



Thu Wai, one of the founders of the new Democratic Party, looks at the upcoming election and his party's plan to engage the regime in the new parliament.

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Thu Wai, a former political prisoner, is the chairman of the Rangoon-based Democratic Party, newly formed to participate in this year's election by Than Than Nu, Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein and Nay Yee Ba Swe, the daughters of U Nu, Kyaw Nyein and Ba Swe respectively, Burma's late prime ministers during the parliamentary era.

He spoke to The Irrawaddy about the military government, the upcoming election and his party's activities.

Question: Snr-Gen Than Shwe said “plans are underway to hold elections in a systematic

way,” and he urged the population to make the “correct choices” in his Independence Day message. Any comment?

Answer: It will be good if he does what he says. But for us, the candidates who want to participate in the election, so far we can’t do anything. There are no election laws and the political parties registration law hasn’t been announced so we can’t legally organize. These laws should be enacted immediately to ensure we have sufficient time to organize our activities.

Q. What has your new party been doing?

A. Even though we are not allowed to organize, we have formed our party. We have recently set up executive committees and branches of women and youths in different towns and divisions. We work together as much as we can, but discreetly. We can’t organize big meetings or mass rallies. We extend our networks through our personal friends and contacts.

Q. What was behind your decision to form a party and participate in the election?

A. First, our country’s situation is deteriorating and we want to help fix the problems. Just talking from the outside isn’t very effective, and demonstrations aren’t very effective. We think we can compete in the election and that some of our candidates will be elected. We can then work on reform from within the Parliament. This is the first point.

Second, we assume there are many people in our country who have never voted in their lives. Some were around 17 years old during the last election. Now they are nearing their 40s. This may comprise half of the population. The election is decision-time for them, and they will want to use the new power that’s in their hands.

If there is an election, we assume the military government will be phased out and a civilian government will ultimately take its place.

If we work hard, that civilian government could be a powerful democratic institution. If the government receives popular support, we could be on the path to democracy very quickly.

Q. Some analysts suggest the coming election and formation of a parliament will not lead to democracy, but just more military control. Your thoughts?

A. There are differences of opinion about the coming election and the 2008 Constitution. Many say the Constitution is undemocratic, and some people think there will be no change even after the election under this Constitution.

I don't think like that. When I heard they are preparing for an election, I thought positively. This military government has tried their best. They also love the country. But the way they are going about things is wrong; their system is wrong and it has wasted a lot of the country's time. Burma has been left far behind the rest of the world.

The leaders of the military government know that. They have worked hard and they have tried. But they were not successful. They are now unpopular and may be finally trying to bring about some reforms. One reform, as they see it, is to hold an election.

I think they will withdraw from their current political stance after holding the election and adopting the new Constitution.

I don't think the army is moving forward, but rather it's in retreat. I see their reasoning from their point of view, as that of a good commander. For a good commander, a retreat of your forces must be done in an orderly and systematic way. Now the junta is withdrawing by taking a role under the Constitution. Our position is to work in this new environment and create an orderly civilian government.