

RANGOON—Tension between Muslims and Buddhists in a Rangoon township rise following following Mayor Aung Thein Lin's change of policy to allow a mosque to be built in the township, which has now been overruled by another government agency.



His order supporting the mosque construction was overturned this week by the Rangoon City Development Committee (RCDC), further complicating politics in the township.

Residents in Rangoon's South Okkalapa Township accused Aung Thein Lin, a candidate of the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), of allowing the construction of a mosque in the township's Ward No.7 in exchange for Muslim votes in the Nov. 7 election.

Local observers said the construction of the mosque had been halted since 2003 due to objections from local residents. The change in policy has led to tension between Muslims and Buddhists in the area, they said.

“Aung Thein Lin said he would allow the mosque construction to resume work if he could get 2,000 USDP members to vote for him. So, some people got together and arranged for what he wanted, and we got permission,” said a Muslim resident in Ward No. 7.

Tension between Muslims and Buddhists reportedly began when Buddhists in South Okkalapa Township, led by the chairman of Ward No. 7, sent a formal complaint against the mosque construction to Aung Thein Lin.

“The three-story mosque is located at the entrance of Thiri Zayar street in Ward No. 7. It's a big building. Buddhists in South Okkalapa have opposed it since the beginning of its construction. But, the Rangoon mayor recently granted permission because he wanted votes,” said a Buddhist who lives in the township's Ward No. 12.

On Oct. 6, the RCDC issued an emergency statement to suspend the current mosque construction work. The statement came out after speculations that the USDP could actually lose votes because of the mayor's action, said a source.

The Muslims in South Okklapa are reportedly unhappy with the order and now blame the Buddhist who complained about the mosque.

“Now we have to stop the construction so the agreement was in vain,” said a Muslim university student in South Okkalapa.

Aung Thein Lin has reportedly lost support in the constituency because of the issue.

“We never liked him. Now, those who said they would vote for him, including members of Ward Peace and Development Council and USDP members, are even thinking about whether they should choose him,” said a resident in Ward. No. 7.

A candidate who will also contest the election in South Okkalapa said he was concerned about a possible religious riot as a consequence of Aung Thein Lin's electioneering.

A source in Rangoon told The Irrawaddy that the Rangoon mayor recently donated 30 million kyat (US \$33,708) to a mosque construction fund to appease the Muslims who were unhappy with the suspension order. The money came from the Rangoon CDC, said the source, who asked for anonymity.

Article 58 (c) of the People's Parliament Electoral Law states that whoever is found guilty of uttering, making speeches, making declarations and instigating to vote or not to vote on grounds of race and religion or by abetment of such acts shall, on conviction, be punishable with imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or a fine not exceeding 100,000 kyat or both.

According to Article 12 (A4) of the Political Parties Registration Law, a party shall not have the right to exist as a political party if it cannot abstain from the abuse of religion for political ends.