

Burma's Election Commission (EC) appears to be approving only ethnic parties with close ties to the ruling junta to run in this year's election, while barring other parties linked to anti-regime groups, according to observers.



So far, a number of ethnic parties have been approved by the EC, including Karen, Mon, Shan, Pa-O and Palaung parties. However, three Kachin parties are still waiting for permission to run in the election, amid rumors that they will be rejected because of their ties to cease-fire groups.

The largest of the parties, the Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP), is led by Tu Ja, the former chairman of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), which continues to resist the regime's efforts to transform itself into a border guard force under Burmese military command.

The KSPP says that it has no affiliation with the KIO, but the EC appears to believe otherwise, say observers.

Another Kachin-led party, the Northern Shan State Progressive Party, is also reportedly close to KIO leaders, while the United Democracy Party (Kachin State) is led by Kachin politicians who resigned from their former organization, the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K), after it decided to form a border guard force.

The regime seems to distrust the Kachin parties even though their leaders have resigned from their former organizations, said Awng Wa, a Kachin observer on the Sino-Burmese border.

“The regime think the parties are led by Kachin leaders who are anti-government,” he said.

In Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, there are rumors that the Burmese authorities are seeking pro-regime Kachin politicians to form a new party and apply for registration.

Observers said that other ethnic parties that have been registered are close to the junta or pro-junta. Some of them are run by retired government servants, members of the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), or ethnic elders trusted by the regime.

Khin Htwe Myint, the chairperson of the National League for Democracy's branch in the Karen State capital of Hpa-an, said that the Kachin parties are unlike the Karen parties that have been approved by the EC. The Karen parties, such as Kayin People's Party (KPP) and the Union Karen League, have very good relations with the regime, she said.

Karen sources also said that most of the Karen parties leaders, like KPP leader Saw Simon Tha and Saw Khin Soe, a respected Karen elder who is campaigning for the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), are former government servants or educated Karen who support the regime.

Simon Tha became famous as a peace negotiator between Karen rebel groups and the Burmese regime. In 2004, he arranged peace talks in Rangoon between the Karen National Union, led by the late Gen Saw Bo Mya, and a government delegation led by former Burmese Premier Gen Khin Nyunt.

Saw Khin Soe once served as a military attache at the Burmese embassy in Tokyo. Karen sources said he could be given the post of Chief Minister of Karen State after the election.

Other ethnic parties, such as the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP), the ethnic Arakanese Rakhine State National Force of Myanmar (RSNFM) and the Pa-O National Organization (PNO), also have good relations with the regime. All of these parties have been granted permission by the EC to take part in the election.

The AMRDP is chaired by Nai Ngwe Thein, a Mon professor and former civil servant with close ties to the Burmese authorities. Another AMRDP committee member, Nai Seik, is also a member of the USDA.

The PNO is also a pro-junta organization, led by Aung Kham Hti, who attended the junta-sponsored National Convention.

Aye Tha Aung, a prominent Arakanese politician in Rangoon, said that the EC is obviously singling out pro-junta parties like the RSNFM for approval. The Arakanese party officially announced that it will cooperate with the USDA in the election.

According to Aye Tha Aung, these parties are only nominally ethnic, with most of their members coming from the USDA.

He said that the entire election process, including the election and party registration laws, is rigged to entrench the regime in power.

“That’s why we are saying that the election will grant no rights for ethnic people,” he said.