

RANGOON—Burma's government-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is stepping up its campaigning on the eve of Nov. 7 election, adding to the billboards that already outnumber the posters of other political parties.

The USDP posters are being dismissed by most people in Rangoon, however, as “advertisements for a transition from military rule to government by the military in civilian clothes.”

Many candidates report that interest in the election is low.

“When we go out campaigning people keep clear of us, saying they are busy,” said a candidate in Rangoon's South Okkalapa constituency. “Some even said that it doesn't matter who wins power as long as they can eat twice a day. Many say they're not voting because the party they trust most is not listed.”

That party, he said, is Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which decided not to register for the election and was consequently struck from the party list by the regime.

At least two parties critical of the government, the Democratic Party (Myanmar) and the National Democratic Force (NDF) are also intensifying their campaigns as the election nears.

“We are working hard distributing leaflets,” said the Democratic Party's General-Secretary, Nay Yee Ba Swe, who is a candidate in the San Chaung constituency. She tours the area by car personally distributing the leaflets.

The efficacy of the leaflet campaign is questioned by many residents. A Mayoung Gone township said people were just throwing them away.

The USDP is distributing mock ballot papers listing the competing parties but with a tick printed against its own name only.

The USDP campaign is possibly proving counterproductive, however, with popular frustration reportedly increasing over the constant plugs on state-controlled radio and TV.

Smaller parties also complain about the amount of time and space allotted to the USDP and about restrictions imposed by the Election Commission (EC).

“We have had to request permission from EC seven days ahead of any public event,” said one candidate. “It has made it difficult to organize any campaign event. We are also forbidden to criticize the regime.”

At the time of the 1990 election, said a veteran journalist, thousands turned out for campaign events.

“Everyone was active. Now look at it! It is like a disaster. There are so many dos and don'ts for

the political parties.”

One election campaign appears to be scoring success, however. A youth member of the NLD said leaflets bearing the image of Suu Kyi were being snapped up.

The leaflets remind the public that they have the right not to vote and also advise people to contact the police if they experience any form of intimidation—an ironic message in view of the police surveillance that surrounds the movements of anybody handing out the Suu Kyi flyers.