

Although Burma's military regime has announced no election law nor declared the date of the poll it plans to hold in 2010, preparations appear to have begun in Naypyidaw.

Informed sources suggest that potential candidates for president, vice-president, commander-in-chief of the armed forces and defense minister have already been chosen.

The current list may yet be modified before the election and some potential candidates in the list could be removed. All depends on the regime leader Snr-Gen Than Shwe, who still calls the shots.

Than Shwe, 76, and his No 2, Deputy Snr-Gen Maung Aye, who is only slightly younger, will retire soon after the election. Informed sources said that they are building lavish new homes in Naypyidaw for their retirement.

However, before vacating the throne, Than Shwe will make sure he and his family can live in safely, leaving his trusted officers in high positions to ensure security.

Than Shwe has reportedly already endorsed the junta's No 3, Gen Thura Shwe Mann, joint chief-of-staff in the armed forces, to become president of post-election Burma.

According to sources close to the military elite, Shwe Mann, 62, will be nominated by the representatives of the military in the future Senate and House, to be formed after the planned 2010 election.

The military will receive 25 percent of the seats at the village, township, state, regional and district levels in the new governing body, according to the 2008 Constitution.

There will be three nominees for the presidency—one from the Amyotha Hluttawa (Nationlities

Parliament or Senate), one from the members of the Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Assembly or House) and one from the military contingent of the two Hluttaws. The Senate and the House will then vote to choose the president.

Shwe Mann, a protégé of Than Shwe, has a reputation of being down to earth and a good listener, but he has yet to show his teeth on a broad range of social, economic and political issues. His vision of Burma's future is unknown.

However, Shwe Mann increasingly oversees regular meetings on political and security affairs with high-ranking military officials in Rangoon and Naypyidaw—perhaps a further sign that Than Shwe will take a back seat after the election.

Shwe Mann and his wife are close to Than Shwe's family on a personal level, and have been known to go on shopping trips together to Singapore.

Recently, Shwe Mann was the subject of extensive news coverage focusing on his secret mission to North Korea in November.

According to the Constitution, one of the duties of the new president will be to head the National Defense and Security Council, which has the power to declare a state of emergency and nullify the Constitution.

Than Shwe's choice for one of the two proposed vice-presidents, according to sources, is Maj-Gen Htay Oo, the minister of agriculture and irrigation and a key leader of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), the junta-backed mass organization.

Htay Oo recently visited Japan—displaying, according to military sources, all the qualities of a politician rather than an army officer.

The choice of the second vice-president is likely to fall to an ethnic leader. It's worth recalling

that Burma's first and second presidents were Shan and Karen.

Analysts ponder the question of who will become commander-in- chief of the armed forces.

Than Shwe currently holds Burma's most powerful position in the armed forces and analysts say he will hand this position over only to his most trusted ally.

There appear to be plenty of subordinates who could fill the shoes. They include Lt-Gen Hla Htay Win, Maj-Gen Ko Ko, Maj-Gen Tin Ngwe and Maj-Gen Kyaw Swe. All are close to Than Shwe and Maung Aye.

Tin Ngwe is said by analysts to be the front-runner for the post of commander in chief of the armed forces. He recently accompanied Than Shwe during an official visit to Sri Lanka.

Born in Nyaung-Oo, in the central heartland of Burma, Tin Ngwe attended the Defense Services Academy Intake 22, together with Kyaw Swe, later serving as G-1 in the defense ministry. He is known to be fiercely loyal to Than Shwe and Shwe Mann.

According to the new Constitution, the commander-in-chief will control the ministries of defense, home affairs and border affairs, exercising wide executive powers.

Analysts also tip Lt-Gen Myint Swe, a Than Shwe protégé, as a possible candidate for the post of defense minister. He attended the 15th intake of the Defense Services Academy in 1971 and is currently commander of the Bureau of Special Operations 5.

Myint Swe became commanding officer of Light Infantry Division 11, overseeing security in Rangoon, and later served as commander of Southwest Military Region in Bassein, Irrawaddy Division, before moving in the late 1990s to the defense ministry, where he worked directly under Than Shwe and Maung Aye.

This seems to be Than Shwe's "rest in peace" selection plan for 2010. If he executes it smoothly, he will avoid the fate of such top men as Gen Khin Nyunt and late dictator Gen Ne Win, both of whom ended up under house arrest.

Analysts say Than Shwe wants to make sure the 2010 election provides him and his family with a safe exit strategy. That entails leaving his trusted aides at the helm—and ensuring that Burma remains under the military boot.

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