



***Phyo Min Thein, the chairman of the Union Democracy Party, recently announced his resignation, saying that the military regime-sponsored 2010 election would not be free and fair. Among the 40 political parties currently registered with the Union Election Commission (EC), the UDP chairman was the first party leader to resign. Phyo Miin Thein, 41, took part in the 1988 uprising. He was arrested in 1990 and released in 2005. Irrawaddy reporter Ko Htwe interviewed Phyo Min Thein about his resignation and the planned election.***

**Question:** *Why did you decided to take part in the coming election and what made you withdraw from it?*

**Answer:** I thought if we endorsed the 2008 Constitution, it could help to end the military rule by forming a new government consisting of civilians and military personnel. I also hoped that there would be a new order with the emergence of political parties, entities and multi-social classes, which would help to march toward democracy and of course, that will also gradually assist to bring us to a new democratic nation. I simply expected there to be that sort of political arena. That's why I decided to take part in the election.

Even though the army will have an automatic 25 percent of the seats in the parliament, we decided to contest the election with an expectation that people can directly elect 330 legislators out of 440. If the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the National Union Party (NUP) and other democratic parties contest the rest of the 75 percent of seats in free and fair circumstances, we, the democratic forces, will win the election. But, the USDP led by the

regime's Prime Minister Thein Sein, formerly known as Lt-Gen Thein Sein, has attempted to create conditions in which they will win the election, and they have effectively undermined the rights of other democratic forces.

For instance, the USDP built concrete roads for some communities. Then, community members had to apply for the USDP membership. The pressure on the community members to apply for party membership directly came from members of the Ward Peace and Development Council. The EC did not say anything about it while it issued different orders to hinder the movements of democratic forces. The EC has clearly ignored the USDP's coercive methods in recruiting new party members. I didn't think the coming election would be free and fair. Therefore, I walked away from such circumstances, believing that it wouldn't be right to take part in the election.

**Q:** *When you decided to contest the election, you ignored the injustices in the 2008 Constitution?*

**A:** I have my own reasons to accept the 2008 Constitution. I do not like that Constitution, but I just try to make a better condition out of it. For instance, when I was in prison, we knew that the jail manual hardly protected us from abuses, but we used it. When we experienced ill-treatment from prison officers, we asked the prison authorities to treat us in conformity with the manual. Just like that. We know and accept that the 2008 Constitution has loopholes in protecting us and is not based on democratic principles. If we accepted the Constitution, we thought we could prevent a system in which orders from the authorities' mouths became laws.

**Q:** *Your statement cited the unfair treatment by the EC, and how it prevents the holding of a free and fair election.*

**A:** From a party's fund raising activities to campaigning, democratic forces have been limited by different regulations and orders released by the EC, but it turns blind no matter what the USPD does. For instance, Deputy Minister Aung Myo Min of the Ministry of Education stressed in a speech at the University of Foreign Languages that if the USDP did not win the election, a coup would be staged. That was a plain insult to the credibility of the election. The EC did not take any action against that statement. Such action destroyed my expectation that the EC would work in a fair manner.

**Q:** *Are the campaign activities of the USDP in accord with the law?*

**A:** The election laws and regulations control the activities of political parties. But, the USDP is above the legal framework of the election. No person or party should be above the law. The USDP goes far beyond the limitations promulgated by the election law. For instance, receiving state-owned funding and property. That violates the regulations stipulated by the election law. The EC just ignored the law. In order to hold a free and fair election, the election law should not be biased. But, some EC laws make it difficult for the newly founded parties with poor financial backing to organize.

**Q:** *Your statement also said that the election would not fulfill your "pre-election goals" for all people to get involved in the election and for all political prisoners to be freed to participate in politics.*

**A:** Political prisoners need to participate in Burma's politics, as all the people of Burma do. We have put our efforts into establishing an environment where media freedom and fair elections can exist. But I don't see any indication that political prisoners will be freed. We have also seen tight restrictions upon the media, which is in a difficult situation in reporting on political parties.

**Q:** *How significant is the release of political prisoners in Burmese politics?*

**A:** Many key players in Burmese politics are still behind bars. Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic leader Khun Htoon Oo and student leaders Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and Htay Kywe are serving long imprisonments. They have not been allowed to participate in politics so far. The election will be held without them. I don't think there should be an effort to keep them out of Burmese politics.

**Q:** *You mean they would contribute something unique to Burmese politics?*

**A:** If they were allowed to participate in politics, we would have leadership within the political opposition. Through dialogue between the regime and Aung San Suu Kyi, we would create national reconciliation that embraced all of our political forces, ethnic leaders and the military.

Then, our country could be developed as a brand new country on a genuine democratic path.

**Q:** *How do you see the future and the ability of political parties to organize and campaign?*

**A:** There are a lot of anxieties among the people at the township level about participating in a party's campaign activities. It's a fear that has existed in our society for 20 years, and it prevents our people from entering politics. If they become involved, people are afraid they will be detained. That effectively undermines organizing work as well as campaigning. People are also feeling pressure from the former members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and Swan-Arr-Shin (a militia-like organization backed by the ruling regime to oppress the opposition) at the township levels.

**Q:** *How significant is the freedom of the media in realizing a free and fair election?*

**A:** This is one of the most important factors. The election will be determined to be free or not only if the media can also enjoy the freedom necessary to do it works. The government may claim it is unfair, but the media could highlight the whole situation as a forth force. By doing so, all people could be informed, as well as the international community. The media could make things more balanced. That's why media freedom is necessary.

**Q:** *What sort of difficulty did you face when you published your party bulletin?*

**A:** At the time our party bulletin was released, we were told by the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD) that the publication was more like a journal, and it should be limited to writing about party affairs. Also, we were instructed to consult with the PSRD on the matter of publication. More oppressive orders came in publishing the party's bulletins.

**Q:** *The USDA "Constitution" has been released. It takes an aggressive stand toward other parties and talks about recruiting thugs at the grassroots levels. Were you surprised?*

**A:** The USDP has simply inherited the USDA, which uses the Swan Arr Shin as a tool of oppression. The Depayin incident is an example. Under democratic principles, someone shouldn't be defined as an enemy based on their holding different opinions. We must accept diversity. But as long as the USDP uses unfair methods to compete in the election, Burma will continue to struggle with an authoritarian regime.