

Burma's controversial election, its first in twenty years, is now at the doorstep. This is not a typical election, and the most important decision the Burmese public must make on Sunday is not which party to vote for, but whether or not to vote at all. That decision will apparently be made in an atmosphere of confusion and fear.



“People don't understand the voting procedures,” said a resident of Rangoon. “But the real problem is in the minds of the people. They feel they have no option, that they have to vote or they will get into trouble. This problem is not only limited to the remote areas. It exists right in the middle of Rangoon as well.”

One of the main sources of voter confusion lies in the three separate ballots they must cast: one each for candidates standing for election in the People's Parliament, the Nationalities Parliament and the Regional Parliament. In addition, in several locations including Rangoon, they have to cast yet another ballot to choose a candidate for a parliamentary seat allotted to ethnic minorities.

Observers inside Burma say that voter confusion also stems from the fact that people could mistake the National Democratic Force (NDF), the largest pro-democracy party contesting in the election, for the National League for Democracy (NLD), the main opposition group which has decided to boycott the polls.

Led by former NLD members, the NDF has been accused of trying to mislead people by using the NLD's “bamboo hat” party symbol in their logo. Many identified the bamboo hat with the NLD's landslide victory in the last election in 1990.

“They are not only using the symbol, but often claim that Aung San Suu Kyi is their leader as well,” said a resident of Rangoon.

In addition, he said, the 88 Generation Student Youths (Union of Myanmar) political party, which

is alleged to be close to the regime, is very confusing to potential voters because the party's name is similar to the 88 Generation Student opposition movement, whose leadership remains in prison and are barred from the polls.

Despite the confusion and the other hurdles they face—such as voter apathy and an Election Commission (EC) that has almost completely ignored their complaints about the “unlawful” and underhanded activities of the junta's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) — the handful of pro-democracy parties contesting the election are still enthusiastic about the polls.

Dr.Than Nyein, the chairman of the NDF, said the party has faced harassment by local authorities and the USDP during the election campaign, which started over a month ago and will continue until the polling day.

“The USDP members in Kachin State removed our posters last month. And recently in Mandalay Division, a farmer who expressed his support for us was forced by village authorities to pave a street,” he said, adding that the EC has not responded to NDF letters of complaint regarding these incidents.

Than Nyein said, however, that he was not daunted by these experiences because he has expected these types of obstacles from the beginning.

Opposition political party leaders say that what most concerns them in the final week leading up to the polls is fraud and intimidation with respect to advance voting. They report widespread cases of voters being extorted to cast advance votes by a mix of USDP representatives, local authorities and EC officials.

“EC officials are exploiting the ignorance of voters about the voting process and trying to pressure them into giving advance votes,” said Than Nyein.

“We know that government employees, workers in factories owned by businessmen close to the government and farmers are being forced to give advance votes,” said Nayee Ba Swe, the general secretary of the Democratic Party (Myanmar).

“We heard that even those already dead were included in the advance voters' list. We are totally helpless. Whatever complaints we've made, we've received no answer back. Still, it is our duty to run in the election.”

Win Tin, an outspoken leader of the NLD, said he was more worried about the sense of fear that would drive many people to the polling centers and cast advance votes than about the current public confusion regarding political parties and the voting process.

“We can help clear away this confusion to some extent. I mean, we can tell people that Daw Suu is not the party leader of the NDF. But we are in no position to dispel the fear in people. Fear will continue since people are worried about their own livelihood,” Win Tin said.

NLD members recently distributed pamphlets containing Suu Kyi's message that people have a legal right to abstain from voting. Afterward, state-run media warned that those responsible for interfering with the election can be legally punished, raising speculation that the regime could extend Suu Kyi's house arrest, due to expire on Nov. 13, by linking her with NLD boycott activities.

"We might not be able to disrupt the polls, but if voter turnout is low due to our efforts, then we can give the impression to the international community that this election is an absolute sham," said Win Tin.

Observers say the same fear that could prod many voters to cast advance votes for the USDP, or go to the polling stations on Sunday, could also afflict polling station officials, many of whom are teachers and other government workers or local authorities.

"With my own eyes, I saw the polling officials set aside many "no" votes as invalid during the 2008 referendum. They feared they would be punished if there were too many votes against the Constitution in the polling booth they were assigned to work," said a local resident in Pegu Township. "The government will use this fear as part of their mechanism in this election as well."

However, not everyone is afraid. One young political dissident in Rangoon who voted against the junta's 2008 Constitutional referendum has decided to boycott the coming polls. He says that if he goes to the voting station on Sunday it would mean that he is supporting the Constitution, which the election is meant to legitimize.

And other young people inside Burma said they would go and vote not out of fear, but because this would be the first time in their life they had a chance to do so.

"The election will be like a forced marriage," said a university student in Rangoon. "You can't just stand by."

"I don't know who to vote for, but I am a Karen so I will vote for the Karen Peoples' Party," said a 23-year-old girl in Rangoon, who said she was previously a trainee at Myanmar Egress, a pro-election think tank. "I am not quite interested in politics. But you know, it takes centuries for democracy to grow."

Though the election has been widely viewed as a sham to further entrench the rule of the military junta, some analysts also describe it as a possible beginning of positive change in the country.

"The ensuing charade and shenanigans still matter as they could foment unintended consequences and allow Burma to break out of its military-dominated stranglehold," wrote Thitinan Pongsudhirak, the director of the Institute of Security and International Studies in Thailand, in a Bangkok Post article on Tuesday.

But this view has little traction among the ordinary Burmese electorate.

“This election will make no difference at all,” said a tri-shaw driver in Rangoon. “It is already in their [the regime's] bag,”