



BANGKOK —The ghost of military-ruled Burma's first strongman, Gen Ne Win, has returned to haunt the Southeast Asian nation's current junta leader, Senior Gen Than Shwe, as the country heads for its first general election in two decades on Nov. 7.

In a bizarre twist, the candidates loyal to the late Ne Win, who ruled Burma with an iron fist from a 1962 coup till 1988, are being cast in some quarters as a welcome force for expanding the very restricted political space in place since the early 1990s, when Than Shwe came to power.

The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), backed by Than Shwe, has nominated over 1,100 candidates for elections to the national and regional parliaments.

The National Unity Party (NUP), supported by Ne Win loyalists who lost political favors and power after Than Shwe became the junta leader, has nominated 999 candidates to contest for seats in the national and regional bodies.

These two political behemoths, both with ties with the junta leaders in Burma, have dwarfed the political parties with more credible democratic credentials, such as the National Democratic Force (NDF), the Democratic Party of Myanmar (DPM) and the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDF).

The NDF has 163 candidates running, while the DPM has 48 and the SNLD 156.

Little wonder why the Nov. 7 polling day is being described by political observers in Mandalay and Rangoon, the country's two largest cities, as a looming showdown between the loyalists of the two strongmen.

The NUP is in fact openly challenging the USDP on the campaign trail, these observers told IPS. "The NUP is trying to draw a distinction between themselves and the current military government," said one Rangoon-based analyst. "Just recently they told voters that they are not 'political monsters' and have learnt from their past mistakes."

"Some of their policies have even struck a chord amongst sections of the middle class who

want change," he added. "They are providing an avenue for change within restricted boundaries."

The NUP's emergence as the only formidable challenger to the ruling junta's party has not been lost on the Burmese media in exile, which have, till now, been trenchant critics of the Ne Win and Than Shwe regimes.

"The National Unity Party could upset the ruling regime's plans for an overwhelming victory by the Union Solidarity and Development Party," wrote 'The Irrawaddy', a current affairs website run by Burmese journalists in exile in Thailand. "(The NUP leader's recent) comment that (his party) would not restrict press freedom in Burma except in the case of a national emergency impressed many political observers inside the country."

Such a nod towards press freedom had even prompted some local analysts to suggest that the NUP "might be willing to form some sort of an alliance with smaller pro-democracy and ethnic parties," 'The Irrawaddy' added.

This marks a major shift in respectability from the early years of the NUP. At the last general election in 1990, Ne Win's loyalists, drawn from his governing Burma Socialist Programme Party, were reduced to having only 10 seats in the over 480 seats up for grabs in the national parliament.

This stark rejection by voters of Ne Win's oppressive rule helped steer the rise of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party. The NLD won 82 percent of the seats in that poll but was denied the right to govern after the military regime refused to recognize the results of that vote.

The NLD, led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, currently in her 14th year under house arrest, refused to contest this year's poll. This move, which saw the party banned subsequently, led to a faction of its members leaving to form the NDF.

Than Shwe's plans to avoid a political tidal wave like the one that struck Ne Win's NUP in the 1990s have been writ large ahead of the November elections. Of the 440 seats in the national legislature, 110 seats have already been reserved under the Constitution for non-elected military officers.

"The main point of the election this time is that the pro-military party just needs to win 166 elected seats," said Win Min, a Burmese national security expert. "Of course Gen. Than Shwe may want to win more than 82 percent of the seats to beat the NLD's 1990 election record for his legacy."

The magic number of 166 elected seats that Than Shwe needs will, with the 110 military appointees in the parliament, secure him support in the new legislature if he wants to be chosen as the civilian president, Win Min told IPS. "There is no minimum requirement of a 50 percent voter turn out like in 1990, making it easier for the pro-military candidates to win even if many people do not vote."

These measures, together with a slew of oppressive measures on the smaller pro-democratic parties in the race, have led analysts and even regional governments to dismiss the November poll as a sham election and a farce.

But little of that has deterred the NUP, whose members, including former military officers, want to challenge Than Shwe's attempt to use the poll to assert that his legacy is more significant than Ne Win's, says an analyst from Mandalay. "November's election is becoming a battle between a dead general and a living one," he pointed out.

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