

Leaders of ethnic ceasefire groups have apparently decided to take advantage of the political space opened up by the Nov. 7 election, while at the same time preparing for possible hostilities with the Burmese Army when the voting is over.

One group, who were among the leaders of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), quit the KIA and formed a political party in an unsuccessful attempt to contest the election. They include former KIA vice chairman Tu Ja.

Tu Ja has been always active on the political scene since the regime introduced its seven-step roadmap. He participated in the National Convention and was actively involved in drawing up the 2008 constitution.

Tu Ja's application to register his party, the Kachin State Progressive Party, was rejected by the Election Commission, as was an attempt he and party comrades made to register as individuals.

"We didn't think at first that they [the regime] would treat us like this," Tu Ja said in an interview with The Irrawaddy. "We feel we haven't been treated equally."

Some observers said that the junta refused to register Tu Ja's party because of his connection to the KIA, which is among the ceasefire groups that have rejected the junta's plan to form a border guard force (BGF).

Other ethnic ceasefire groups to reject the BGF include the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and a faction of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) led by Col Saw Lah Pwe, commander of the DKBA Brigade 5.

All are being pressured by the regime to join the BGF, and observers and ethnic sources predict that a major offensive against ethnic ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups will be launched by the government after the election.

In an article last month in the state-run newspaper The New Light of Myanmar, the regime called the KIA an "insurgent group." The KIA had previously been named a "ceasefire group," and observers said the usage likely is a sign that the junta is doubtful about its ceasefire agreement with the group.

Saeng Juen, an editor with the Chiang Mai-based Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN) said the regime praised the ethnic ceasefire groups when it wanted them in the past, but would damage their image if necessary.

He pointed out that the government surprise attack against the ethnic Kokang armed group Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in August 2009 resulted in an estimated 37,000 refugees fleeing to China.

The regime maintained at the time that its troops were searching for illegal drug traders allegedly operated by the Kokang leader Peng Jiasheng.

A Burma watcher, David Scott Mathieson, Burma expert with New York-based Human Rights Watch, said it appeared that the regime doesn't want to give any chance to ethnic groups, even though ethnic leaders try to cooperate with them politically within a very tight political structure created by the regime.

He also pointed out that Shan opposition leader Khun Htun Oo—who was involved in the political process within a legal boundary—is now serving a 93-year term of imprisonment in Putao prison in Kachin State.

The international community, including China, India and Thailand, also need to watch Burma closely after the Nov. 7 election because of the ethnic armed groups based close to their borders. Leaders of ethnic ceasefire groups have apparently decided to take advantage of the political space opened up by the Nov. 7 election, while at the same time preparing for possible hostilities with the Burmese Army when the voting is over, said Mathieson.

The United Nations should not only focus on Rangoon but also ethnic areas, he said.

The ceasefire groups finally lost the opportunity to participate in political movements even though they have been cooperating with the government for the past 20 years within legal limits given by the regime since signing ceasefire agreements, Mathieson said.

The description “insurgent” given by the junta to the KIA also demonstrated the tension existing between the government and the KIA, said Mathieson.

Ethnic politicians inside Burma also say the election will grant no protection or promote the rights of ethnic people as it is based on the junta's one-sided constitution written by handpicked representatives.

At a recent meeting in Kale, Sagaing Division, several prominent ethnic Shan, Chin, Arakanese and Mon leaders called on the government to build a federal democratic system based on equality and democracy as well as a Panglong-style conference to seek national reconciliation.

The Panglong conference was held in the eponymous town in southern Shan State on February 12, 1947, and produced an agreement signed by ethnic Shan, Chin and Kachin leaders and Burma's independence hero, Gen Aung San, leading to Burma's independence from Britain.

An Arakanese politician, Aye Thar Aung, who is also general secretary of the Committee Representing the People's Parliament, said: “We need to review a new constitution based on the Panglong agreement.”

As escalating tension was reported between government and ethnic armed groups amid a prediction of a potential post-election offensive across ethnic regions, ethnic leaders including Wa, Kachin, Karen, Karenni and Mon, held several meetings and agreed to provide mutual military assistance if any one group is attacked.

Zipporah Sein, general secretary of the Karen National Union, which has been fighting the junta

for six decades, said the Burmese regime's 2008 constitution grants no rights to ethnic minorities in Burma. The regime would only eliminate and manipulate ethnic minorities if ethnic armed groups followed all its orders.

"If we don't try to protect our people in our land, Karen people will not even have a chance to learn the Karen language and Karen history," she said.

Zipporah Sein said the offensive against ethnic minorities would be even worse after the election, despite the government's claim that it is trying to bring democratic reform by means of the election. She said the numbers of internally displaced persons and of refugees into Burma's neighboring countries, together with human rights abuses, were expected to increase after the election.

The recent purchase of some 50 Mi-24 military helicopters from Russia seemed to be evidence of the junta's preparations for an offensive, she said.