

Asean countries have mostly remained quiet after the Burmese government announced its non-inclusive election law.

Most of Burma's neighboring countries have remained silent regarding the Burmese junta's political party registration law, which bars dissidents including opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi from the forthcoming election this year.

Of the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) only the Philippines and Indonesia have commented on Burma's electoral law announced on Monday.

"Unless they release Suu Kyi and allow her and her party to participate in the elections, it's a completely farce and therefore contrary to their road map to democracy," said Alberto Romulo, the foreign secretary of the Philippines, on Thursday.

Jakarta followed Manila in criticizing the Burmese junta's election law. Teuku Faizasyah, a spokesman of Indonesia's foreign ministry, said the law may undermine the election because it will result in an election that is not inclusive.

Analysts including *The Economist* have suggested that Indonesia, a former military dictatorship that has become the world's third largest democracy, might be a good example for Burma's transition to democracy.

The Burmese junta appear to have learned from Indonesia's Suharto era (1968-1998) by forming the Union Solidarity and Development Association, which can be likened to Indonesia's Golkar Party.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is scheduled to send his foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa, to Burma later this month. Indonesia is expected to raise its stand for democratic reform in Burma including the inclusiveness the West is calling for in the coming election.

However, the rest of Asean has remained silent. Governed by a communist regime, Vietnam, the current holder of Asean's chairmanship, is unlikely to make a hasty announcement

regarding Burma's electoral law.

"The rest of Asean is shocked by Burma's election law, which rejected Asean's call for inclusiveness in the election. Asean countries might not know what to say," said Debbie Stothard, the coordinator of the Alternative Asean Network, speaking with *The Irrawaddy* on Monday.

In February, Surin Pitsuwan, Asean's Secretary-General and former foreign minister of Thailand told *BBC's* "Hardtalk" that Asean expected a credible and transparent election in Burma in 2010, but it cannot interfere in the details of the election.

"No election is perfect. It has to begin. That's why they [the Burmese regime] are beginning. They promise [to hold an election] at the end of this year," said Surin, adding that the Burmese generals' commitment to the election should be seen as a positive factor.

Thailand, which is one of Burma's biggest investors and trading-partners, has made no comment and is now busy with internal affairs, controlling mass protests by Redshirt supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Asean is scheduled to hold its 16th Summit in the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi on April 8-9. However, it is questionable whether Hanoi will allow discussion on Burma during the summit. Vietnam's chairmanship motto is: "Towards the Asean Community: from Vision to Action."

Stothard said the Burma issue has undermined the vision of the Asean Community. "Burma's election law is another example of why Asean has failed," she said.

Asean's next chairmanships are to be held by Brunei (2011) and Cambodia (2012). Like Vietnam, these countries are not very interested in Burma's politics.

Kurt Campbell, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs is on his

10 Asian nations trip. In contrast to its Asean allies, the US denounced the junta's election law.

"The US approach was to try to encourage domestic dialogue between the key stakeholders, and the recent promulgation of the election criteria doesn't leave much room for such a dialogue," said Kurt Campbell in Bangkok on Friday.

"We're very disappointed, and we are concerned. It's very regrettable. This is not what we had hoped for, and it is a setback," he said.

US President Barack Obama is scheduled to visit Indonesia this weekend. The Burmese junta's ban on Suu Kyi and other political prisoners from participating in the election is likely to be a subject for discussion in addition to the US anti-terrorism agenda.

Like Asean, Burma's two giant neighbors, China and India, have yet to make any public statements on Burma's election law.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao will visit Burma in the near future, according to official Chinese sources. But, aside from bilateral economic ties, rising tensions between the junta and ethnic groups along the Sino-Burmese border are likely to be the subject of discussion.

India, meanwhile, announced investment of 1.35 billion dollars in Burma's gas projects earlier this month, competing with China's more than 2.5 billion dollar investment in Burma's oil and gas sectors.