

Thailand's foreign minister says the country will press the Burmese regime to open its first election in two decades to all political opponents and ethnic minorities.

NEW YORK — Thailand will be pressing Burma's military leaders in the coming week to open its first election in two decades to all political opponents and ethnic minorities, the country's foreign minister said on Thursday.



"I'm concerned about the national reconciliation and the inclusiveness of the whole new political process," Kasit Piromya said in an interview with *The Associated Press*.

Last week, opposition leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest, denounced the government's newly announced laws guiding the election as undemocratic and recommended a boycott of the election, expected later this year.

Her National League for Democracy (NLD), which swept the last vote in 1990 but was barred from taking power, decided on Monday to opt out of the election and now faces dissolution under the junta's laws.

"They have every freedom to decide on their own affairs," Kasit said. "So I honor and I respect that decision."

He said the decision was made after the military announced the electoral laws, "which look discriminatory" because "you are providing amnesty only to the military leadership and not to the rest of the political opposition side of it."

Kasit said decisions should be evenhanded.

"If you were convicted on the political side, there should be a general amnesty and forgiveness

so that Myanmar [Burmese] society could start anew where everybody could participate in the political process,” he said.

Kasit said Thailand has raised the issue of political inclusiveness with Burma and he will raise it again when he meets Burma's foreign minister in two days at a meeting of the Mekong River Regional Commission, which Thailand is hosting.

He said Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva will also raise the issue when he meets Burmese leaders at the annual summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (Asean) in Hanoi next week.

Kasit said Indonesia's foreign minister is in Burma this week, and “I'm sure he has taken up the concern collectively of the Asean members.”

He noted that the Asean member countries have called for “national reconciliation, the national election and so on [to be] inclusive, free and fair, and also with the release of the political prisoners.”

Kasit said that if elections are held as a first step toward democracy, “then one has to look whether that first step is conducive to the national reconciliation, to the democratization of Myanmar as a whole or not.”

If there is “exclusivity” in the election process, then “maybe that first step is not good enough of a step,” he said.

Burma's military authorities “could redress the situation,” he said. “There is still time to bring in some of the elements to make that first step—(a) leap forward, back to democracy.”