

Burma's military junta has put its proposed Border Guard Force (BGF) plan on the back-burner in order to focus on dominating the upcoming election. They will have an additional advantage if polls do not open in areas controlled by armed ethnic cease-fire groups.



According to military sources in Naypyidaw, the regime's top generals decided that their first priority in the coming months is securing a landslide victory in the election, with the sensitive BGF issues to be resolved at a later date.

“Top generals, particularly junta chief Snr-Gen Than Shwe, recently said that winning the election is their urgent policy, and they would be dropping the BGF for a while,” said a military source.

Quoting Napyidaw's blue-print for the coming months, the military source said that the generals believe, “We need to focus on issues related to more than 50 million people rather than related to a few million.”

“However, it does not mean the generals have given up the BGF plan. They will implement the plan later on, as strategically they do not want to open two front lines— the election and the tension over the BGF— at the same time,” he added.

In recent meetings, the junta's top generals have instructed the military to make certain that Prime Minister Thein Sein's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) will win the election across the country by a large margin.

The generals' goal is for the USDP to top the 1990 polling results achieved by the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who won 80 percent of contested constituencies in that election, sources said.

To achieve that goal, the junta will be going against the grain of Burmese election history. In 1960, under Gen Ne Win's command, the military openly supported the Stable Faction of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) led by Kyaw Nyein and Ba Swe over U Nu's the Clean Faction of the AFPEL, asking the troops to vote for the Stable AFPFL.

In 1990, the current junta supported the National Unity Party (formerly the the Burmese Socialist Programme Party), and soldiers were again urged to support the military's preferred party.

Both in 1960 and 1990, the military-backed parties were unable to win the hearts of the Burmese people and soldiers, and the parties not supported by the generals won—including a majority vote in military areas.

In 1993, three years after the NLD's landslide victory, the junta changed tactics under Than Shwe's leadership and formed its own mass organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), which will support its political offspring, Thein Sein's USDP, in the coming election.

Since its formation, the USDA has become a main actor in many infamous events under the junta's military rule. Independent human rights advocates said the USDA was a key player in both the brutal ambush on Suu Kyi's convoy in May 2003 and the crackdowns on anti-junta mass movements in August and September 2007.

The USDA also organized polling across the country during the 2008 national referendum on the junta-back Constitution, which took place in the wake of Cyclone Nargis and was heavily criticized as unfair. After the referendum, the junta announced that 98.12 percent of the voter population showed up for the poll and 93.82 percent voted 'yes' to the Constitution.

The USDA will have an extra-advantage in the 2010 elections if polling does not take place in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups who are still opposing the BGF plan.

Both the junta and the armed ethnic groups have yet to guarantee that the elections will take place in these areas, particularly in Kachin State and Shan State where the largest armed ethnic group, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), and other significant groups such as the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), also known as the Mongla group, are based.

Unless further agreement is reached between the armed ethnic groups and generals in Naypyidaw ahead of the 2010 polling, observers believe that townships controlled by the UWSA and the NDAA in Shan State will be out of the elections.

Currently, no political parties representing the mandate of the UWSA and NDAA are registered with the election commission in Naypyidaw. Some ethnic political parties, including the Kachin State Progressive Party led by Tuja, a former leader of the KIO, still await a green light from the election commission over their applications.

"The Kachin State Progressive Party and other ethnic parties representing the real interests of

the ethnic people have not been approved by the election commission,” said a KIO source in Laiza, the KIO's headquarters. “On the other hand, it is still uncertain if elections will be held in our territory.”

Armed ethnic groups are influential in their territories, and ethnic parties could be main challengers to the junta's USDP in the poll. For this reason, some observers believe the junta may block ethnic parties linked with armed groups in the election unless the generals get a clear message from the frontiers in support of the BGF and the Constitution.

However, based on their experience in the 2008 referendum, even if the polls are opened in areas controlled by armed ethnic groups, there is no guarantee they will be free and fair.

“Leaders of the UWSA, NDAA and MNDAA [Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army also known as the Kokang group] allowed the 2008 referendum to be held, but urged people in their areas to vote against the unfair Constitution,” said a Wa source on the Sino-Burmese border.

“Ethnic voters in the areas voted ‘No’,” he said. “But after the election the junta announced an overwhelming ‘Yes’ vote in the ethnic areas. How would the result come like that, unless false?”