

The announcement on Monday by the chairman of Burma's Union Election Commission (EC) that no media or photography will be allowed inside or around polling stations on Nov. 7, the day of Burma's general election, will inevitably lead to vote-rigging, several local journalists and Burmese politicians have said.

Thein Soe, a former advocate-general and later deputy chief justice of the Supreme Court, made the EC announcement at a press conference in Naypyidaw on Monday.

According to a Rangoon-based journalist who attended the press conference, Thein Soe refused to answer questions directly related to press freedom and procedures.

"At yesterday's press conference, Thein Soe refused to respond to reporters' questions that were relevant to media coverage of the election," he said. "I believe this attitude will seriously undermine the credibility of the election."

He said that the EC chairman informed the assembled reporters that no foreign or exile Burmese journalists will be allowed to enter the country to cover the election, but added that the authorities will arrange "tours" for diplomats and UN agencies.

Thu Wai, the chairman of the Democratic Party (Myanmar) said, "The election should be transparent. Photography should be allowed. In fact, it is their [the EC's] duty to invite the media. I don't know why they are restricting the press.

"In 1990, both the public and the media were able to observe the election freely," he added.

Several political parties have accused the EC of turning a blind eye to infringements of electoral laws by the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, which is accused of using state funds for its campaign.

The United States and Indonesia have criticized the EC decision not to permit foreign observers and media into Burma to cover the election.

Observers say that the military regime orchestrated massive fraud and voter intimidation ahead of and during the 2008 constitutional referendum. Security at polling stations was tight and no foreign news agency correspondents or independent journalists were allowed to follow the process at polling stations or during public rallies.