

RANGOON — The political temperature is rising rapidly in Burma as the country prepares for its first election in two decades on Nov. 7 amid uncertainty about the possibility that the National Unity Party (NUP) could upset the ruling regime's plans for an overwhelming victory by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

Both parties are broadly in favor of allowing the military to retain its dominant position in Burmese politics, but the NUP, formed to contest the country's last election in 1990 as a proxy for the defunct former ruling party, the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), is seen as loyal to the late dictator Ne Win, who was forced from power by a nationwide pro-democracy uprising in 1988 and replaced by the current junta, now headed by Snr-Gen Than Shwe.

According to well-informed sources close to the regime leaders' inner circle, the top generals want the USDP—formed earlier this year from the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a mass organization founded by Than Shwe in 1993—to win at least 80 percent of the seats up for grabs.

However, many senior figures, including Than Shwe's immediate subordinates and several army leaders who were removed in a recent major reshuffle, have expressed doubts about the likelihood of attaining this goal, which would match the 1990 electoral victory of the now disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD).

"[Than Shwe] is hoping the USDP will win 80 percent of the seats in the coming election," said a military source, adding that the Burmese strongman has no understanding of the depth of anti-junta feeling in the country.

"People hate this regime even more than they hated the BSPP," he said.

Faced with a situation where the only pro-democracy options are a handful of small, poorly funded parties, including one that broke away from the NLD after it refused to take part in this year's polls, many voters could turn to the lesser evil of the NUP as a way of expressing their distaste for the USDP, according to some analysts.

In terms of its representation in the election, the USDP has a sizable advantage over other parties, with candidates competing for virtually all of the 1,163 seats being contested. But the NUP, with 999 candidates, is a close second, far outnumbering the third-placed National Democratic Front (NDF), formed by ex-members of the NLD, which will run in 163 constituencies.

Last month, senior NUP leader Khin Maung Gyi told the local journal Weekly Eleven that his party regretted the NLD's decision not to take part in the election, saying that it would have made it a "very strong competition."

"Now we have just two" major parties competing, he added—the USDP and the NUP.

Khin Maung Gyi's comment that the NUP would not restrict press freedom in Burma except in the case of a national emergency impressed many political observers inside the country, prompting some local analysts to suggest that the party might be willing to form some sort of

alliance with smaller pro-democracy and ethnic parties.

What is not likely to happen, according to some party insiders, is an alliance with the USDP. Sources say that the ruling generals' recent efforts to reach out to senior NUP leaders have met with a lukewarm reception.

The reason for this coolness in relations between the two parties is that many of the leading members of the NUP were faithful followers of Ne Win who remain deeply resentful of his treatment at the hands of Than Shwe, who placed the aging former dictator under house arrest in 2002 after members of his immediate family were found guilty of plotting to overthrow the regime.

One of these NUP leaders, Tun Ye, served under Ne Win as the first head of the newly created Bureau of Special Operations in the northern region. Nicknamed “Napoleon” because of his short stature and steely determination on the battlefield, he was handpicked by Ne Win to lead a major offensive against the Chinese-backed Communist Party of Burma in 1978.

Than Tin, who like Tun Ye is in his eighties, is another NUP leader whose combat experience earned him Ne Win's lasting respect. He led major offensives against Karen and Communist rebels in the Irrawaddy delta and the Pegu Yoma mountain range in the 1970s.

Now both men seem ready to fight one last battle on behalf of their former commander, this time against Than Shwe—who, ironically, served as their junior during army offensives in the northern region in the 1980s.

This isn't, however, likely to take the form of an open confrontation, since the NUP leaders follow the same code of military solidarity as the ruling generals. Instead, they will probably try to undermine Than Shwe's quest for electoral supremacy to teach him a lesson that disloyalty comes at a cost.

The only question, then, is whether the voters will give the NUP the ammunition they need to put Than Shwe on notice that his own fate could one day match that of his former master.