

RANGOON — Twenty years after the last elections here, when a landslide opposition victory was annulled by the military-run government, Burma is holding a nationwide vote Sunday that its secretive generals tout as "discipline-flourishing democracy."



There is definitely plenty of discipline.

Political gatherings are only allowed with a week's notice and an official review of the campaign speech. Hundreds of potential opposition candidates—including pro-democracy hero Aung San Suu Kyi—are under house arrest or in prison. Many of the rules were clearly written to benefit the proxy party for the ruling junta.

But in a country battered by more than 50 years of brutal military rule and sometimes-bizarre economic mismanagement, some candidates hope that maybe — just maybe — the poll could mark the start of a new era in Burma, which is also known as Myanmar.

"We don't believe this is a free and fair election," said Phone Win, an aid group founder running as an independent candidate in Rangoon, the country's largest city.

Still, he added, "This could be something worthwhile, it could really change Myanmar." Then he smiled: "Or maybe not."

There is little disagreement about who will win. Diplomats, political observers outside Burma and many voters predict the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party will come out on top.

Numbers alone appear to make major change impossible.

The USDP is fielding 1,112 candidates for the 1,159 seats in the two-house national parliament

and 14 regional parliaments. Its closest rival, the National Unity Party with 995 candidates, is backed by supporters of Burma's previous military ruler.

The largest opposition party, the National Democratic Force, is contesting just 164 spots.

While most candidates struggle to raise the \$500 needed to register, the junta's proxy party has financial resources and a ready-made political machine culled from the vast civil service. It has the tacit support of the state media, which gives it extensive coverage.

Most importantly, it has the backing of generals who have repeatedly proven willing to do whatever is needed, from mass arrests to torture, to quiet political threats. Already, opposition parties have complained of strong-arm tactics to force people, particularly in rural areas, to vote for the USDP.

Just in case all that isn't enough, the constitution sets aside 25 percent of parliamentary seats for military appointees.

So the elections' critics see it as nothing but a way to put military-approved candidates, many of them former top soldiers, into civilian clothes.

"This isn't just simply a flawed process. This is a categorically antidemocratic process," said Muang Zarni, an exiled Burmese dissident and researcher at the London School of Economics.

Suu Kyi, who led her party to the annulled victory in 1990 and remains under house arrest, agrees. She dismissed the election as rigged and urged her party, the National League for Democracy, to boycott the vote, leading to its dissolution.

But some also see the election as a democratic opportunity—albeit a deeply flawed one—that cannot be passed up.

"The door is ajar and we need to try our best to slip through," said Nay Yee Ba Swe, the 58-year-old daughter of a former prime minister and a candidate with the opposition Democratic Party. "At first the political space will be very small but ... time will change the landscape in favor of democratic forces."

A thin, demure woman who served five years in prison for political activity, she believes there is no choice but to participate.

"If you don't vote, you are telling the regime and their cronies to rule forever," she said.

Phone Win agrees. "The elections are just the first step. Afterward, we will work inside parliament, outside parliament," he said. "Even if we get only one seat in parliament, we can start to do something."

His campaign might appear ridiculous anywhere but Burma. Well-spoken and telegenic, he has yet to actually make a public speech because of the restrictions. Instead, he distributes flyers

during stops in tea shops, with loudspeakers on rented trucks blaring earsplitting music to attract attention.

"I talk and talk and talk and talk," he said.

But few passers-by paid him much attention on a recent evening as he tried to rally voters in a crowded Rangoon market. Some were clearly frightened away by the secret policemen at the edge of the tea shop, photographing anyone standing with him.

The military has ruled since 1962, with a succession of generals suppressing dissent and driving the country into international isolation. Today, it has a per capita income of \$1,200, and a third of the population lives in poverty. Uprisings were forcefully put down in 1988 and 2007. The jails hold some 2,200 political prisoners.

The country has often been ruled by dictatorial whimsy. The previous military leader, obsessed with the number 9 and reportedly advised by his astrologers, banned bank notes not divisible by that number.

In 2005, the current leadership ordered the capital shifted overnight from Rangoon to the once-tiny village of Naypyidaw, 250 miles (400 kilometers) to the north. Little but rumors are known about Than Shwe, the senior general who heads the junta.

The generals are loath to allow any political opening that might someday jeopardize their family fortunes or, even worse, put them on trial.

Given that, many worry that even if the elections do bring some change, it is likely to be reversed if things move too quickly for the junta.

"The door may open a bit, but if you put your foot in too far they may just chop it off," said a middle-class businessman, who spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing government reprisal. "Then if you try to walk in, they'll probably just shoot you."