

Rangoon Mayor, Ex Brig-Gen Aung Thein Lin, 58, a leading member of the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), is facing a challenge from independent candidate Kaung Myint Htut, 35, who was one of the youngest political prisoners in Burma.



Aung Thein Lin

Kaung Myint Htut

Both candidates are running for a seat in the lower house in Rangoon's South Okkalapa Township constituency in the Nov. 7 election.

"Frankly speaking, I don't believe the elections can bring the changes we would like to see," Kaung Myint Htut said. "But I think people should be given an alternative to candidates from the USDP or the former military rulers in the National Unity Party."

Kaung Myint Htut, an entertainment producer, attempted to form the Myanmar Democracy Congress Party with some colleagues when the Union Election Commission (UEC) called for registration of political parties in March, but the attempt failed because of financial difficulties and obstacles to membership imposed by the UEC regulations.

Kaung Myint Htut was 13-years-old when he was arrested following his involvement in the 1988 democracy uprising. He was arrested three times between 1988 and 1990 before he was sentenced to six years imprisonment in 1991.

He said he hoped his fellow student activists of the 1988 Generation who are in prison understand his involvement in the elections.

Coming from the ruling military hierarchy, however, Aung Thein Lin background is very different. He was a major in the military in 1988 and later became the commander of Light Infantry Division 101 and then deputy minister of Industry-2 as well as an executive of the junta's mass organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), which was

transformed into the USDP in April. He became mayor of Rangoon in 2003.

Aung Thein Lin's association with the junta and the USDA may not help him win votes since the USDA under its modern guise as the USDP achieved infamy in the eyes of the general public in the past 17 years.

Political observers in Rangoon suggest that if the USDP does not cheat in the polls, even Aung Thein Lin might find it difficult to compete with Kaung Myint Htut, his main rival.

"Major U Aung Thein Lin's political background as a general and member of the USDA stands in direct contrast with that of Kaung Myint Htut, who was a teenage political prisoner because of his principled stand for human rights against the military's injustice," said a businessman in South Okkalapa who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"The National Democratic Force (NDF) candidate [running in the same constituency] is also young, but when I read her campaign statements, I saw she has no political background, so I think Kaung Myint Htut will be a much stronger candidate," he said.

But Aung Thein Lin has a much greater advantage than other candidates in his constituency since he can use his government position, state property and projects and the state media to support his campaign.

As the election approaches, state-run-newspapers have frequently published pictures of Aung Thein Lin and other USDP leaders inspecting and opening state construction projects in the country, describing them as government officials rather than USDP leaders.

Aung Thein Lin's picture was published in October when he attended opening ceremonies of construction projects in his constituency along with the commander of the Rangoon Regional Military Command, Brig-Gen Tun Than.

"I expect that I will definitely win my seat at this year's election," Aung Thein Lin said in a report in The Myanmar Times weekly published by USDP candidate Tin Tun Oo. "If I win in South Okkalapa I will focus on speeding up development in my constituency. I believe that other elected representatives will try to do the same."

However, Kaung Myint Htut told The Irrawaddy he is optimistic even though Aung Thein Lin is a heavyweight.

"Since the USDP candidates are government ministers and officials, they have more opportunities to promote their campaigns than other candidates," he said. "But what the Burmese people are really looking for is someone who will stand before them and advocate for basic rights that are free and fair."

"So I believe they will vote for me and the other candidates rather than U Aung Thein Lin and the USDP," he said.