

BD Prakash is a senior political analyst with The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), a nongovernmental agency formed in 1997 as Asia's first regional network of civil society organizations. It strives to promote and support democratization at national and regional levels in Asia.

Question: *Did ANFREL contact Burma's Union Election Commission (EC) to offer its services as an observer during the Nov. 7 general election? If so, what was the EC's response?*

Answer: ANFREL has not contacted the UEC. In fact, ANFREL has already stated that the prevailing conditions under which the elections are being held need to be improved otherwise the elections would not be credible. Factors like transparency, accountability, responsibility, fairness, management and neutrality are essential for ensuring a free and fair process.

Q: *Has ANFREL made any recommendations or suggestions to the EC or the Burma government?*

A: Following the referendum, ANFREL made some recommendations. However, this time there has been no direct recommendations, apart from the position the organization has taken regarding the elections in Burma.

Q: *What's your position on the junta not allowing poll observers in during the Burmese election?*

A: The restrictions are not surprising as it is clear that in a country where democracy is suppressed by a military dictatorship, it would be difficult for ANFREL to observe the election. But we will continue to maintain a close watch from the outside on all the developments relating to elections.

Q: *Why did ANFREL urge Asean to review the credibility of Burma's planned election in a recent statement?*

A: We urged Asean to review the credibility of Burma's election because a formal process can have more impact. Asean has shown great interest in pressuring the Burmese government to make the process more credible. So given this fact, we support any initiative that can allow for free and fair elections.

Q: *Can you name some factors that indicate the election will not be free and fair?*

A: In a recent statement we mentioned undue restrictions on campaigns by certain political parties and alliances, which clearly violates the three basic rights—freedom of expression, assembly and association. These are the basic tenets of democracy and have to be upheld at any cost. In any democratic process all parties and candidates should have the right to comment or criticize other parties on their policies and their performances in the past. Opposition party and new parties must be given sufficient room to fully showcase and introduce themselves to people in any public without threat, obstruction or violence. These are among the many factors that are not conducive for a credible process to unfold.

From the way things have shaped up during the run up to the election, it undoubtedly indicates that the UEC is not able to work independently or freely, which is a reflection of its composition of 18 commissioners selected by the junta. Other factors include: The military is too involved in the election; The media is not free and is under total control and censorship. Also, there is a lack of transparency in absentee voting, advance voting and ballot counting.

Q: *What are the main differences between the preparations for the election in Burma and other countries in the region ?*

A: It is less than 30 days to the polling day and the UEC is yet to prepare a comprehensive voter education program, no outreach, no equal access for political parties to media and no advance voting has been announced. All political parties (except the USDP) have not received electoral process or documents for them to train their party workers. Many people still do not know which document they can use to show poll officers before voting. They do not even know where the location of polling stations and how to check their names. What can be done if their names are not in the list? Many voters have some information about USDP candidates but they have not seen much about new parties or the opposition. Many illiterates do not know how to mark the ballots, because there are no sample ballots to show them.

Q: *Why is media freedom important for the Burmese election?*

A: only a free media can ensure that a democracy is functioning properly. Not only for Burma but for all democracies it is important that the media is free from any sort of control, either by the state or other groups or institutions. If media is gagged as is the case in Burma, then democracy, even after several elections, would be impossible to sustain. Take the case of some neighboring countries where media freedom is under control. These countries are yet to be regarded as flourishing democracies.

Q: *What is ANFREL's opinion about the Union Solidarity and Development Party led by Prime Minister Thein Sein?*

A: The USDP appears to be clearly enjoying government support. It's formation and dependency on the government are enough indications to suggest that this party gets undue preferences than other political parties. There are lots of allegations against the USDP and so far the government or the election commission has not shown any interest in setting up an investigation, forget even questioning the USDP leadership. If the USDP can have access to the media and voters, other parties deserve the same treatment.