

Burma's 2010 election, like it or not, will end military rule and result in the emergence of a new form of military-controlled civilian government.

The pre-election political landscape has led to speculation that the result has become clear even before the election and that the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) will win.

The junta has done everything to ensure election success—a constitution in favor of military supremacy, a set of restrictive election laws and the assumption of the role of a referee in the election.

If history is repeated, Burma will probably witness a political scenario similar to the one in 1974, when “Gen” Ne Win, as chairman of the Revolution Council, handed power over to “U” Ne Win as chairman of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP).

However, unlike the country's socialist era, there will be opposition parties alongside the ruling party in post-election Burma. The country's multi-party democracy is likely to be a one-party dominated political system controlled by a strong military institution in the center of state power.

If everything were clear, what would the Burmese news media be reporting on the election?

The Burmese media, either local or exiled, have become an important platform for the new political parties to communicate with the people.

However, seeing the political antagonism between the junta and the now disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD) in the past two decades, the new parties have become cautious in dealing with the media and avoid including the country's major political issues in their policies.

Asked whether the Democratic Party will call for the release of the political prisoners before the election, the party's chairman Thu Wai said: “We have no plan to make such a call. This kind of demand has been repeatedly done in the past 20 years.

“Our way is to win the election and the release of political prisoners will come with our victory.”

Likewise, Dr Than Nyein, chairman of the National Democratic Force (NDF), said: “Our party's first bill in the first assembly of the elected parliamentarians is to release all the political prisoners.”

The NDF was established by some former leaders of the disbanded NLD who see the election as the only way to break the current political stalemate and regard the new parliamentary framework as the viable mechanism to change the country. Many of the NDF leaders are also former political prisoners, who spent many years behind bars.

The political prisoner issue and other issues at the center of the democratic struggle over the past two decades may lack importance in the upcoming election campaigns.

Instead, the new parties are advancing some arguments on why they are contesting an

undemocratic election.

Some of the arguments are:

“The election is an inevitable process towards democracy even if it is undemocratic;”

“Confrontation with the military has produced no result in the past 20 years;”

“Change can be achieved only within the parliamentary framework.”

However, the election is a power game in which parties necessarily confront each other with their policies in order to win the support of the people.

If policy confrontation is avoided, how can the parties make a difference in gathering votes without competition? Will the parties remain silent to injustice in the society in order to avoid tensions with the junta?

“We know the formation of the USDP is breaking the election laws, but we didn't officially submit a complaint to the Election Commission,” said Thu Wai. “Our strategy is that we talk about the issue whenever we meet with the voters during our organizational trips.”

In any election, political parties must display in public the policies they plan to follow in tackling the country's political, economic, social, environmental, health and educational issues if they win.

However, it is obvious from policy positions put forward in the local and exile media that the parties lack a sound policy foundation, but also fail to articulately touch upon the real social issues at the grassroots level.

If they single out the specific issues of the country, they can't avoid issues such as national reconciliation, the release of more than 2,000 political prisoners, the end of the chronic ethnic armed conflicts, poverty reduction, economic reforms and the need to repair and reform the long-term deteriorating health and education infrastructure.

The problem is that if they address the root causes of these issues, they can't avoid pointing the finger at the junta, which could lead to confrontation with the generals.

On the other hand, if they avoid raising these issues, they ignore the hardship of the people, resulting in a loss of public support.

Aware of such a policy crisis, Thu Wai said: “Our policy is just to point out the issues in a manner not to blame the ruling junta.”

When the time remaining for pre-election campaigning becomes scarce, the parties will have to choose where they stand between the rulers and the ruled.

There is a saying: “Who dares, wins.” Any party that hopes to win Burma's upcoming election must show its courage, stand before the people and convince them that it would form a government that will definitely bring them peace, freedom and democracy.