

HANOI — World leaders are expected to launch a last-ditch plea this week for free and fair elections in military-run Burma, but at least one neighboring Southeast Asian country has already dismissed the upcoming polls as a "farce."

Aside from reclusive Burma, China is expected to take center stage at an annual summit of leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations following a series of territorial spats that has rattled regional nerves.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and several other dignitaries will join discussions at the conference, which opens Thursday in Vietnam's capital, Hanoi.

Burma's much-anticipated Nov. 7 elections are supposed to be a move forward in the country's so-called roadmap to democracy following five decades of military rule. But critics say the junta has already taken steps to block transparency and ensure that the military remains in power by repressing the country's main opposition party and limiting campaigning.

"It's a farce," Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo said ahead of the Asean summit.

No foreign journalists or outside observers will be allowed into the country for the election, the first in two decades.

The main opposition party, led by democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, is boycotting the elections as undemocratic after winning a landslide victory in 1990 that was dismissed by the military leaders.

That leaves the key junta-backed party as the only strong contender to win the upcoming contest.

Monique Skidmore, a Burma expert at the University of Canberra in Australia, said the outcome of the election is a foregone conclusion.

"The important thing about these elections is that they are occurring, and they will bring a small level of change and unpredictability that has been absent in Burmese political life for many years," she said.

The United Nations and world leaders have strongly urged the generals to free Suu Kyi and nearly 2,100 other political prisoners. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate has been imprisoned or under house arrest for 15 of the past 21 years.

China will also be under the spotlight in Hanoi following a number of maritime incidents in the South China Sea where Beijing and several Asean countries have a long-standing feud over strategically placed and potentially oil-rich islands. At a security meeting earlier this month in Hanoi, China attempted to improve relations after being accused of bullying its smaller neighbors.

In a preparatory document obtained by The Associated Press from one Southeast Asian country leading up to this week's summit, China was accused of trying to "bully" Asean into keeping disputes involving the South China Sea out of the meetings.

"We've passed the historical stage and now entered into a new era," said Arthur Waldron, an international relations specialist at the University of Pennsylvania. "Asian states will remain very closely involved in trade, but they're going to start hedging their bets and pulling away and talking to each other about, 'How do we deal with China when she's sort of had a few?'"

The territorial waters are a hot-button issue for several countries. China claims sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, but parts of it are also claimed by several of its Southeast Asian neighbors, including Vietnam.

Japan and China are also still recovering from a nasty row near disputed islands in the East China Sea after a Chinese fishing boat collided with Japanese patrol vessels. Japan arrested

and later released the boat captain, enraging Beijing.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is expected to meet with leaders from Japan and South Korea while in Vietnam.

Heads of state from the Asean countries—Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam—along with leaders from Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia and the United States will attend the summit.

*Associated Press writer Jim Gomez contributed to this report from Hanoi, Vietnam.*