

With an armed forces of up to half a million men and women, winning the military vote is crucial in a Burmese election. Still, it appears the military regime does not even trust its own soldiers as it has ordered all its personnel and their families to cast advance votes in favor of the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

No official polling stations have been set up at military bases across the country. Instead, military personnel and their families were either given ballot papers this week and told to cast their votes in front of a commanding officer, or they were told to sign declarations that their vote had been cast in advance for the USDP.

“Soldiers and their family members at more than 50 battalions under the Rangoon Command have all given advance votes for the USDP,” said a battalion commander under condition of anonymity. “We were not given any option to choose other parties.”

He said that soldiers at other battalions were told to cast their ballots at makeshift polling booths within their compounds.

Another officer from Rangoon Command said that advance votes from soldiers in Light Infantry Division 77 based in Pegu were collected in early October.

He said that, in many cases, soldiers were told they need not go to polling stations on election day and their names were reportedly placed on advance voters' lists.

“There are request forms for advance voting, which are actually intended for those who will be on duty at polling stations or away from base on Nov. 7,” said a major at the military's Records Office in Rangoon. “Those who will not be available on that day have to fill out their name, address and reason for advance voting. Such forms were distributed widely among soldiers and their family members, and they were ordered to complete the forms. I heard all officers up to the rank of major had to fill them out. Those with ranks higher than major were exempt.”

He said that in addition to the 1,500 staff members at the Record Office plus their families, he knew that soldiers from Light Infantry Division 66 based in Prome, western Pegu Division, were also told to cast advance votes for the USDP.

The size of Burma's army is regularly cited at between 400,000 and 500,000 soldiers. However, in recent years it appears to have downsized, probably to around 350,000, according to Andrew Selth, a Burma expert at Australia's Griffith Asia Institute. However, that number does not include family members.

Burma observers have denounced the policy of forcing sectors of Burmese society to cast advance votes as another attempt of the junta to ensure a victory at the general election on Sunday.

The State Constitution—which was forcefully approved in a referendum in May 2008 while the country was still reeling from the effects of Cyclone Nargis—reserves 25 percent of seats in the parliament for military appointees.