

Burmese Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein may leave his current post to head the new political wing of the government-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), according to sources in Naypyidaw.



Although Thein Sein reportedly wants to retire and is having heart problems, inside military sources said Snr Gen Than Shwe asked him to remain and head-up the new political party.

Several government sources said Thein Sein has been told to hand over his current house and other state-owned properties to the government. The new election laws forbid political parties and their candidates from using state-owned resources, although there is an exemption for resources officially allotted by the government.

The rumor regarding Thein Sein's future is spreading fast among government servants, dissident circles and observers inside and outside Burma.

Thein Sein, who is known to be a trusted associate of Than Shwe (considered to be the patron of the USDA), was named prime minister in October 2007 and led the National Convention which resulted in the controversial 2008 Constitution. In 2001 he was appointed adjutant-general of the War Office and three years later was promoted to the Secretary-1 in the regime's ruling council.

Sources said two other high ranking officers and trusted aides of Than Shwe are expected to take leading roles in the future civilian government: Gen. Thura Shwe Mann, the joint chief of staff in the armed forces who is considered the junta's No 3 in command, and Maj-Gen Htay Oo, the minister of agriculture and irrigation and secretary-general of the USDA.

The 2008 Constitution grants 25 parliamentary seats to the military. It is not known if Thein Sein, Thura Shwe Mann and Htay Oo will run for the junta-sponsored political party as civilian candidates or be appointed to parliament as military representatives.

Sources say two high level officers close to Than Shwe will not enter the political arena. Lt-Gen Myint Swe, head of the Bureau of Special Operations (5), and Maj-Gen Tin Ngwe, chairman of Mandalay Division, will reportedly remain in the military.

The USDA was formed in 1993, and according to official documents has 24 million members, almost half the population of Burma.

USDA members held 633 seats, or 58 percent, at the National Convention convened in 1993 to prepare guidelines for the new constitution. The guidelines were finally approved in 2007 and the Constitution was enacted in 2008.

Opposition group observers say most USDA members are civil servants who were recruited by harassment and intimidation. It also includes teachers, students, business people and political activists.

Many Burmese view the USDA as principally an instrument of the regime that carries out violent acts against opposition activists and civilians. The group has paramilitary members who perform surveillance and search for dissidents in hiding.

USDA members played a key role in the bloody crackdowns during the 2007 uprising and in a deadly attack on Aung San Suu Kyi's motorcade in 2003, in which 100 people were killed.

In November 2005, Htay Oo publicly told USDA members that if necessary the association will be turned into a political party.