



RANGOON — A veteran politician contesting Burma's upcoming elections said Sunday the political party backed by the ruling military junta will easily win the most seats because challengers face financial and other handicaps.

Thu Wai, chairman of the newly formed Democratic Party (Myanmar), said the challenger parties can field candidates in less than half of the national and regional constituencies.

But the junta's backing gives the Union Solidarity and Development Party, led by Prime Minister Thein Sein, access to money and a national presence, and the party is widely expected to receive the most votes.

The Nov. 7 elections are the first in impoverished Burma in two decades. The National League for Democracy party of detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, which overwhelmingly won the last elections in 1990 but was barred by the military from taking power, has decided to boycott the polls.

"By creating obstacles to other political parties before the election, it won't be necessary to cheat or rig votes in the election as the USDP is getting the upper hand. Thus voting (itself) will be free and fair," Thu Wai said.

All candidates contesting the polls must pay the Election Commission a deposit of 500,000 kyat (\$500), more than half a year's salary for an average schoolteacher.

Thu Wai, 77, is a longtime democracy activist and former political prisoner. His party's executive secretaries include former Prime Minister U Nu's daughter Than Than Nu, former Prime Minister Ba Swe's daughter Nay Yee Ba Swe, and Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein, the daughter of a former deputy prime minister.

Thu Wai said that out of the more than 1,100 seats in the national parliament and regional parliaments, other political parties may be able to field candidates in just 500 constituencies, leaving more than half uncontested.

"Since the Election Commission has given us only two weeks to submit the candidate list, our capacity to field candidates has been greatly reduced, as we are short of cash and time," said Thu Wai, adding that his party may be able to field around 100 candidates, though it had planned on more.

Some 47 political parties have registered to contest the elections and so far 41 have been permitted.

Election laws passed ahead of the voting have been criticized as undemocratic by the international community. They effectively bar Nobel Peace Prize laureate Suu Kyi and other political prisoners—estimated at more than 2,000—and members of religious orders from taking part in the elections. Suu Kyi's party was automatically disbanded under the laws for refusing to register for the elections.