

An internal congressional report says that the results of the 2010 election in Burma may be a strong indicator of the potential for political change.

WASHINGTON — An internal congressional report has told US lawmakers—who, unlike in the recent past, are divided over the American approach to Burma—that the results of the 2010 general election in Burma may be a strong indicator of the potential for political change in the Southeast Asian nation.

“If, despite political restrictions, the SPDC [State Peace and Development Council] conducts comparatively free and fair elections with official outcomes that appear to represent the views of the public, there may be calls from the Obama administration and some sources for Congress to scale back the sanctions,” said the report prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS).

CRS is a bipartisan independent research wing of the US Congress, which prepares periodic reports for the lawmakers on issues of their interests. It is rare for the CRS to come out with a report exclusively on Burma.

“However, if the SPDC manipulates the elections to prevent full participation and/or releases biased or inaccurate results, Congress may choose to increase the political and economic pressure on Burma’s ruling military junta,” the CRS said.

A copy of the 22-page report titled “*Burma's 2010 Elections: Implications of the New Constitution and Election Laws*,” authored by Michael F. Martin, a specialist in Asian Affairs, dated April 29, was obtained by *The Irrawaddy*.

Noting that the 111th Congress has already taken action with respect to Burma, such as renewing the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003, the CRS said if the Congress were to determine that additional actions should be taken, there are several alternatives available.

“Among those alternatives are holding hearings or seminars on the political situation in Burma,

pushing the Obama Administration to implement existing sanctions on Burma more vigorously, and adding or removing existing sanctions,” the report said.

Referring to the new Burma policy adopted by the Obama administration in September 2009, the CRS said the policy keeps most of the elements of the Burma policies of the last two administrations in place, but adds a willingness to engage in direct dialogue with the SPDC on how to promote democracy and human rights in Burma, and greater cooperation on international security issues, such as counter-narcotics efforts and nuclear nonproliferation.

“The Obama administration accepts that little progress has been made during the seven months that the new policy has been in effect, but has indicated that it will remain in place for now,” it tells the congressmen, amidst increasing call from them that the Obama administration should review its policy of engagement with the junta as this has not been working.

Inside the Congress itself, there is no unanimity on how to proceed on the Burma policy. “There are signs of concern among Members of Congress about the dearth of progress in Burma towards democracy and greater respect for human rights. Nine Senators sent a letter to President Obama on March 26, 2010, urging the imposition of additional economic sanctions on the SPDC in light of ‘a set of profoundly troubling election laws,’” it said.

“However, another senator perceives “several substantive gestures” on the part of the SPDC, and suggests it is time to increase engagement with the Burmese government,” the report said. The CRS report also informs the Congress that Burma’s leading opposition groups are highly skeptical of the SPDC and the 2010 elections, concerned that the SPDC will use a new constitution promulgated in 2008 and legal restrictions placed on participation in the 2010 elections to maintain its stranglehold on power.

Given that the decisions of the top three political parties, including the National League for Democracy (NLD) that won over 84 percent of the seats in the 1990 election, are not to participate in the forthcoming election, the report said this has created a possibly large void in representing the political views of a substantial segment of the Burmese electorate.

“There are also signs that the NLD decision has spawned a campaign to boycott the election,” it said, adding that during the campaign for the constitutional referendum, there was a

difference of opinion among the opposition groups on whether people should refuse to vote or vote against the constitution.

“With several of the leading opposition parties refusing to participate in the 2010 parliamentary election, there is a growing call for people not to vote to express their opposition to the new constitution and the election,” it said.