

Officials from Burma's Union Election Commission (EC) launched a door-to-door campaign this week to collect advance votes in Rangoon and other larger cities, reflecting the military junta's fear that the position of its proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), may not be secure due to the party's unpopularity among the electorate, according to sources.

The heaviest advance vote collecting activity occurred on Friday, two days ahead of the Sunday election, sources said. Voters reported being forced to cast advance votes and junior EC officials reported being threatened with the loss of their job if they did not collect sufficient advance ballots.

"Local authorities were asked to collect at least 200 advance vote ballots per official. If they do not do so, they will lose their job," said a junior EC official in Meikhtila Township in middle Burma, where several military bases are located.

Ohn Kyaing, a leader of the National League for Democracy who conducted the party's reorganizing trip to Shan State this week, said that people in the state complained about being forced to provide advance votes. He also said that he witnessed EC officials from his township, Thingangyun, forcing people to vote for the USDP.

"In large cities, Rangoon and Mandalay, authorities are forcing people to vote in advance for the USDP or during the election on Sunday. We know that they will do even more in rural areas that are far from the eyes of the media and the international community," said Ohn Khaing.

Under the election laws promulgated by the EC, advance votes shall be collected from soldiers and civil servants, overseas citizens, detainees, patients and the disabled. However, reports from Burma said EC officials called for advanced votes by as many citizens as possible, saying people should vote for "the Tatmadaw's [armed forces] party," in reference to the USDP which is stacked with recently retired generals.

USDP sources said that the reason behind the urgent push to obtain advance votes is the junta's fear that the USDP's unpopularity will hurt it at the polls on election day. Rangoon sources confirmed public anger regarding the USDP, which they said resulted from the intense campaign conducted by USDP members.

"The election is day to day. Wearing white and green, USDP campaigners were easily noticeable on the streets. They announce their promises to the people through speakers and pamphlets and billboards, but everybody knows they are liars," said a 30-year old housewife in Rangoon.

A USDP campaign billboard includes the party motto: "Promise for the People." The billboard claims the USDP will provide peace and stability in Burma; will modernize and develop the country; will safeguard race and religion; and will not be a tool of other countries.

"They say they will not be a tool of other countries. But what about China's influence in Burma? Therefore, all of their mottos are rubbish," said a journalist working for a private journal in

Rangoon.

The junta and the USDP are not only concerned about their unpopularity among the general electorate; they are also worried about tension within the party. USDP sources said some USDP candidates were unhappy about the junta's selection of candidates and assignment of constituencies.

“Some retired generals who became USDP candidates are disappointed because they were ordered to contest in not very good constituencies, while favored generals were chosen for good constituencies such as the one-horse-race constituencies and Naypyidaw,” said a USDP source.

He added that the USDP’s “first-line leadership”—including Shwe Mann, who it is rumored will become president, Tin Aung Myint Oo and Thein Sein—are running either in the 52 constituencies which the USDP is running unopposed or in the junta stronghold of Naypyidaw.

USDP sources said top junta officials placed non-favored USDP leaders, such as Rangoon Mayor Aung Thein Lin, in challenging constituencies. Aung Thein Lin is running in Rangoon’s South Okkalapa constituency against a former political prisoner.

“U Aung Thein Lin is a good example of the unhappiness within the USDP. If he does not win in the poll, his future position would be unsure. So he has to use every way to win in order to secure his future,” said the USDP source.

Unlike Aung Thein Lin, Burmese foreign minister and ex Maj-Gen Nyan Win is assured of winning a seat in the Pegu region because he is the only candidate competing in his constituency.