

Some 200 villagers from Kyarinseikyi Township in southern Karen State held a secret rally earlier this week to air their grievances about being denied the right to vote in Sunday's general election.



Kyarinseikyi is one of 33 ethnic townships in Burma where the election has been canceled due to “security concerns.” Many of the townships, like Kyarinseikyi, are comprised of rural village tracts where the rebel Karen National Union (KNU) is active.

However, many residents say they are unhappy because they have been denied the right to vote on Sunday.

“If they are eligible, they want to vote,” said a local resident in Kyarinseikyi. “They are unsatisfied with the decision not to allow polling in the area.”

The Burmese military authorities in September announced they will not allow polling stations to open in 46 of the 67 village tracts in Kyarinseikyi Township. Each tract comprises between two and 10 villages.

The 46 village tracts are among more than 300 village tracts across Karen State where elections have been canceled—an area of some 3,400 villages with an estimated population of 1.5 million people.

On Nov. 2, Burma’s Union Election Commission (EC) canceled polls in 12 more village tracts in six constituencies in Karenni State in northeastern Burma.

A member of the Pwo-Sgaw Democratic Party, an ethnic Karen party that draws much of its support from residents in Pa-an, the capital of Karen State, said that the authorities have unofficially stated that the polls in Kyarinseikyi Township will remain closed on election day

because of fears of attacks by the KNU.

However, he speculated that the real reason behind the move was more likely because the junta anticipated that its proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, would lose out at the polls to ethnic Karen parties in those areas.

Voting has also been canceled by the EC in many village tracts in Bawkaligyi Township in Pegu Division. However, the tracts specifically targeted are all in areas known for strong nationalist Karen sentiment.

An ethnic Karen woman in Taungoo said villagers did not know why they were banned from voting, and that even pastors were disqualified.

People in ethnic Mon villages such as Kyaikto have also been banned from voting on Nov. 7. Local sources said disenfranchised villagers were unhappy with the decision.

Some 500 residents in Ye Township at the Mon-Karen border reportedly launched an anti-election protest in late October with calls for other villagers to boycott the upcoming election.

Apart from the disenfranchised voters within the ethnic areas, several million more Burmese nationals are unable to exercise their right to vote in Burma's first election in 20 years.

Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), migrant workers abroad in countries such as Thailand and Malaysia, and dissidents and exiles are not generally registered to vote.

Figures show that some 140,000 refugees—the vast majority of whom are ethnic Karen, Mon and Karenni—stay in camps along the Thai-Burmese border. Having fled Burma, they are not recognized as citizens with voting rights.

According to the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium, there are approximately 19,000 IDPs, mostly in Karen State, who are homeless and hiding in the jungle. Most have fled civil war and have had to abandon their villages. They cannot vote because their villages have been disenfranchised or, in many cases, burnt down by government troops.

In addition, there are at least 3 million Burmese migrant workers currently living in Thailand and Malaysia who are—for reasons of fear or finance—unable to return home to vote, plus unknown thousands of other dissidents, exiles, migrants and resettled refugees from Burma in third countries across the world whose status prohibits them from registering.

Robert Htwe, the chairman of the Karen Refugee Committee, said the election is a “sham” and will do nothing to help refugees return home.

Instead, more people will be forced to seek refuge at the Thai border, he said, because armed conflict will resume after the election.

Moe Swe, the head of the Thailand-based Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association, said some migrants were saddened that they could not express their right to vote as they were unable to travel back to their homes. Others were apathetic about the election, he said, because they could not envisage it changing anything in Burma.

Moe Swe said that he doesn't see any sign that Burmese migrant workers in Thailand can return and work in their country peacefully in the wake of the election.