

The date for the 2010 elections has not been set, but 39 political parties are preparing for campaigns with a hope to win seats in the regional and national governing bodies.

Out of 45 parties that have applied for registration, 39 have been approved, 17 of which will contest in nationwide constituencies. The 22 others are ethnic parties that only intend to contest in ethnic areas.

Of the 17 parties that will compete nationally, the parties can be roughly divided into three categories such as pro-military, pro-democracy or pro-opposition, and a third group for parties that do not belong to pro-military or pro-opposition groups.

Among the first group, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which was transformed from the government-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association, is the largest in terms of structure and potential for winning. The second largest is the National Unity Party which transformed from the Burma Socialist Programme Party after the pro-democracy movement in 1988.

Other parties that go into the first group are led by former 88 students such as Aye Lwin and Ye Htun, two brothers who formed the Union of Myanmar Federation of National Politics and the 88 Generation Student and Youths (Union of Myanmar), respectively. Although they are former 88 student leaders, they have no relation with the 88 generation students group led by Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi.

In fact, the brothers are a breakaway group from the National Political Forces allied with the New Generation Students for Studying Political Economy jointly led by former Communists and breakaway NLD MPs-elect. The National Political Forces was spit into groups just before electoral laws were enacted. The other group set up a party in the name of National Political Alliances League led by former NLD leaders and some MP-elect such as Ohn Lwin, Kyi Win, Tin Tun Maung and Thein Kyi.

The other party, New Era People's Party, is led by Tun Aung Kyaw, who used to be a personal assistant to Thakhin Soe, one of the founders of the Communist Party of Burma in 1939. Tun Aung Kyaw was general-secretary of the Unity and Development Party which contested in the 1990 elections but won no seats, and was de-registered later. He is well-known for his anti-sanctions stance.

The second category includes political parties that are not pro-military but chose to set up political parties and contest in the elections. They believe that democratic change can be brought about within the system and a legal framework. The National Democratic Force is led by former NLD leaders such as Khin Maung Swe and Dr. Than Nyein; the Democratic Party (Myanmar) is led by Thu Wai and the Union Democratic Party is led by Phyo Minn Thein.

The National Democratic Force was formed after the NLD decided not to re-register under the new political party registration law. Some NLD central committee members who did not agree with the NLD's decision set up a new party to participate in the elections.

The Democratic Party (Myanmar) is led by Thu Wai, a veteran politician who set up the Democracy Party, which won one seat in 1990 elections. He was joined by Than Than Nu, Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein and Nay Yi Ba Swe, daughters of former well-known leaders of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, such as U Nu, U Kyaw Nyein and U Ba Swe, respectively.

Ironically, their fathers used to be rivals and antagonists in their time as they split the AFPFL into two factions called "Clean AFPFL" led by Nu-Tin (U Nu and Thakhin Tin) and "Stable AFPFL" led by Swe-Nyein (U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein). When the NDF broke away from NLD, people also dubbed the split as "Su-Tin" (Aung San Suu Kyi, U Tin Oo and U Win Tin) and "Swe-Nyein" (U Khin Maung Swe and Dr. Than Nyein).

Another party in this category is the Democratic Party (Myanmar) comprising former 88 generation leaders such as Phyo Min Thein, Nyo Tun, Thein Tin Aung and Min Lwin. Phyo Min Thein is a former political prisoner who spent 15 years in jail with other 88 generation student leaders. He also allied with U Shwe Ohn, a well-known veteran Shan politician who is a patron in his party.

There are some parties that do not conform to any of the above categories and which make up a third group, which comprise of the Myanmar Democracy Congress Party led by "Wei Hmu Thwin" and U Taung Aye, a Chin national; the Difference and Peace Party led by Nyo Min Lwin and Nay Myo Wai, who formerly worked with Aye Lwin's National Political Force and some others, such as the Myanmar New Society Democratic Party and the People New Society Party, whose positions cannot be distinguished at this time.

Ethnic political parties can also be roughly divided into the same categories.

But they represent smaller ethnic groups such as the Mro, Lahu, Kokang, Wa, Pa-O, Kayan, Taaung, Inn, Phalon-Sawaw, Kaman, and Khami, all of which can be more or less categorized among the third group.

Some ethnic parties representing larger ethnic group such as Karen, Mon, Chin, Rakhine, Shan and Kachin are mostly pro-military parties. There are two Karen parties, such as the Kayin People's Party led by Dr. Sai Mon Thar, and the Union Karen League, which has existed since 1990. Two Chin parties: the Chin National Party and the Chin Progressive Party; and two Rakhine Parties: the Rakhine State National Force and the Rakhine National Progressive Party are also approved for registration.

A Shan party, the Shan Nationals Democratic Party led by Sai Aik Pao, a former general-secretary of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), won 23 seats in 1990 elections. There is only one Mon party, the All Mon Region Democracy Party, led by Nai Ngwe Thein and other ex-civil service officials.

Out of four Kachin parties that applied for registration, only the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State, apparently backed by the military, has been registered. The rest of the Kachin parties including the Kachin State Progressive Party led by Dr. Tu Ja, who so far has not been

registered, allegedly because of its presumed link to the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), which has refused to accept the regime's border guard force proposal.

Except for some ethnic parties that intend to contest in their limited area and the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which is fully backed by the regime, all political parties are facing challenges to win in their contested constituencies. Even the NUP complained about the unilateral campaigns of the USDP, which has access to state-owned property and facilities.

U Chit Hlaing, one of the executive members of the NUP, has complained that he wanted a level playing field, but the USDP has many advantages and enjoys government support.

Now some political parties are considering joining together into a political alliance. Recently, the Democratic Party (Myanmar), the National Democratic Force (NDF), the Rakhine National Development Party, the Shan National Democratic Party and the Union Democratic Party have held some form of discussions.

Snr-Gen Than Shwe called on the public to make “correct choices” during his Independence Day speech in January. According to sources close to the military, he recently ordered regional military commanders at the quarterly meeting to help the USDP in the forthcoming elections.

Not only is the USDP preparing to win many seats at the national level, it also aims to win at the regional-level parliaments, where there are only 22 ethnic parties.

Although the military will be given 25 percent of the seats in both houses of parliament, the government party wants to win up to 90 percent of the seats, to ensure that two of three vice presidential candidates come from the military. Some observers feel that the other 38 parties might have a chance to win 10 percent of the seats. Good luck to them.