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***The Irrawaddy recently interviewed the vice-chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Tin Oo, who was formerly the chief of staff of Burma's armed forces. He spoke about his personal political experiences, as well as the NLD's current status and future plans following its decision not to register for the election in 2010.***

***Tin Oo, 83, was last arrested in 2003 after Aung San Suu Kyi and her entourage were attacked by a government-backed mob in what has come to be known as the “Depayin Massacre.” After being detained for several months, he was placed under house arrest for six years and was finally released in February.***



**Question:** The May 7 deadline for political party registration is approaching. There is concern that following this date the NLD won't be able to engage in pro-democracy activities since it has decided not to contest the election and most likely will be dissolved. How do you respond to these concerns?

**Answer:** An office and a flag are helpful components for an organization or a league to be meaningful. However, having no signboard and flag doesn't mean that the NLD is not involved in politics and the struggle for democracy. The NLD is not forsaking the people and it will never turn its back on them. We will continue to work for freedom and democracy in the country by peaceful means. We are still in the position to do so.

In the past, we managed to work without an office and flag when our headquarters was raided and shut down for a few months. Also, some people in the office were given lengthy sentences and thrown into jail. Nevertheless, those who remained outside continued to work for the people and the NLD still existed.

We are getting old now but the new generation is very active. I believe in the NLD youth, and I believe that youth from other organizations, especially students, will eventually join the democracy movement. Even if older NLD members can't be part of the future struggle, the current generation will continue to work for democracy and human rights.

They will join hands and become a powerful force for democracy. We older members believe that. One thing we keep telling them is not to do anything aggressively.

We know people are depending on us and have great expectations. But we had to ask ourselves whether we should contest the election just because of the fact that people were relying on us. The answer was 'no,' we can't contest just for that reason.

We can't accept the 2008 constitution and operate under its unjust provisions. If we do, we will just be an organization that listens to what authorities say and agrees with them. Look at who has registered for the election. Most of them are groups with friendly relationships with the regime.

It doesn't mean that we are going to turn our back on what the people want. We will never abandon our people. We won't turn blind. We will try our best to work for them however we can. I want our people to know that we are old but still very active, so they should not be too concerned.

**Q:** *How can you convince people that refusal to accept the election laws and the 2008 Constitution was a good reason for the NLD not to register for the 2010 election?*

**A:** The election laws are very strict. These laws bar the leaders who the people support, such as pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, from participating in the election. In the case of political prisoners, I don't think we can assume a person is convicted when they are in the process of appeal. It is not fair if these people are not allowed to participate in the election. We cannot and should not do that in a democracy. No special explanation is needed for this. No one can move around under these laws as they tightly control all. In fact, it is even hard to say that they are laws.

But even though we will not contest the election, the statement we issued said that the NLD had done as much it could under the circumstances despite constant repression, that we will continue to work on behalf of the people and, if possible, we will negotiate to find solutions through dialogue.

**Q:** *What is your opinion about the political parties that have decided to contest the election? Do you think people can make the right choice if they are allowed to cast their own votes?*

**A:** I don't want to speak about that. People are mature enough. They know the situation and are intelligent. They really want democracy and they have knowledge related to democratic principles, so they will vote from their hearts however they prefer. How can I say who should do what? If I do, they [the regime] will say in newspapers that the NLD did not register for the election and now is trying to ruin the election by persuading people to vote, or not vote, against their will.

People are not stupid. They understand what is going on very well. So they just need to use their intelligence and create the results they want.

**Q:** *Has the democracy struggle just begun? Or did it start a long time ago? How has the NLD been involved in the struggle?*

**A:** I would say the democracy struggle started following the military coup in 1962. The military rule of the current regime has lasted for more than 20 years. If you look at the period following the formation of the NLD and before the 1990 election, many NLD leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi and me, were already in detention. The NLD, however, won a landslide victory in the 1990 election because the rest of the NLD leaders and those who remained outside detention

continued their work peacefully.

Although the regime made many promises, in practice it prevented MP-elects from performing their jobs and were often arrested. This is part of the struggle too. And when the regime convened the National Convention, participants felt pressure not to speak on behalf of the people because they could be punished if they said something critical of the Convention. So we decided to walk out of the Convention.

After Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest, however, the NLD tried to participate in the Convention once again. The NLD requested that the Election Convening Commission allow the party to discuss its proposals and pledged that if permitted to do so it would re-join the Convention. The regime didn't even respond. That means it didn't need to care because with arms and military might it could do whatever it wanted. Maybe it did have arms and power but it didn't have people's support. Since the regime was not serious and sincere, the NLD just couldn't join the Convention.

As you know, most of the NLD MP-elects were later incarcerated or put under house arrest. The regime frequently pressured our members to resign from the NLD and took down the party signboards. We were being seriously repressed, and the party almost reached the point where it couldn't do anything. Still, we continued.

After Aung San Suu Kyi and I were released from detention we made organizing trips and tried to reopen our offices in different parts of the country. Consequently, the regime became suspicious of our activities, and finally they sent a mob to attack us in Depayin in May 2003.

Even though we were viciously assaulted, the NLD still looked for opportunities to attend the National Convention. We asked the regime to free political prisoners and allow us to open our offices. We also requested dialogue to find solutions. None of our proposals were granted. On the contrary, Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, including myself, were detained once again and the movements of other NLD members were continuously restricted. If you think about it, the NLD has never been able to work freely. It has always worked amid arrests, imprisonments and repression since its inception. There are many NLD members still behind bars today.

**Q:** *You and Aung San Suu Kyi have worked together and been through the Depayin massacre. Could you share your opinion of her?*

**A:** Aung San Suu Kyi joined the democracy movement just to work for the people and victory over the regime. She does not have any intentions other than to participate in the movement. She doesn't want power and fame for herself. She doesn't want that. Her father had worked for the freedom of his country, and she wants to follow in her father's footsteps by bringing freedom to her own people. She also wants to work for ethnic nationalities. She is still engaged in the democracy struggle and will never step back. She will continue. She has to.

**Q:** *Please tell us about your younger days and how you became involved in politics.*

**A:** When I was young I wanted to go to college very much, as I wanted to be a doctor, but my thoughts were driven a different direction when World War II broke out. I joined the army after I finished high school. I was a soldier for quite a while and I thought after the revolution I wouldn't continue being in the army. Luckily, I was selected as an officer. Only 150 soldiers across the country were chosen as officers and I was one of them.

The uprising in 1988 took place when I was about to begin studying for a master's degree in law. I joined the democracy movement together with Aung Shwe and others. Aung San Su Kyi appeared in the movement too. I like her leadership. She is smart. I am a soldier, so I act like a soldier. But for her, she is a well-rounded person and has vision. She wants to work for freedom and democracy. She wants her people free from oppression. We worked together then and still join hands today.