

With new Burmese political parties now taking their first tentative steps into the political arena ahead of the election, many new faces are introducing themselves and their party policies to the people.

However, Burma's major political issues, which have been the center of the country's politics for the past two decades, remain largely unmentioned in policy statements and in interviews with local news journals as well as the Burmese media in exile.

Three major issues are not being addressed. First is national reconciliation among all the stakeholders such as the Tatmadaw [military], civilian political institutions and armed ethnic groups. Second is the release of more than 2,000 political prisoners detained by the current military rulers in prisons across the country. Third is a resolution to the chronic ethnic armed conflicts.

If Burma wants to build a democracy in the future, either a regime-backed "disciplined" or a genuine democracy, the future leaders in the post-election power establishment—no matter whether they are military or civilian—can't be silent on these issues during the run-up to the election.

These three problems are at the core of the country's politics and are well-known by the Burmese people as well as the international community.

In the past 20 years, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by the democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi, has persistently sought a meaningful political dialogue with the military government to discuss these issues, to no avail.

Due to this failure and the political tension that existed between the former NLD and the ruling military, the new political parties might be trying to avoid these issues when discussing party policies and in interviews with the media.

Instead, their message has been focused more on non-political issues such as the economy and the social welfare of the people, in effect rolling out the ever-popular political flavors of freedom, equality and justice in society.

For example, the National Unity Party, which was transformed from the former ruling Burmese Socialist Programme Party, formulated its policies with an eye at targeting the country's majority peasant population with promises that "the farmer must own the land they sow and plough" and "the farmer must have the right to sell their agriculture produce freely."

These promises, in fact, have long been political clichés in Burmese politics, and the rulers have never seriously paid attention to the welfare of the peasants.

Without solving the three core issues, the economic and social development of the country will not move forward even under a "disciplined democratic" government formed in the post-election in accord with the new Constitution.

There are several possible reasons why the new political parties are silent on the major issues.

First, they don't want to talk about national reconciliation because they are afraid of being seen as echoing the NLD's long-term demands, creating tension with the military even before the election.

Second, they don't want to press the junta for the release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, because, again, it identifies them with NLD policies.

Third, they don't want to voice the border guard force issue probably for fear of being seen as political allies of ethnic cease-fire groups such as the Kachin Independence Organization, United Wa State Army and New Mon State Party.

Interestingly, no new political party formed by Burmans (Burmese nationals) has so far stressed the need to address the country's chronic ethnic armed conflicts. One new ethnic party, the Chin National Party, in its party platform called for "a peaceful solution to the end of the ethnic

armed conflicts.”

If the election is limited to political cliches and platitudes, it shows a true lack of political will among the new political parties and their leaders.

If the new political parties' leadership really want to win the support of the people as the NLD did in the 1990 election, they must show their courage by speaking truth to the people.