

The chairman of the newly formed All Mon Regions Democratic Party (AMRDP), Nai Ngwe Thein, has predicted that the ethnic Mon party will win a majority of votes in Mon State in the Nov. 7 general election.

He added that as a former assistant director from the Ministry of Education in Mon State, he has many students in Mon State who support him and who will encourage others to vote for his party.

According to an AMRDP member who wished to remain anonymous, the party is becoming more prominent and is receiving more widespread support from people in Mon State.

Speaking to The Irrawaddy on Tuesday, he said the platform of support includes many Buddhist monks, youths and human rights/ democracy activists. "They support the AMRDP because they believe that the Mon people should have a political party representing them in next month's election," he said.

The head of the underground Mon Young Monks Organization in Moulmein said, "It doesn't matter whether or not a Mon party can achieve rights for our people through the election, it is our duty to help our ethnic party win more votes."

Traditionally in Mon State, Buddhist monks play a powerful role in shaping politics and influencing the public. Mon politicians frequently seek approval from the sangha [Buddhist monkhood] before they announce their candidacy or form a political party.

"Whenever I go to a village on an election campaign, I first pay respects to the monks at a local monastery," said Nai Ngwe Thein. "They are influential and can advise people who to vote for. Sometimes they even offer our party members food, because we are running our election campaign on our own funds."

The AMRDP is registered to run 34 candidates to contest seven Mon townships in the general election. The party leaders have said that they face many difficulties in organizing their supporters during this election campaign because Burmese special branch police routinely follow their members to their homes and question them. They say that only the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is given free rein to campaign.

The USDP and the National Unity Party (NUP) will contest every constituency in all 10 townships of Mon State. The Democratic Party (Myanmar) and the National Democratic Force are registered to contest a handful of seats.

Meanwhile, four well-known Mon singers, including Pamo Ka Chan and Jan Yit, have composed songs for the AMRDP to aid its election campaign. The songs are due to be released on Oct. 15.

"They have been working in a studio in Rangoon and have produced CDs for distribution," said Nai Ngwe Thein.

Several sources have told The Irrawaddy that opinion is divided among the Mon population on whether to participate in or boycott the election. Convention wisdom dictates that a majority of Mon inside Burma are inclined to vote, whereas overseas and exiled Mon are encouraging a boycott of the election.

The Mon Affairs Union—an umbrella group of Mon organizations both inside and outside Burma, including the New Mon State Party—released a statement last month urging a boycott, claiming that the election will not be free and fair, and saying that it will not bring about a political voice for the people of Mon State after the election.

In August, the Mon National Council, which is based in Australia, sent an open letter to the party leaders of AMRDP, saying that Nai Ngwe Thein's political agenda is “creating confusion” among the Mon people ahead of the election.

However, Min Nwe Soe, the secretary of AMRDP, said, “We know there are many restrictions in the electoral laws, but we are facing up to them. Our belief is that Mon people need to be represented by a political party. It is important to bring up the Mon issue at parliament. If there are no Mon parliamentarians, no one will speak up for us.”