

Whatever else happens after this year's election, it is clear that one thing is certain not to change—namely, the extremely limited role of women in Burmese politics.



According to the findings of a survey conducted by *The Irrawaddy*, less than eight percent of the candidates in the Nov. 7 election will be women. The survey, based on a sampling of 14 parties (out of a total of 37 registered to take part in the election), found that only 36 of the 454 candidates being fielded by the parties will be women.

A more complete survey of Rangoon Division, including candidates from all parties as well as independents, revealed an even smaller proportion of women running for election. Out of 458 candidates seeking to represent the division in the upper and lower houses of the national parliament and in the regional parliament, only 25, or 5.5 percent of the total, will be women—including seven from the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

If all of these women were to win in their constituencies, it would represent an improvement over Burma's last election in 1990, when female candidates captured just three percent of the seats in parliament. That is extremely unlikely, however, and in any case, none of the 15 women who won in 1990—all members of the National League for Democracy (NLD)—were ever allowed to sit in parliament after the ruling regime ignored the NLD's landslide victory.

Yu Zar Maw Tun, an independent candidate for Rangoon's Hlaing Township, told *The Irrawaddy* on Friday that if elected, she would work for women's rights.

"If I am elected, I will serve the whole country, but addressing women's issues will automatically be an important part of this," she said.

Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein, a leading member of the Democratic Party (Myanmar) who will contest in Gyobingauk Township in Pegu Division, also said that she will fight for the rights of Burmese

women.

“I can’t accept that Burmese women face rape and human trafficking because of their need to seek employment in foreign countries,” she said. “I will fight for their rights.”

She added that while there are many female activists in Burma, there are very few women who become politicians. “Women here mostly love to spend their life with their family,” she said.

She also said that regime-affiliated agencies such as the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association did not do enough to protect women.

Khin Htay Kywe, one of the 15 female candidates elected in 1990 and a lawyer for detained NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi, said, “As a lawyer, I wanted to amend some laws that discriminated against women's rights.”

She added: “The government has formed organizations for women, but in reality, women can't rely on them.”

While female candidates in this year's election speak of how they hope to advance women's rights if they win, other Burmese women are not so optimistic they will succeed.

Mi Sue Pwint, the chairperson of the Burma Women’s Union in Thailand, said she welcomed the participation of female candidates in the coming election but worried that the government would only exploit their participation.

“I don’t believe that a new government can bring rights for women,” she said.

According to the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoner—Burma, there are 178 women among the 2,183 political prisoners now in Burmese jails.