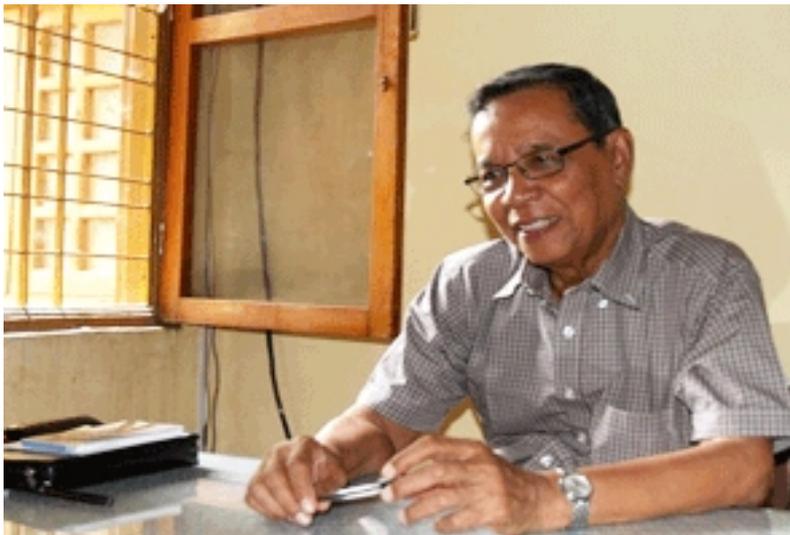


Dr. Than Nyein graduated from medical school in 1963 and worked as a civil servant until 1988, when he was forced to resign due to his involvement in the popular uprising of that year. He joined the National League for Democracy (NLD) in January 1989 and was elected as the member of parliament for Rangoon's Kyauktan Township the following year. He was arrested for the first time in 1997. In 2004, he was arrested again and incarcerated until September 2008.



In May, he co-founded the National Democratic Force (NDF) after the the NLD was forcibly dissolved for refusing to take part in this year's election. He is now the chairman of the NDF, which registered on June 24 to compete in the election. The party's application was approved by the Election Commission (EC) on July 9.

Irrawaddy reporter Ko Htwe interviewed Dr. Than Nyein recently to discuss his party's policies and future activities.

**Question:** How do you think you will do in the election?

**Answer:** It is very unlikely that we will win in a landslide as we did in 1990, but we will do our best under the present circumstances.

**Q:** Why do you think an overwhelming victory is unlikely?

**A:** There are many limitations. The first is time. Our party registration was just approved by the EC. As the election is to be held within this year, we will have very little time for campaigning. Another one is financial constraints. Candidate fees are [US \$500], much higher than they were in the last election, and it is very difficult to find funding.

Another problem is the media. We have not received fair treatment. We have been interviewed many times by the domestic media, but much of what we said was censored, and some media have even rejected us. We have relied on the domestic media to reach out to people, but it has not been as effective as we expected. The exiled media has been biased, too. For instance, some media groups said they wanted to speak to us about our party, but in fact, they were against us, so it became more like rumor mongering than a real discussion. I think we need to be careful about dealing with this kind of situation.

**Q:** Which parties will be your main opponents?

**A:** Any party that competes with us wherever we contest the election will be our main opponent. I can't say anything for sure right now, as we still can't say exactly where we will contest and don't know which other parties will contest where.

**Q:** Does this mean that the NDF will only contest the election in some areas?

**A:** We can't work equally in all areas throughout the country. We don't have enough candidates. We have strong supporters in some places and we are not so popular in some other places. The strength of local support for our political course is more important than anything we can do, so we will contest the election in areas where our supporters can work efficiently.

**Q:** What do you think of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)?

**A:** Well, I believe everybody knows the background of the USDP. It was spawned by the Union Solidarity and Development Association, which is a government-backed organization. It is not very nice to see that incumbent ministers are currently involved in the USDP. The Tatmadaw (armed forces) has already taken 25 percent of the parliament seats. What we want is a fair competition for the rest of the seats with equal participation by all. That's how it should be if we are genuinely marching towards democracy.

**Q:** Do you think there's a level playing field?

**A:** Everybody knows whether it is level or not. There's no need to say anything more about that.

**Q:** During the 1990 election period, political parties formed alliances. Does the NDF have any plan to form an alliance?

**A:** I think it would be pretty difficult to form an alliance, since we don't have much time left. In principle, we would prefer not to compete directly with political parties that have a genuine will to create a true democratic Burma, so we will try to consult with them as much as we can in the time we have left.

**Q:** Which parties will you consult with?

**A:** There won't be many. We still have to make decision in our party as to which parties we are going to consult. We will also be learning about other parties, too.

**Q:** Which ethnic parties do you think you might cooperate with, and what kind of policies should they hold [as potential partners]?

**A:** Our position on ethnic parties will be different from that of the NLD in the 1990 election. What I mean is that we don't have any plan to heavily compete against ethnic parties in different states and ethnic-controlled territories. We just want them to know what they should be doing

and do what they have to do dutifully. Of course, exceptions exist in some places. For example, there are some areas in some states where we have supporters. In such cases, we will ask our members there to consult and cooperate with pro-democracy and ethnic parties focusing on those areas.

**Q:** The EC that has yet to approve the registrations of the Kachin parties, including the one led by Dr. Tu Ja. What do you think about this?

**A:** It is their parties' own affairs and this issue should be resolved by the parties and the EC.

**Q:** What is your position on national reconciliation?

**A:** National reconciliation is the main issue and it is an essential part of our party's policy. We have already accepted that without national reconciliation, problems between ethnic groups and races cannot be settled and a peaceful co-existence will not be possible in the long run. We will pay attention to this issue as much as we are allowed.

**Q:** It was recently reported that you still support Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Is that right?

**A:** Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has worked with us and led us for more than 20 years. We could never question her good will for the country. She is a leader that we will always respect.

**Q:** How will you maintain the policy of her party, the NLD?

**A:** We have worked for the NLD for over 20 years. It is not a stranger to us. However, since it decided not to register for the coming election, its legal status became null and void on May 6. One can't possibly argue that from that time on, no matter how much we wished to continue working as a political party, we couldn't do so in practice. We were with the NLD until it was dissolved. After that, we didn't see ourselves as related to the NLD anymore. Whether or not the NLD will continue to exist as a political party is up to other NLD members.

**Q:** Do you mean the NDF's policy doesn't have any relation to the NLD's Shwegodaing Declaration?

**A:** The Shwegodaing Declaration was mainly written by Ko Khin Maung Swe and me, together with Ko Sein Hla Oo. We fully believe in the policies in the declaration. Today, we are talking about the declaration as it was written and don't define it as we want. We said in the declaration that we need to resolve political problems through dialogue. This will always be true. The need for dialogue never dies. As long as we have differences, between two persons or among many people, we will need dialogue. We will always uphold this principle.

With regard to the election, we didn't say in the declaration that we were not going to contest the election. We said that we would consider participating in it if our conditions were met, but we didn't say that we wouldn't compete if these conditions were not met. In fact, there is no need to define our statement that way. If we said it like that, it would just be a wishful definition. We stressed in the declaration that we would never abandon our people—that the NLD would never leave the democracy struggle and an election was a political landmark that we had to go through on our way to democracy. We are doing today as we said in the declaration.

**Q:** What is the NDF's position on political prisoners?

**A:** Our demand for political prisoners is the same as before. We were also political prisoners. Our call for their immediate release is something we can never change. The authorities have pledged many times for the inclusiveness of the election, so we'd like to urge them to act accordingly as soon as possible so that all stakeholders will be able to participate in the election. The release of all political prisoners would indicate the credibility of the election to a certain extent. If it doesn't happen, once our party candidates have the chance to sit in the parliament after the election, our first proposal will be for their release and for amnesty.

**Q:** Burma is earning billions of dollars from the sale of its resources, but most of it has been spent on the military, with very little going to the health and education sectors. What will your party do to change this situation?

**A:** There is no transparency, so we don't know exactly how much income we have and how much we spend on which sectors. There is no way we can find out about this, so there's not much we can say about it. However, if there is a parliament in the future, the government will have to submit its expenditure and annual budget to the parliament, so we will then try to say what should and shouldn't happen.