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RANGOON — Washington's new policy of engagement with Burma's military government appears to be failing, a senior US official indicated Friday, noting the junta's decision to bar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from upcoming elections.



This week the government unveiled election laws that prevent the detained Nobel Peace Prize laureate from running for office or even voting in the polls and greatly weaken her National League for Democracy. The date of the elections has not been announced.

The United States recently modified its strict policy of isolating the junta in the hope that increased engagement would encourage change. However, the Obama administration has said it will not lift sanctions on Burma unless it sees concrete progress toward democratic reform—notably freeing Suu Kyi and letting her party participate in elections.

"The US approach was to try to encourage domestic dialogue between the key stakeholders, and the recent promulgation of the election criteria doesn't leave much room for such a dialogue," said U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell.

Campbell, speaking to reporters in Bangkok, said the US would continue to talk with all parties inside Burma, including the government.

But he added: "We're very disappointed, and we are concerned. It's very regrettable. This is not what we had hoped for, and it is a setback." Campbell is on a 10-country Asian trip.

On Friday, the junta unveiled the last of its election laws, which Suu Kyi has described as unjust and repressive.

The fifth and last law, carried in state-owned newspapers, governs elections for 14 regional parliaments. Details of the five laws have trickled out over the course of the week.

"Aung San Suu Kyi said she never expected such repressive laws would come out but said she's not disappointed," her party spokesman Nyan Win told reporters after meeting the 64-year-old democracy leader at her home Thursday.

"She said such challenges call for resolute responses and calls on the people and democratic forces to take unanimous action against such unfair laws," he said.

The party has yet to decide whether it will participate in the elections. Political parties have 60 days from Monday to register.

It will be the first poll since 1990, when Suu Kyi's party won a landslide victory. The junta ignored the results of that vote and has kept Suu Kyi jailed or under detention for 14 of the past 20 years.

This year's elections are part of the junta's "roadmap to democracy," which critics deride as a sham designed to cement the military's power. A military-backed constitution was approved by a national referendum last May, but the opposition charges that the vote was unfair.

An election law announced Wednesday prohibits anyone convicted of a crime from being a member of a political party, making Suu Kyi ineligible to become a candidate in the elections — or even a member of the party she co-founded and heads.

In August, Suu Kyi was convicted of violating the terms of her house arrest by briefly sheltering an American who swam uninvited to her lakeside residence, and was sentenced to 18 more months of detention.

Election laws announced Thursday take away her right to vote, saying those convicted of crimes are barred from the polls. Thursday's two laws also formally invalidated the 1990 election results, saying the 1989 election law under which those polls were held was repealed by the new legislation.

"They have been slowly trying to decimate the party and now they are doing it with utmost force. But the NLD will never collapse," said the party's deputy chairman, Tin Oo.

US-based Human Rights Watch says it believes 429 members of the league are currently imprisoned, including 12 who won parliamentary seats in the 1990 elections.

The United States and human rights groups have warned that the junta is running out of chances to make the elections appear credible. Clauses in the constitution already ensure that the military will retain a controlling say in government and bar Suu Kyi from holding office.