

Pro-democracy activists in Germany and the Burmese opposition have accused the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (also known as Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung—FES), a German NGO associated with Germany's Social Democratic Party, of having “controversial relations” with Burma's military government as it held a round-table discussion about the Burmese election in Berlin on Sept. 17. About 50 people including a pro-election group from inside Burma, German academics and Burmese pro-democracy activists in exile joined the FES event.

In an interview with *The Irrawaddy*, Aung Htoo, a Burmese lawyer and the general-secretary of the exiled Burma Lawyers' Council who attended the discussion, said, “We talked about how to approach Burma's new parliament after the election because the election is not legitimate yet.”

A pro-election group from inside Burma led by Khin Zaw Win, who is with the International Development Enterprise, a US NGO, and three other representatives from civil society groups attended the Berlin talk.

“Khin Zaw Win said he is optimistic on the current political situation and that despite the restrictions in the election, it is providing an opening for democracy,” Aung Htoo said. “He thinks political change will come through the election.”

He also talked about the 2008 Constitution, which was accepted by the majority of the people in controversial referendum shortly after Cyclone Nargis struck *The Irrawaddy* delta region in 2008.

About 15 pro-Burmese democracy activists in Germany protested about the pro-election group during the discussion, accusing participants of being “tools of the Burmese military regime.”

In a letter sent prior to the FES Berlin discussion to Andreas List, the European Commission official responsible for Burma, Tin Oo, vice chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD), asked what evidence the FES had for saying the “elections will bring about positive change in creating more space for political action” when the previous day the Election Commission had “deregistered five political parties that they themselves had permitted to form very recently.”

In his letter questioning the impartiality of participants, Tin Oo asked what “seditious writings and human rights work” by Khin Zaw Win had bestowed on him the title of “prisoner of conscience,” and wondered whether Nay Win Maung of Myanmar Egress, who was also invited to participate, was independent or “a broker between the government's cronies and the NDF [National Democratic Force] which it is touting as a substitute for the NLD.”

Tin Oo said that participation by Andreas List “could create the impression that the European Commission is trying to steam roller this election which most see as a means to constitutionalize military dominance in Burma.”

“We strongly urge that appropriate measures be taken by the European Commission to make clear that it is not acting in concert with those who are disseminating pro-junta propaganda,” he said.

The FES has been a partner with the Rangoon-based civic group, Myanmar Egress, as well as the Brussels-based Euro-Burma Office led by well-known lobbyist Harn Yawngnwe, the son of Burma's first post-independence president.

At a farewell speech made by the FES' former Burma project director, Paul Pasch, at the Hotel Savoy in Rangoon on Nov.6, 2009, said beside relationships with civic groups in Burma, the FES engaged with the junta by organizing a study visit for Burmese officials to Brussels and Strasbourg in November 2005 and cooperating with the Myanmar Institute for Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) of Burma's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It was also involved in the partly state-run MRTV-4 and Mandalay City FM.

Speaking with *The Irrawaddy* on Friday, Aung Than Oo, a spokesperson of Berlin-based Burma Bureau, which organized the protest against the talk, said: "We support their working for civil society and for the people in Burma. But we do not support their lobbying the German government to support the election in Burma, which is being managed by the military regime."

The group accused the FES of funding political parties in the 2010 election as well as inviting regime "backbones" on a lobbying trip to the EU they were offering the Burmese military.

The FES Malaysia office in Kuala Lumpur declined to comment on the allegations when contacted by *The Irrawaddy* on Monday.

Regarding the round-table discussion in Berlin, independent candidates Phone Win and Yuza Maw Htoon, who are also executives of Burmese NGO Mingalar Myanmar and six other independent election candidates issued a statement on Sep.

15, saying: "Such a process would result in growing conflict leading to irreconcilable conditions among Myanmar [Burmese] political community...Such interferences either directly or indirectly by foreign organizations form a huge threat to Myanmar political future."

Political observers in Rangoon said civic groups such as foreigner-friendly NGOs like Myanmar Egress and Mingalar Myanmar have become openly involved in politics in the run up to the election.

"NGOs such as Myanmar Egress and Mingalar Myanmar openly engage in politics directly or indirectly. It is an open secret in Rangoon that Myanmar Egress has influential close ties with the NDF (the National Democratic Force) and even appointed candidates for it," said a private journal editor in Rangoon speaking on condition of anonymity.

He cited *The Voice* journalist, Tin Lin, who is now a candidate for the NDF as an example.

He also said Mingalar Myanmar has close ties with the Democratic Party (Myanmar) and has organized independent candidates.

While Myanmar Egress, which calls itself a "think-tank," has relations with the NDF, executives

of the group are also close to officials of the military government leadership and their cronies.

Hla Maung Shwe, an executive of Myanmar Egress who is brother of Brig-Gen Hla Myint Shwe, commandant of the National Defense College, was honored by the junta in Naypyidaw on Aug. 31 for constructing cyclone shelters in the Irrawaddy Delta alongside US-sanctioned tycoons Tay Za, Zaw Zaw and Aung Thet Mann.

Meanwhile, Harn Yawngwe visited Tokyo, Japan recently. He reportedly met Japanese officials including deputy foreign minister Masaharu Nakagawa along with members of a Burmese group there, the Association of United Nationalities in Japan (AUN-Japan).

The AUN-Japan announced on Monday that it does not associate itself with Harn Yawngwe's pro-election policy and activities.