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The group, which describes itself as a “third force” in Burmese politics, announced its estimate at meetings in the Thai capital, Bangkok, with diplomats and non-governmental organization officials from Europe.

At one meeting in Bangkok last week, participants were told that a survey undertaken by Myanmar Egress after the 2008 constitutional referendum found that 85 percent of respondents agreed with the constitution—very close to the government's claim that 93.8 percent of voters had cast “yes” ballots.

Although Myanmar Egress claims political independence, it supports the planned election, advocating it at meetings such as those it held in Bangkok and with donor organizations from Europe. A pro-election Thailand partner, the Vahu Development Institute took part in the meetings.

At a meeting last week in Bangkok, said a source, “they made several presentations to diplomats and foreign NGOs and expert groups regarding the election.”

“Basically they asked money from European countries. Interesting is that they claimed at the meeting that key political parties for the coming election give them a mandate to seek funding abroad.”

The press were not invited to the meeting and Aung Naing Oo of the Vahu Development Institute declined to describe the proceedings when contacted by *The Irrawaddy*. When contacted by *the Irrawaddy*

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, Myanmar Egress denied the meeting had even taken place.

Main speakers at the Bangkok meeting were businessman Hla Maung Shwe, vice president of the Myanmar Egress, and its general secretary Nay Win Maung, who is owner of *Living Color* magazine and *The Voice Weekly* journal.

Hla Maung Shwe, a key member of the Myanmar Shrimps Association, was a member of the opposition National League for Democracy in the 1980s and 1990s. He was arrested in the early 1990s and spent three years in prison.

Hla Maung Shwe's younger brother is Brig-Gen Hla Myint Shwe, commandant of Defense Services at the Institute of Nursing and Paramedical Science, according to sources.

Sources said the Bangkok meeting was shown video footage of three Burmese political parties—the National Democratic Force (NDF), the Democratic Party (Myanmar), led by veteran politician Thu Wai, and the Union Democratic Party (UDP).

“They came to our office and interviewed us on the difficulties we are facing,” said Khin Maung Shwe, a NDF leader. “We sent messages to the international community through them as they requested, as we think the media is biased. That is all. We did not give any mandate to them for any purpose,”

Phyo Min Thein, a leader of the UDP, also denied his party had given any mandate to Myanmar Egress. “A few weeks ago, they came to take a video about our perspective on the election and the difficulties,” he said.

A third denial of any mandate issued to Myanmar Egress came from Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein of the Democratic Party (Myanmar). “We are not dependent on others, including for funding,” she said.

The Myanmar Egress is popular with some young people who want to study abroad as they can build capacity at the group's training sessions in Rangoon, Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand.

According to a report in *The Christian Science Monitor* in June, Tin Maung Thann of Myanmar Egress said training young people in areas such as rural development, and securing the best and brightest to study overseas, is one way to speed change.

Nevertheless, most young intellectuals are critical of Myanmar Egress, accusing it of pro-government bias.

“The Myanmar Egress or the “Third Force” people say they are not for the government or the opposition. But what they say and write are quite biased, advocating the junta's constitution and election,” said a young Rangoon researcher who spoke on condition of anonymity. “However, they are quite clever when they meet diplomats and foreigners, speaking like pro-democracy activists.”

Myanmar Egress executives are the product of the country's elite.

Nay Win Maung is the son of a military officer and a friend of former spy chief Gen Khin Nyunt's son, Ye Naing Win. Helped by good connections with the ruling generals, Nay Win Maung and Ye Naing Win established *Living Color* magazine in the late 1990s.

Nay Win Maung was also an executive member of the Kanbawza Bank run by Aung Ko Win, one of the junta's associates.

Executive members of Myanmar Egress benefit from opportunities from the military rulers in the export and import business, including diesel import licenses.

It has been alleged that Nay Win Maung and his colleagues have reported to government agencies such as the Military Affairs Security and the Special Branch of the Burma police.

“The West knows what the 'Third Force' is really up to. But they—western policy circles of academics, diplomats, NGOs, donor agencies, etcetera— want to expand their 'own' space together with an organization like Egress,” said a Burmese political analyst in Rangoon.

According to observers in Rangoon, contacted by *The Irrawaddy*, Myanmar Egress also has created opportunities for foreigners to work with the organization and conduct research. Other groups that try to organize similar classes or activities are immediately harassed or banned by the authorities.

Sources said the Myanmar Egress is now engaged in educating voters, teaching them the SPDC constitution and encouraging participation in the election.

Official limitations are still placed on Myanmar Egress, however. Training sessions held outside the organization's premises have been banned in the past by the authorities.

“The space Myanmar Egress has enjoyed is not a benchmark for our civil liberties,” one source said. “Now, some foreigners got distracted by this illusion of 'space,' a pure rhetoric of the Third Force which came into our political vocabulary only a few years back.”

An article in *The Voice* by Nay Win Maung in favor of the constitution and the election was even reportedly suppressed and the magazine ordered to close for two weeks because one minister was upset by its moral tone.

“The article was totally pro- constitution, pro-election and pro-roadmap of the junta,” said a Rangoon editor. “But journalists here learned that one minister read the article and got angry because the article adopted a morally high ground tone.”

The editor, who works for a private publication, commented: “The 'third force' people said they know how to create political space under military rules. But the space even for apologists of the system is limited.”