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MANILA — The Philippines' foreign secretary shrugged off Burma's rejection of international monitors for the junta-led country's first elections in 20 years, saying Thursday the polls were a farce anyway.

The polls, to be held sometime this year, have been sharply criticized as a means for the military to maintain its grip on power under a civilian guise.

The criticism from Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo was unusually blunt, coming from a fellow member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a grouping which typically avoids commenting on the internal affairs of its counterparts.

During a recent trip to Burma, American envoy Kurt Campbell said the run-up to the election so far leads the US to believe the polls will "lack international legitimacy" and urged the regime to take immediate steps to open the process.

He asked junta officials if election monitors, possibly from Asean, would be allowed and was rebuffed.

Sending observers may "legitimize a farce" since opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party will not be involved in the election, Romulo told reporters.

"In the first place that election is fraudulent and a farce so why bother (sending monitors)?" said Romulo, adding it was his personal opinion. "It's a game, like children playing games."

The NLD won the last election in 1990 but was never allowed to take power by the military.

The party considers newly enacted election laws unfair and undemocratic since Suu Kyi and other political prisoners would be barred from taking part in the vote. It declined to re-register for the election as required, and it was automatically disbanded last week.

Suu Kyi has been detained for 14 of the last 20 years by the ruling generals.