If military-backed political candidates win big in the election, their increased share of legislators will pave the way to form a strong, authoritarian government.

In a democracy, elections are the only way for a political party to hold state power and shape the policies that will influence the country.

After the 2010 general election in Burma, voters will have a chance to determine the division of power between the political parties in parliament, where the nation's laws and regulations will be decided.

When the military junta announces the new electoral rules, observers will study them carefully to determine how much of the old electoral system remains and how much is new.

The junta excluded the electoral system from the 2008 constitution because of the difficulty of making changes through amendments. An electoral system separated from the constitution is more flexible.

However, it is important for international and local election observers to understand that the electoral system is really closely tied to the constitution, because an electoral system's design can greatly impact on the issue of who governs in parliament, particularly in terms of the balance of power.

As voters, the Burmese people now have little information on the type of electoral system that will translate their votes into the number of seats a political party will secure.

Therefore, it is important to understand the electoral systems currently used in the world and Burma's previous electoral system. Although there are many types of electoral systems, the most used are generally categorized into three groups: plurality-majority systems, proportional systems and mixed systems.

In the plurality-majority systems, there are five types: First Pass The Post (FPTP), Two-Round System (TRS), Alternative Vote (AV), Block Vote (BV) and Party Block Vote (PBV).

In the proportional systems, there are two types: List Proportional Representation (List PR) and Single Transferable Vote (STV).

The mixed type systems uses the former two types in combination: Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) and Parallel system uses two electoral systems independently at the same time.

New democratic nations usually choose the electoral system they know best. In the 2008 book "*Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook*," the Stockholm-based International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance noted that previously colonized nation's electoral system can be "inherited without significant alteration from colonial or occupying administrations."

The FPTP System's Impact on Burma's Politics

Like Malaysia and Singapore, two former British colonies in the Southeast Asia region, Burma inherited its FPTP system from the British. But in Singapore, the country now practices a mixture of two systems from the plurality-majority family: FPTP and PBV.

What is the FPTP system and how could it influence the political stability of a country? The IDEA handbook research says notes that the system is the simplest form and voters only need to choose and vote for one candidate. The candidate who wins the most votes is elected.

There are a number of positive and negative factors associated with the FPTP system. A significant factor is that it's a winner-take-all system, creating a potential for dominance by a single-party.

In theory, some important positive factors of a strong single-party dominated government are:

the country might enjoy political stability; second, because the system is candidate-centered, it encourages ethnic political parties to seek representation of their regions in parliament; third, the government can make state policies or law decisively; fourth, the responsibility of the failure or success of the policies and laws can be clearly determined; fifth, if there is a circumstance that demands a major shift in policy or law, the government can respond efficiently.

In looking back at Burma's previous two parliamentary elections in 1960 and 1990—the former being the last election before the end of democracy in 1962 and the later being the reemergence of democracy after the end of socialism in 1988—the results were landslide victories for parties heading towards the formation of a strong single-party dominated government.

Prime Minister U Nu's Pyidaungsu Party (Union Party) won 203 out of 250 parliamentary seats in the 1960 election. Similarly, the National League for Democracy, led by the democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi, won 392 out of 485 seats in the 1990 election.

In spite of the different time periods, the political scenarios were similar: the winning parties were denied the ability to rule the country by the military. Following the military-backed "Stable" Anti-fascist People's Freedom League loss in the 1960 election, the military staged a coup in 1962. In the 1990 election, the incumbent generals broke its promise to hand power over to the winning NLD party when the military-backed National Unity Party (NUP) suffered a stunning loss.

Although there are many issues behind Burma's political crisis and the division between the military and civil political parties, one of the factors was the FPTP electoral system, because it produced a disproportional representation of a single political party, resulting in a lack of power balance in parliament.

For example, when the NUP transformed from the former ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party after the demise of socialism in 1988, it won only 10 seats with 21.2 percent of the votes in the 1990 election. Although the party placed second after the NLD in a total votes cast, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy won 23 seats, or 1.7 percent of the votes, but it placed second after the NLD in total number of seats in parliament.

In theory, such positive and negative factors can be adjusted within an election mechanism which is tailored to create an equal opportunity on a regular basis for all political parties to win effective representation in the legislature. However, the election mechanism was destroyed by the military, and we are again in the process of creating an electoral system.

After the decades-long tensions between the military and civil political groups, the current military junta reintroduced a new political order through the new constitution approved in 2008.

Under the constitution, the military designed a bicameral parliament with an undemocratic proportional representation—25 percent military-appointed and 75 percent elected representatives.

With the parliamentary design created by the constitution, the military doesn't need to stage a coup if military-backed candidates lose badly in an election, because they are guaranteed a dominate position in the parliament. To further avoid the dominance of an opposition party, the constitution introduced a president system with parliamentary characteristics, in order to prevent an opposition party from controlling the executive power of the state.

If the new electoral law continues to use an FPTP system, an anti-military political party will have a chance to win a majority of seats in parliament, but the military's undemocratically appointed share of legislators will effectively block the creation of a strong democratic government.

However, if the military-backed political party wins big in the election, its increased share of legislators will pave the way to form a strong, authoritarian military-dominated government.

Burma observers will watch carefully to see what type of electoral system the military favors this time around, and they will dissect it to understand how it may affect the distribution of legislators in parliament.