MAE LA REFUGEE CAMP, Thailand — It's no wonder that Saw Tun Wai has little desire to return to Burma, even after upcoming elections that its military rulers describe as a step toward democracy.

The wiry 52-year-old teacher fled to Thailand on foot over rugged mountain terrain in 2006, escaping a vicious and largely unseen army campaign against ethnic rebels that shows no sign of ending.

"The government (falsely) accused me of being a partner of the revolution," said Saw Tun Wai, who belongs to the Karen ethnic group. "I was beaten and forced into making a confession." Then, he said, he was press-ganged into working for the army as a porter.

The prospects that the Nov. 7 election will bring change to their homeland seem negligible to the 150,000 refugees in Thai camps near the border with Burma, also known by its old name, Burma.

The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party is a shoe-in to top the polls, the first in two decades. A constitution imposed by the military in 2008 ensures that the generals

will call the shots for the foreseeable future anyway.

The elections, said Saw Tun Wai, now a teacher in the Mae La refugee camp, offer no hope for positive change, "neither for the Karen, nor for any of the people in Burma." His hope is to one day become eligible for resettlement in another country.

For the refugees, a more immediate concern is a possible shift in the attitude of Thai officials, who have indicated that they might send them home sometime after the election.

The first camp was established in the mid-1980s. Thousands of refugees have been resettled overseas under UN auspices, but a constant stream of new arrivals swells the populations of the nine camps, scattered along the Thai side of the border.

Picturesque streams and dirt lanes crisscross Mae La, the largest camp with an estimated 47,000 inhabitants.

In a dirt-floor tea shop, men smoke Burmese cheroots, chatting over shots of sugary milk tea and the blare of Thai music videos. The voices of children, chanting lessons in Burmese and English, come out of the many bamboo schoolhouses.

The prospect that Thailand may consider Burma's election a turning point toward justice and democracy — justifying the refugees' return — casts a shadow over their future.

Sharp international criticism forced Thai authorities to abort a planned repatriation in February of 3,000 Karen refugees from another camp to an area believed to be littered with land mines.

That came just a few months after Thailand forcibly repatriated more than 4,000 ethnic Hmong refugees to Laos, despite international fears they would face persecution.

At the end of September, Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya set off fresh jitters.

Speaking in New York, he said that he would launch "a more comprehensive program for the Burmese people in the camps, the displaced persons, the intellectuals that run around the streets of Bangkok and Chiang Mai province, to prepare them to return to Burma after the elections."

Kasit's remarks were vague, and the Foreign Ministry later said Thailand wants to prepare the refugees to go home "when the situation in their country becomes conducive for their eventual return."

"Thailand clearly wants to send refugees and political exiles back, but after the election the situation in Burma won't change, so it will be hard for them to justify it," said Mark Farmaner of Burma Campaign UK, a group that lobbies for democracy in Burma.

Human rights groups accuse the Burma army of rape, torture and summary execution in insurgent areas. They say the military forces villagers to work as porters and walk ahead of military columns as human land-mine detectors. The government denies the allegations.

Tu Ja, a 54-year-old teacher from the Kachin ethnic group, fled Burma after distributing political pamphlets during anti-government protests in 2007.

"The Burmese regime wants to destroy this camp, that's for sure, but where shall we go?" he said. "All of our families are dispersed everywhere and we have no home. How can we return to Burma?"