

Burma's Election Commission (EC) has attached a number of restrictions on the election campaign TV and radio broadcasts political parties will be allowed to make.



The restrictions, announced on Tuesday, say the 37 parties contesting the Nov. 7 election can publicize their policy platforms during the allotted 15 minutes that the state-controlled media will carry, but they must avoid anything that defames or damages the honor of the ruling government or tarnishes the image of the armed forces, the Tatmadaw.

Live broadcasts will not be allowed and scripts must be submitted seven days beforehand to the Election Commission for its approval.

The ruling effectively bans any criticism of the government or any mention of the country's problems, particularly ethnic issues.

The parties face abolition if the EC finds they violate the restrictions.

“We have to explain what our country needs and what reforms are necessary in a delicate way,” said Thu Wai, the chairman of the Democratic Party (Myanmar), who said his party would take advantage of the 15-minute time slot.

The voting process in Burma's first general election in 20 years has still to be explained fully to the electorate.

But, according to recent reports in the state-media, Burmese voters can cast at least three ballots for candidates standing for seats in the People's Parliament, the Nationalities Parliament and the Regional Parliament. In several places, including Rangoon, ethnic people can cast an additional vote to choose a candidate competing for parliamentary seats allotted to ethnic minorities.

The articles also warned that those who are found guilty of obstructing the people from voting face a sentence of one-year imprisonment or a fine of 100,000 kyat (\$100).

“I heard that the different ballot boxes will be separated by color, but I still don't know how to vote,” said a young Rangoon journalist.

While political parties are heavily restricted in reaching out to the people, the regime has allowed two non-governmental organizations in Rangoon to give training to the parties on the voting process, according to Rangoon sources.

Rangoon-based Myanmar Egress and Shalom Foundation, locally known as the Nyein Foundation, have already conducted various training programs on voting procedures to members of political parties running in the election, the sources said. Both organizations are known for their support of the junta's 2008 Constitution and the upcoming election.

They reportedly gave training to up to 10 political parties including the National Democratic Force (NDF), Shan National Democratic Party (SNDP), Democratic Party (Myanmar), Kayin Peoples Party and two other parties representing the Arakan and Mon people.

The Shalom Foundation was founded in 2001 by the Rev. Saboi Jum, a leading figure in the ceasefire agreement reached between the regime and the armed Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and he is still working as a peace negotiator between them. He has condemned the KIO for its persistent refusal to accept the government's border guard force plan.

“The Shalom is encouraging people to participate in the election,” said a Rangoon journalist.

It is not clear how the two groups conduct their training programs.

When contacted by The Irrawaddy on Wednesday, the secretary-general of Myanmar Egress, Nay Win Maung, declined to comment on the training.

“We have concerns that these NGOs may be campaigning for the junta's proxy parties, but as long as they are not biased, it should be okay because people probably don't know how to vote,” said Dr. Aye Maung, the chairman of the Rakhine National Development Party.

Despite confusion about the voting process and restrictions on political parties, officials of the junta's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), who are also government ministers, are reportedly touring the country campaigning.

“The USDP is now publishing campaign pamphlets using the state-owned press machines. It has even done TV programs for campaigning,” said a Rangoon journalist.