
ELECTION MONITOR NO. 8

MON STATE USDA LAUNCHES ELECTION CAMPAIGN

An election campaign has been launched by the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) throughout parts of Mon state, according to locals from the Mon community. Campaigners have been lobbying locals with promises of development, health care and education and urging them to support and vote for the USDA in the upcoming elections. The USDA campaign group is led by Minn Lun Aung, USDA secretary of Kyaikmaraw (Kyaikmayaw) Township, followed by U Aung Myo, the former township educational department in charge and U Sein Hlaing. On November 20, the USDA's election campaign kicked off with a tour through Kaw Palaing, Kaw Soi, Kaw Sak, Tarana and Dhamasa Mon villages in Kyaikmaraw, Mon State and Kawkareik Township in the Karen State. These areas were first priority for the USDA because the Burmese candidates from the NLD and other parties were defeated by the Mon political party (MNDF) in the 1990 elections. "The Mon political party won the most seats without much campaigning", said a political observer in Mawlamyaing. The USDA, founded by the SPDC as a GONGO (government organized non-governmental organization) in 1993, is notorious for its brutal crackdown on opposition forces along with security forces. The junta claims that the USDA has a membership of over 20 million, nearly half of Burma's population of over 50 million.

TOC COMMANDER IN RAKHINE STATE WANTS YOUTH FOR FIRE SERVICE TRAINING.

The Tactical Operation Commander (TOC) stationed in Buthidaung Town has ordered the Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) Chairmen of Maungdaw and Buthidaung Townships on November 14 to send youths to the concerned Na-sa-ka area for 'Fire Service' training, said a VPDC chairman from Maungdaw Township. The Commander also asked the VPDC Chairmen to send 15 youths from each village to the concerned Na-sa-ka area by 20 November for Fire Service training. The government has not funded these training activities and therefore all the expenditure is borne by the local village. The young people who had previously taken basic military training from Na-sa-ka are allowed to participate in the Fire Service training, however Rohingya youths have been automatically excluded from taking part, said a local school teacher in Maungdaw Township.

Earlier, some young people from Rakhine State were forcibly recruited from villages to serve in the army because the army failed to recruit voluntary soldiers in Rakhine State as many refused to join. As a result, the authorities gave the young people basic military training and allowed them to go home by claiming that the youths had been trained for fire service, said an elder from Buthidaung Township. The youths of Rathedaung, Pauktaw, Kyauktaw and Mrauk U townships, in Rakhine State have already been given this 'Fire Service' training. In reality, it is not Fire Service training, as the junta is giving

the young people training for the 2010 election on how to get support from local people. This is being done in the guise of Fire Service training, said a politician from Maungdaw Township who declined to be named. Some USDA members and village councils in rural areas of Rakhine are now preparing for the 2010 election, said a trader from the locality requesting not to be named. "We believe that the junta authorities will take votes forcibly from the people though there is pressure from the international community," a local businessman from Buthidaung Township said.

MUSLIMS TO BE ISSUED GREEN REGISTRATION CARDS BEFORE ELECTION

Burmese military authorities are preparing to issue a green coloured card to local Muslims living in the urban areas of Maungdaw District in western Burma's Rakhine State ahead of the 2010 election, reports an immigration official. "The card, which recognizes the bearer as a 'guest-citizen' will be delivered to those urban Muslims in Maungdaw District who are eligible for the status before the election," sources quoted on condition of anonymity, although the exact status the card offers to bearers is still unclear. The official said that the Director General of Immigration, Colonel Maung Maung Than had visited Maungdaw for three days from 19 to 21 November and met with regional immigration staff and Na-sa-ka authorities regarding the implementation of the process. According to local sources, Colonel Maung Maung Than also brought a delegation of four Muslim businessmen from Yangon to mobilize support of local prominent Muslims and community leaders for the SPDC's implementation of the election scheduled for 2010. The businessmen were identified as Shamsul Alam, Nur Armin, Zahidur Rahman and Jamil Ahmed, all former residents of Maungdaw township.

A resident from Maungdaw also confirmed that the delegation met with prominent religious leaders and local Muslims and sharing the regimes plans for the 2010 elections.

"We had a meeting with them after Jumma prayers last Friday in Myoma Mosque. They told us to support the authorities in the coming poll, so as to get full citizen rights like other people in the country and that no one or no party except the SPDC government can make our community developed," he said, citing the speech of a delegation member during their meeting. The military authorities are apparently planning to issue the card to Muslim people in Maungdaw District in order to have their support in the coming elections. Currently, most Muslim adults in Maungdaw District have been issued a provisional white registration card stating that "the bearer must not claim citizenship of any country." Very few of those who are related to Rakhine (Arakanese) or Myanmar (Burmese) have been issued red-coloured citizen cards with "Rakhine/Muslim" or "Myanmar/Muslim" in the 'ethnicity/religion' field of the card.

According to an intelligence source, Burmese authorities issued similar cards just before the 2008 constitutional referendum to some Indian tribes, known locally as Manipuri or Kathay, who have been settled in a jungle village near Ngaranchaung Village in Maungdaw township since 1993.

INGO WORK IN BURMA COULD STOP DURING ELECTION PERIOD

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) operating in Burma may have to suspend their activities next May, according to NGO sources in Burma. Although no official announcement has yet been made by the regime, some government officials warned that INGO work could be suspended from May until October because of the 2010 election, said INGO sources. "We have heard from government officials that possibly because of the election, INGOs in the country will temporarily close project activities in the country," said an INGO staffer in Rangoon, requesting anonymity. "No written order has yet been made by government ministries, however." A veteran lawyer in Rangoon, Kyi Wynn, said a non-Burmese friend working for an INGO told him he had been informed by a government official that INGO activities would be halted during the election period. The lack of any official confirmation is causing confusion among INGOs, who are asking whether the decision to suspend activities applies to all or just those aid groups which have been operating in the country since the Cyclone Nargis disaster in May 2008. A backlog in granting visas for foreign relief workers has also arisen. Burma's ruling generals often see INGOs that work in Burma as a "tool of neo-colonialism." Government officials have warned foreign NGOs to follow four basic principles—"non-political, non-religion, non-profit and non-governmental." In early 2008, the junta reduced INGO projects in Burma from five years to one year. INGOs must also renew their projects three to six months in advance.

The ruling junta hasn't yet announced a date for the election planned in 2010, although observers say it will be held either before or after the monsoon season. Both the 1990 general election and the 2008 referendum were held in May. The 1990 election was announced about 15 months in advance, and the electoral law allowed 90 days for campaigning. The constitutional referendum in May 2008 was announced the previous February, and went ahead despite Cyclone Nargis, with the regime barred foreign aid workers while voting took place.

ANALYSIS

The election campaigns by the USDA in the Mon State and the conducting of fire-service training courses for local youths in Rakhine State are but part of the many strategies being put into place by the regime prior to the promulgation of the election registration law. If and when the election law is introduced, the government will already have gained momentum in its election preparations while the opposition parties will only be initiating their first steps. The regime has therefore taken this advantage to promote support for its parties and candidates throughout the country. The plans to issue Muslim locals in the Rakhine State with green registration cards can be regarded as vote buying in the crudest possible form. Under normal circumstances, the issuance of identity cards, especially to Muslims in this region, is regarded as impossible and thus the authorities have been able to use the offer of the green registration card to manipulate the present circumstances to their benefit, even though the status the card

confers is still unclear. In recent months the SPDC Chairman has reiterated that the 2010 elections will be held as scheduled. During the preparations for the elections it appears that some, if not all, of the on-going humanitarian aid projects being implemented by INGOs within the country could come to a halt. In the eyes of the junta this move is regarded as a precautionary measure to remove internal and external 'interference' towards the election process. The extent to which the SPDC will go to secure the successful implementation of its Roadmap is unlimited as well as unpredictable, which has now become the trademark of the military junta.