

Myanmar Constitution Guidelines Ensure Military Power

By SETH MYDANS
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BANGKOK, Sept. 3 — After 14 years of on-and-off sessions, a constitutional convention in Myanmar produced a set of charter guidelines on Monday that guaranteed the military's continued dominance.

The guidelines were the first step on what the ruling military junta describes as a "road map to democracy." Six more steps are to lead to a constitutional referendum and an election.

But the document ensures that the military, which has ruled the country formerly known as Burma since 1962, will remain the dominant force, wherever the road map leads.

Under the guidelines, the military will control major ministries, hold large blocks of unelected seats in all legislative bodies and have the right to declare a state of emergency and seize power at any time.

The document severely limits the rights of political parties and it hedges its provisions on human rights and political activity with limitations based on concerns of "national security."

It fails to meet the expectations of minority groups who have been demanding autonomy and other rights, and there are reports that some groups involved in past cease-fires have begun to rearm in remote jungles.

The document also attempts to limit opposition by setting requirements for political office that seem tailored specifically to bar Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her opposition party, the National League for Democracy.

Western nations have criticized the process as an undemocratic show devised to produce an undemocratic constitution. It was not clear who would draft the final charter.

"It's been a sham process," said a Western diplomat in Yangon, the country's major city. "It's becoming increasingly evident that this government is not willing to give an inch."

In a sign of continuing opposition and discontent, the end of the convention coincides with an eruption of street protests following an unannounced rise in fuel prices two weeks ago. The protests have been mostly small and the government has responded with force, arresting most of the leaders. They have dwindled as the days have passed, and no protests have been reported in Yangon since Tuesday.

The nation has had no constitution since the current junta seized power after crushing a pro-democracy uprising in 1988, causing the deaths of thousands of people.

Two years later the generals held an election, and lost in a landslide to the party of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi.

They annulled those results, and in 1993 embarked on their long constitution-drafting process. The convention was suspended in 1996 after the delegates from the National League for Democracy walked out, calling the sessions undemocratic.

It reopened in 2004 with 1,100 hand-picked representatives, but without members of the opposition party. A special law mandated a prison term of up to 20 years for anyone seen to be criticizing the process.

The Associated Press quoted a delegate as saying that Acting Prime Minister Thein Sein, in his closing speech, declared the convention a success.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/04/world/asia/04myanmar.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin