

Burmese democracy champions are doing just what makes the country's ruling generals happy. They're fighting over a bamboo hat.

A bamboo hat?

Exactly. More specifically, it is a traditional Burmese bamboo hat usually used by farmers in rural areas. But before we go into the details of the fight, remember that the leaders of the country's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy and the recently formed breakaway political party, the National Democratic Force (NDF), were, only a few months ago, sitting together in the NLD headquarters at Shwegondaing, Rangoon.

They were working together to achieve the goal of democracy, and many of the main players had faced the same bitter experience of imprisonment by the junta. They were democracy's champions.

Now, the hat story. You may have seen some of the beautiful portraits of a smiling Aung San Suu Kyi wearing a *kha mauk* (in Burmese) hat. Those popular images of the detained NLD leader will never be erased from the pages of Burmese history: Suu Kyi and the *kha mauk*, the *kha mauk* and the NLD, the NLD and its loyal voters who marked "X" beside the *kha mauk* symbol on voting ballots, which also carried other parties' symbols.

"Mark 'X' beside the hat, achieve the people's victory," became a memorable slogan during elections in the past two decades. With the hat symbol, the NLD won the election by a landslide. So the hat is now an historical symbol. It belonged to the NLD. That's the background.

Here's the news: the NDF registered its party with a *kha mauk* image in June, although it was not a facsimile copy.

Senior NLD leaders said the NDF “stole” their *kha mauk* symbol.

Here's the verbal dueling in the turf war between NLD and NDF leaders in recent days.

Nyan Win, a NLD spokesperson, said, “Their symbol is an imitation of ours.”

Khin Maung Swe, a founding NDF leader, said, “The symbol is not the property of the NLD, and it was not copyrighted.”

Nyan Win: “We have evidence that the *kha mauk* is the symbol of the NLD. It is misleading and against the law for another party to use an imitation of our symbol.”

Khin Maung Swe: “They are quite different. The design of our hat symbol is different from that of the old NLD and ours includes two overlapping stars above the hat.”

Ohn Kyaing, an NLD executive member, said, “The NDF’s seal is a *kha mauk* under two stars. However, a *kha mauk* is a *kha mauk*, and it was the recognized logo of the NLD in the last election.”

Dr Than Nyein, another NDF leader, said: “U Khin Maung Swe was the person who suggested to choose the *kha mauk* as a symbol for the NLD in the 1990 elections.”

Nyan Win said: “Our letter of complaint to the Election Commission office asks that the NDF not be allowed to use the *kha mauk* symbol.”

Dr. Than Nyein said: “The Election Commission will decide whether the NDF can use the symbol or not.”

Former friends are now fighting each other, and a common foe has become the judge and jury.

But, the fight over the hat is not really about the hat. Underneath the fight, there is an ideological issue— the wisdom of taking part in the junta's upcoming elections or not to contest. That was one divisive issue that separated different NLD factions before it voted not to contest and register as a political party.

One faction held to their core principles: the upcoming election won't be free and fair; the electoral laws are repressive and would require the expulsion of Suu Kyi and political prisoners; the 2008 Constitution is undemocratic; all political prisoners must be released.

Yet other NLD politicians saw the elections as an opportunity to create a small democratic space within the future parliament, even though they understood the election would not be truly democratic. The NDF is part of that camp.

So as a result, the NLD was divided over the election. So are other pro-democracy groups. But, at this stage it seems that some opposition factions are their own worst enemies, and the generals must be enjoying the farce.

What the people really want to see is a united democratic opposition that can effectively counter the powerful military government.

But this hat fight is a symbol of disunity among the democratic opposition.