RANGOON — "Voting in X (number of) days," reads what sound like a reminder to voters in the front pages of weekly journals here ahead of the Nov. 7 general election in Burma, the first to be held in 20 years.

But while there is a lot of election talk in this military-ruled country, many of the voices quoted in articles in state media and journals are those of politicians and not of voters.

"There are many journals writing about the elections, but those are just boring. All the news came out after being censored by the scrutiny board," remarks Ye Htut, a 30-something vendor of news journals.

A mix of moods prevails here in the former capital of Burma ahead of a vote that some say will just legitimize military rule under a civilian veneer, but others believe offers some chance to get a degree of political change. Some say it might be better to boycott the vote, while others have mixed, conflicting opinions about it. "It is a very complicated process for voting but I still have no idea who are going to contest or whom to vote," says Cho Cho, a homemaker.

Recalling the atmosphere in the weeks before the last election in this South-east Asian country of 53 million people in 1990, she says: "We could hear campaign songs played loudly everywhere."

Recalling parts of a campaign ditty at the time, Cho Cho sang, ‘We would be wealthy if Suu (Aung San Suu Kyi) wins in the elections’." But "it is different this time. I haven't seen many party doing public campaigns widely like that".

Cho Cho voted for Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) that won a landslide victory 20 years ago, but which the military junta did not recognise. The NLD has been disbanded after it decided to boycott the November poll after finding "unjust" the government’s electoral laws.

"In 1990, we could make speeches anywhere we like but it is quite different this time," says Khin Maung Swe, who contested the 1990 elections with NLD and has now formed a new party called National Democratic Force (NDF). He is also its spokesman.

"We have to deal with very strict rules and regulations. If we want to make a public speech, we have to ask permission one week ahead about where we'll make it, how many people will come, and who will say what," he explains. "Very strict!"

Political parties also complain about the limited time for building networks and getting candidates under the rules set by the Elections Commission.

"We were given just 15 days. It was very, very hard for our two-month-old, newly established party to get enough candidates within these days. If we were given one more month to seek candidates, we could have got 300 candidates," says Khin Maung Swe. "But we just got only about 160 candidates in two weeks."

The Nov. 7 election will be held for 498 seats in the People's Assembly or lower house of parliament, 224 seats in the Nationalities Assembly or upper house and other seats in the legislatures of divisions and states. The country's 2008 Constitution guarantees the military 25 percent of these slots.

Parties like the NDF also find financial resources a struggle. "We have to rely on donations even for travel. Our party can't finance its candidates," Khin Maung Swe adds.

The registration fee is 500 US dollars for one candidate, a hefty amount in a country where 32.7 percent of the population lives below poverty line.

Only the strongest party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), is contesting more than 1,100 seats out of 1,163 seats nationwide to be voted in during the November poll.

In campaigns aired on state-owned television, USDP general secretary and agriculture minister Htay Oo has called the party a "national force" that was "formed with the fine legacy of the USDP that has been joining hands with the people for about 17 years in serving the interest of the national people".

In truth, many voters say they do not make much of a distinction between the USDP and the military government because Prime Minister Thein Sein and other generals, as UDSP candidates, will be running for civilian seats.

"USDP is acting as a ruling party. It's acting as the government's party. That party can do anything that it likes. It can make public speeches in public areas. The party is also organising elderly people to vote for them by giving money," argues the NDF's Khin Maung Swe.

Ye Htut says, "USDP will win for sure. It's going to be worse if they take power because thugs and gangsters will misuse power to ruin the country."

This is why "I'm not going to vote," says a 42-year-old government employee. "They have the winning cards in their hands. The result has been arranged. Why should we bother to play this game?"

But those like Cho Cho say that while it might not be clear what kind of government would be in place after the vote, its verdict might be quite clear on who Burma’s voters do not want to stay in power.

"In 1990, many people had only one consensus, to not vote for the National Unity Party," she recalls. That party had been transformed from the Burmese Socialist Party, which ruled for two decades until it was toppled in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

This time, Cho Cho explains, a similar consensus—to avoid voting for USDP—is shaping up among many. "This time, we don't want the USDP to win, but we still don't know which party to vote," she says.