

Sources say the Burmese PM is retiring from the military to head a new political party—part of Than Shwe's master plan for entrenching military rule.

Burma's Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein and about 20 other ministers are widely reported to be in the process of quitting their military posts to take on leading roles in a new pro-junta political party that will contest the general election this year, sources in Naypyidaw said.

Quoting Burmese officials in the capital, the sources said that Thein Sein and other generals, including: Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation Maj-Gen Htay Oo; Minister of Communications, Posts and Telegraphs Brig-Gen Thein Zaw; and Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Brig-Gen Phone Swe, will head the new party.



Although the ministers will resign from the military, sources said, they will retain their current positions within the government.

Burma's state-run media has to date made no mention of Thein Sein's new role, but ran footage and reports of the general attending a religious ceremony along with junta chief Snr-Gen Than Shwe and other top brass in Naypyidaw on Monday.

However, officials in Naypyidaw do not deny the reports. "You should listen out for the news. Then you'll hear confirmation," an official from the Government Office in Naypyidaw told *The*

Irrawaddy
on Tuesday.

An editor with a private journal in Rangoon said, “As far I know, the news is confirmed. Officials in Naypyidaw told me the government will announce Thein Sein's candidacy in the coming days.”

Speculation among Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) members and businessmen in Rangoon is rife that Thein Sein will lead a pro-military party, which could be a proxy of the USDA, sources said, adding that respected civilians among local communities were being sought as candidates for the pro-government party.

An official from the pro-junta civic group, the USDA, told *The Irrawaddy* on Tuesday that Thein Sein was being groomed by Than Shwe to run as the party leader.

“It sounds very possible,” said Ohn Lwin, a politician in Rangoon whose party, the National Political Alliance, has applied to contest the election. “Gen Thein Sein could lead a party and become the next president.”

Several official sources have recently tipped Thein Sein to play a leading role in a post-election government.

“Following the NLD [the main opposition National League for Democracy] decision not to register as a political party for the election, Snr-Gen Than Shwe has had a change of heart,” said another official. “In his new plan, Gen Thein Sein will be president.

“Alongside Thein Sein, two chiefs at the Bureau of Special Operations, Lt-Gen Myint Swe and Lt-Gen Khin Zaw, will also be on Than Shwe's list,” he said.

According to the sources, Htay Oo, who is also the current general secretary of the USDA, was

previously in Than Shwe's favor as the man to lead the future government.

Htay Oo was reputed to be in favor of presenting a “free and fair” election in front of the international community, however. Sources have said that at a government meeting last year, he advocated “allowing” opposition parties 30 to 40 percent of parliamentary seats.

Businessmen close to the generals are now tipping Lt-Gen Hla Htay Win, the chief of armed forces training and former commander of the Rangoon regional military command, to step into the fold as an important figure in Burma's armed forces.

However, the future of the current No 3 and 4 ranking generals—Gen Shwe Mann, the joint chief of staff and coordinator of special operations (army, navy, air force), and Gen Tin Aung Myint Oo, the quartermaster-general and junta secretary-1—is now regarded as unsure. The two are reported to be rivals.

Several Burma observers said they were surprised to read state-run reports in the press that Tin Aung Myint Oo was absent from Than Shwe's religious ceremony in Naypyidaw on Monday. However, Shwe Mann was present.