

When the KSPP leaders went to Naypyidaw in May to meet the EC members and to ask why the approval of their party had been delayed, the answer given was reportedly: "Because of the KSPP's ties with the KIO," said Lahpai Nawdin, the editor of the Thailand-based Kachin News Group, who interviewed the party leaders.

If that were the case, the EC would have to specify which article of the Political Party Registration Law was broken by the KSPP.

Article 12 (A-3) of the law reads: "Contacting or abetting directly or indirectly an insurgent organization and individuals in revolt with arms against the State, organization and individuals designated by the State as committing terrorist acts or organization declared as unlawful association or members of the said organization."

Did the EC categorize the KIO as a insurgent organization or an unlawful association? If so, does that indicate that the cease-fire agreement between the KIO and the junta has expired or has been annulled?

Looking back over the years at the post-cessate-fire relationship between the KIO and the junta, it is clear the junta treated the organization neither as an insurgent organization nor as an unlawful association.

In fact, the KIO has enjoyed a strong status both economically and politically. They have benefited from trade links and business deals, albeit mainly in Kachin State. They joined the junta's National Convention in 2004 and participated in drawing up the Constitution.

When the junta introduced its program of transforming the armed cease-fire groups into border guard forces (BGF) in April 2009, the relationship intensified due to the junta's transparent attempt to incorporate the ethnic groups under the command of the Burmese military.

Although the Burmese negotiators used a number of carrots to persuade the KIO to accept the BGF plan, they failed to convince the KIO leaders to alter their deep-seated distrust of the military regime.

When Tu Ja and his colleagues cut ties with the KIO and formed their political party, the junta took revenge by using the EC mechanism to slap the KSPF down a peg or two.

However, at the end of the day, Naypyidaw wants at least one Kachin party contesting the election in order to show the inclusiveness of the ethnic parties in the electoral process.

The junta's solution will be to urge local Kachin leaders from the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) to form a nationalist Kachin party that is allied to Naypyidaw, and instruct the EC to let the KSPF and the other Kachin parties crash and burn.