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Before Burma's 1990 general elections, detractors of the Burmese military regime—officially known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)—cried foul against the repressive and restrictive conditions of the polls.

They feared and predicted an unfair election, which would be rigged in favor of a military-backed former socialist party, the National Unity Party (NUP). But the results—a landslide victory for the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD)—stunned the nation. Then the regime itself cried foul.

Here we are now again—20 years later—confronted with the prospect of another election. Opponents of the regime have long voiced opposition to the 2008 constitution and the planned election, due to be held under its auspices. Undeterred, the military government has moved on with preparations for the polls.

So are we in for a re-run of what happened in 1990?

A brief comparison of pre-election conditions, laws in place and military preparations and necessary steps between 1990 and 2010 reveals both strong similarities as well as stark contrasts in the election scenarios.

But the most pressing question in the peoples' mind—the core issue regarding elections—is

the results.

Can the opposition win under current conditions, or is there room for a similar type of surprise outcome as in 1990? Undoubtedly, such fundamental questions will be repeatedly asked and examined within an opposition party like the NLD.

For a start, the 1990 election was the result of the nation's clarion call for the return of democracy after 26 years of single-party socialist rule. But after the military takeover in 1988, the country remained under military administration in the run up to the elections. As such, the pre-election was characterized by restrictions on campaigning and the harassment—and in many cases imprisonment of opposition activists.

Campaign-financing rules favored the NUP, which was allowed to retain its funds after the coup in 1988. Aung San Suu Kyi remained under detention, along with hundreds of political prisoners. Her application to stand for election was rejected on the grounds that she was married to a foreigner.

Unlike 2010, the 1990 election was organized without a constitution.

In 1990 the SLORC did not specify the terms of transfer of power, which was the source of contention and subject of opposition's repeated calls for dialogue with the junta before the election. Then after the election power was never transferred.

However, in the 2008 constitution it clearly states that the first session of the parliament must be convened within 90 days from the election, raising the prospects that the fledgling institutions will get up and running.

After 2010 election the current junta, SPDC, will cease to exist—although there is no mentioning as such in the constitution. Other clear provisions on executive, legislative and judiciary branches of the constitution abundantly indicate that the rule of the game will change.

Back in 1990, against all odds, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD contested and won the election. But the backdrop of the 1988 uprising allowed the party to ride on the wave of the popular movement. That popular support is still there and the NLD is likely to win a sizable chunk of seats—on conditions that elections are free and fair and its candidates contesting the election unhindered.

The elections 1990 were organized without any international monitoring. Realistically, no one expects the internal monitors to be involved in the 2010 polls. However, it will not be a surprise if ASEAN sends its diplomats or officials to observe the election proceedings. But this will not make any difference to the outcome.

Twenty years later, not much has changed in terms of the basic parameters of the polls. Aung San Suu Kyi has remained under house arrest and will most likely do so during the election. She will not be allowed to participate in the election.

Although she is no longer married to a foreigner following the death of her late husband, sub-section (a), Article 121 of the 2008 constitution, states that “a person serving prison term, having been committed by the Court concerned for having committed an offense” shall not be entitled to be elected to the parliament.

Meanwhile, military rule remains in force and will remain so until the convening of the first parliamentary session—presumably sometime in 2011. Moreover, as said earlier, there is no clear stipulation in the constitution how the SPDC will be abolished.

The opposition still faces restrictions and harassment, with many top opposition leaders imprisoned. These prominent dissidents—whose name recognition makes them strong potential candidates—will most likely remain incarcerated, and thus ineligible to contest, during the elections.

Besides Aung San Suu Kyi, they may include key figures such as Min Ko Naing, Khun Htun Oo and others if not all currently under detention.

Not all conditions are similar. Back in 1990, Burma did not have Swan Err Shin or the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)—the two groups often accused of harassing the opposition activists.

In 2010, unlike 1990, the prospect of the USDA transforming itself into a government political party looms large. A mass organization with abundant resources and nation-wide membership, it will be a threat to opposition's attempt to wrestle any meaningful win in the election.

And its role in violence against NLD and other opposition activists is one of the key concerns on the minds of the opposition politicians. Presumably in a similar fashion, the Swan Err Shin in its role outside the constitutional and legal framework may be used in harassing opposition candidates.

These possible threats or acts of violence may affect the outcome because many would-be parliamentarians may stay steer clear of direct standoff with such organizations by not contesting the elections.

If these concerns come to be true, even if the elections turn out to be free and fair on election day as Senior Than Shwe often promises, the election results then—fundamental issue in an election—may still tip towards the SPDC or its allies.