

Burma's Elections a Test for Reforms



Reuters

Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi beside another candidate from the National League for Democracy in Yangon

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

Burma is holding elections on Sunday. Voters will fill forty-five seats in elections for the national legislature or parliament.

This will be the first vote in the country since the end of almost fifty years of military rule. Yet the armed forces still have strong influence over the government. One-fourth of the seats are for military appointees.

Burma's legislature has four hundred forty seats in the lower house and a two hundred twenty-four seat Senate.

Two years ago, the Union Solidarity and Development Party won seventy-six percent of the vote in the most recent elections. Since then, the government has eased restrictions on the media and freed hundreds of political prisoners.

It also released the country's most famous opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, from house arrest. These developments have led to positive reactions from

western countries, including the United States. Late last year, Hillary Clinton became the first American Secretary of State to visit Burma in fifty years.

Aung Zaw is with the online newspaper the Irrawaddy. He recently visited Burma after living in exile for twenty years. He says many Burmese are guarded about the reforms.

AUNG ZAW: "I find and discover a lot of very skeptical voices. And people remain very, very, very, very, very skeptical about this reform process in our country. A lot of people inside the country who speak Burmese, who read Burmese, who can communicate in our own language, don't wear their rose-colored glasses."

Burmese exiles have long been critical of Burma's government.

The opposition National League for Democracy did not take part in elections two years ago. The party won parliamentary elections in nineteen ninety, but Burma's rulers never recognized the results.

This year, party leader Aung San Suu Kyi is a candidate and is expected to win a seat in the legislature. On Friday, the Nobel Peace Prize winner met with reporters and diplomats at her home in Rangoon. She said her party's candidates faced threats and violence in the election campaign. And, she said the vote on Sunday cannot be called free and fair.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI: "I don't think we can consider it a genuinely free and fair election if we take into consideration what has been going on for the last couple of months. But still, as we wish to work towards national reconciliation, we will try to tolerate what has happened. And we hope that the courage and resolution of the people will overcome the intimidations and other irregularities that have been taking place."

Some observers say the recent changes in Burma will have a big effect. Reporter Thiha Saw says the vote will be an important test for the country.

THIHA SAW: "I watch it very closely because this will be something like a marker or a test about the sincerity of the regime. Are they going to make it really free and fair? If it is going to be free and fair, the people in the western communities will start lifting the sanctions. So this is important for Burma as well as for the international community, too."

Other observers are less hopeful for a fair vote, but say it will still be important. Burma's government has invited observers from Asia, Australia, Canada, the

European Union and the United States to witness the voting. Reporters from around the world are in Burma to report on the elections.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.