

Several ethnic party leaders who will participate in Burma's election this year say they will fight for freedom even if the 2008 Constitution is flawed and undemocratic.

"We will fight in the election because we get that opportunity from the Constitution," said Nai Ngwe Thein, the chairman of the All Mon Region Democracy Party. "If we don't participate, there will be no one to fight for the Mon people."

Sai Hla Kyaw, an executive member of Shan National Democratic Party, said, "We're worried that our ethnic people will lose an opportunity if we don't join in the election with others."

Burma will hold its first election this year since the 1990 election. However, the date has yet to be set by the military regime.

While some ethnic party leaders will field candidates, others have opted not to participate, calling first for a review of the 2008 Constitution and the release of all political prisoners.

Mai Ohn Khaing, the secretary of Palaung National Party, said, "We know there are many Constitution critics. But, for us, if we don't do this for our people, our people will lose out. We tried armed struggle first, but it didn't work. The situation now offers us a different chance. We need to take it."

There are 22 new ethnic political parties that will compete in the election. Many party leaders are new to politics while others are seen as representing government interests under the flag of an ethnic party.

Some observers of the new party leaders have questioned the loyalty of some to their own people because of their roles as government employees or their close association with the regime. Some ethnic party leaders are members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association, the junta-backed civilian mass organization. Critics say some of party leaders are using their "ethnic" party names to attract votes.

Party leaders come from a variety of backgrounds such as doctors, professors, school teachers and government officials. Some were hand-picked by the military junta based on their roles in the national convention in 2008. Some leaders are peace brokers while others have a background in armed cease-fire groups.

Nai Ngwe Thein, who retired in 2009 as a professor at Moulmein University, said, "I didn't want to take part in politics because I am retired from the government. But, if we don't join in the election, we can't raise our voices in parliament."

Many new ethnic leaders stress the need to criticize the government from "the inside" as well as from the outside.

"We don't want to criticize the Constitution. We need to work on it first. We will get to know more after we work on it," said Mai Ohn Khaing.

The Palaung and Wa in northern Shan State have the right to set up their own autonomous regions, according to the 2008 Constitution. Leaders say that if the Palaung and Wa can win local, regional and well as national seats they will attain a measure of real power over their territory.

Many observers say that the election will at the least offer ethnic groups a chance to voice their own issues while inside governmental institutions and could provide them with some control over their own affairs.