

If you look at the election strategy of the Burmese military regime, you will find it has ensured control of a majority of seats in the parliament even before the election.

The strategy was put together like a military operation in a war theater starting with the 2008 Constitution which was approved in a so-called referendum vote.

Under the Basic Principles of the Constitution, one of the six objectives of the Union is “enabling the Defense Services to be able to participate in the National political leadership role of the State.’ Accordingly, military personnel are granted 25 percent of the total seats in the respective parliaments.

The second step of the strategy was the Political Party Registration Law and Electoral Laws, carefully crafted to demand allegiance to the state in ways that were unacceptable to pro-democracy parties such as the National League for Democracy, which refused to take part. In this way, they eliminated their major opposition and ensured even more seats in parliament.

Next, the Union Election Commission, whose members were selected by the military, was given draconian power to judge which parties were registered to take part.

At the same time, as part of its strategy, the military increased pressure on ethnic cease-fire groups to transform into a border guard force. Those that refused were blocked from entering the election. The only party that attempted to take part was the Kachin State Progressive Party, led by Dr. Manam Tu Ja, a former vice president of the Kachin Independence Organization. His party was not accepted for registration, presumably because it was seen as a proxy party of the KIO.

Step by step, major political forces, both ethnic and Burman, that could pose a threat to the military regime, were marginalized from the election process.

Finally, the regime's mass organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, was transformed into the Union Solidarity and Development Party led by Prime Minister Thein Sein and other ministers. Later they were joined by the former joint chief of staff, a former secretary of the SPDC and many other retired high-ranking military officers.

The formation and operation of the USDP has clearly violated the electoral laws barring civil services personnel and state resources from involvement in party politics.

The Election Commission, led by Thein Soe, a former military judge advocate-general and deputy chief justice of the Supreme Court, approved the registration of the USDP regardless of the irregularities. From that time on, the USDP has enjoyed the full support of local governmental authorities and the Election Commission, including the assets of the former USDA.

And then came the candidate registration fees. Most of the parties, except the USDP and NUP, the former socialist party, could not field all their candidates as originally planned due to the high registration fees.

Coupled with insufficient time, that prevented most parties from ever putting together a well-funded, coordinated campaign.

However, some challenges remained regarding a few ethnic political parties, but they were handled by declaring designated ethnic-dominated townships and a large number of ethnic village tracts as areas where a free and fair election could not be held, hence the people in those areas were denied the opportunity to vote.

Lastly, the USDP has used the resources of the state in its campaigning, offering inducements such as loans, selling mobile phones at reduced price or offering incentives such as providing donations, building roads and bridges, opening free clinics, repairing schools or digging water wells for local communities in return for support.

In some places like Maungdaw and Buthidaung it even issued ID cards to local people. The USDP distributed 100,000 copies of newsletters free every week using the Ministry of Information's printers, all without interference from the Press and Scrutiny Board, which carefully scrutinized the campaign literature of other political parties.

The USDP, acting like an agency of the state, reportedly instructed Naypyidaw civil servants to vote for its candidates. The prime minister delivered speeches to civil servants asking them to vote for the USDP during visits around the country.

According to a leaked document, in the run-up to the election the USDP is even prepared to use violence including the use of cadres of hardcore criminals to achieve a landslide victory. The document says, "criminals and thugs must be organized. Otherwise, they could be used by other political parties to bully, torture and extort from us."

There have also been reports that the USDP forcibly recruited party members, shut down business owned by other political parties and prohibited members of other parties from freely campaigning.

With such a well-planned strategy to keep control of the election process and deny other parties an equal chance on the playing field, the regime has guaranteed its continued dominance of the political scene.

The only remaining question is how many seats the generals end up with after the Nov. 7 election.

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<http://www.irrawaddy.org/election/constitution/314-usdp-illegal-under-constitution.html>