

Burmese parties planning to participate in the election with the intention of focusing on the people's betterment, believing they could make changes from within, should not gamble on the fate of the nation.

By the first week of August, 40 political parties had registered for the upcoming Burmese elections and others were still waiting for their applications to be approved.

One of the most recent parties to be registered was a Kachin political party called the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UDPKS), while three other Kachin political parties are still waiting to hear if their applications are successful.

It is well known that the UDPKS leaders are former members of Kachin State Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), who were asked by their USDA superiors to form a political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in their State.

The regime is doubtless also busy creating other regional and ethnic based political parties of the USDP. The regime is dividing not only political parties but also communities and societies into pieces in order to claim that the military is the only institution which the country needs for leadership.

Having excluded the main stream pro-democracy forces such as the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) from the electoral process, the regime seems intent on generating confusion with the registration of more than a dozen national-level parties. Many of them are actually pro-regime parties and apart from the USDP and National Unity Party (NUP) are only national in name, without any countrywide membership base.

While most of those national level parties are struggling with the imposed limitations of the electoral laws and directives of the regime in order to function properly, the USDP and the NUP are apparently beginning their election campaigning.

They are also campaigning hard with a surprising accusation from the NUP that the USDP is abusing State power and facilities and claiming that the USDP is using its unique position within the ruling military regime to commandeer planes, helicopters and budgets for its election campaign.

Commenting on the current pre-election environment for political parties, Chit Hlaing, former foreign minister of the Burma Socialist Programme Party government and a leading member of the NUP, also challenged the USDP, saying "one has to run on the plain and another has to run up the mountain". He proposed that there should be a "level playground."

Chit Hlaing said his party would not need to be afraid of anyone if there were correct voting

procedures.

In fact, the NUP and USDP are blood brothers, both born of military dictators. And both are the biggest political parties in the so-called "only game in town."

No other registered political party can compete with the NUP and USDP in terms of members, district, township and village level party branches, party funds, and the favor received by various levels of state authority.

The NUP is a descendant of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) which in different forms ruled the country for 26 years. The BSPP was forced to disband by the nation-wide pro-democracy uprising of 1988, when it formed a proxy, the NUP, to compete with the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 1990 election.

The NUP lost miserably to the NLD. While the NUP accuses the USDP of corruption, it is at the same time trying to clear its own name, claiming that it has returned all funds and property to the State, although there is no proof of this.

The more recently formed USDP is blatantly intertwined with the military regime, which shamelessly created the party from the USDA, the mass civil association masquerading as an independent body but headed by Snr-Gen Than Shwe. USDP members are notorious for harassing and crushing pro-democracy activists.

The USDA organized mass meetings across the country, calling for support for the regime's national convention and denouncing Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD.

Win Sein, Railway and Transportation Minister and a former USDA executive member, publicly called for the elimination of Suu Kyi.

USDA members were responsible for the deadly attack on Suu Kyi's motorcade in 2003 and participated in the brutal suppression of the so called Saffron Revolution in 2007.

When the USDA became the USDP this year, headed by Prime Minister Thein Sein, a USDA spokesman announced: "From now, there will not be the USDA but we will continue as a political party and we have officially transferred all of our assets to the party according to the central executive committee's decision."

Since the USDA was formed by the State, its properties and assets became the State's.

Membership fees were also collected from civil servants, teachers and students for whom membership of the USDA was compulsorily.

The USDP has no right to inherit USDA assets, and now the NUP is complaining about their use by the USDP in the election campaign—in effect, complaints against the government.

The NUP's criticism of the USDP may be a signal that it has already lost the protection of the

regime.

The NUP might have originally hoped that it would be the leading party, and with the formation of the USDP it may have thought that Than Shwe would at least grant it the status of an opposition party in parliament.

But as it witnesses the VIP treatment accorded to the USDP by the regime, it may have given up all hope of making it into parliament at all.

There is ample evidence to support the claim that Than Shwe has carefully planned the continuation of his rule. Witness the biased electoral laws, the restrictions on political party registration act, the directives related to party organizing and oppressive decrees such as 2/88 (banning gatherings of more than five persons) and 5/96 (outlawing debates or discussions on the country's constitution).

Only recently, State-owned newspapers warned that those who are critical of the election and its process are punishable with up to 20 years imprisonment.

Than Shwe does not trust any political party, even those of his former bosses, who have been supporting his road map for the last 20 years.

Among those parties is the NUP, which, while backing the constitution and road map, may still have loyalties to the late Gen Ne Win, whom Than Shwe deposed.

While the NLD has been consistently harassed, intimidated and finally forced to disband by the regime over the last 20 years, the NUP has been able to run its offices across the country and work without any limitations.

Nevertheless, it has now come out with criticisms of the pre-election environment, positions which other political parties not supporting the regime would certainly agree with. The question must therefore be asked: if the NUP, close as it has been to the junta, is feeling vulnerable and is aware of the unfair situation, and is uttering criticism which falls on deaf ears, how will the other political parties fare?

One of these parties, the United Democratic Party (UDP), courageously openly challenges the regime's unfair rules and regulations. But if all these voices go unheard, and if there is no reform, then shouldn't they boycott the election rather than take part in an election where they themselves are witness to the unfair and undemocratic pre-election environment and their dream of at least being able to oppose the regime in parliament is already vanishing?

It is not too late for the democratic political forces which are thinking of participating in the election to review their pro-election policies. Their political survival depends on them moving swiftly to join hand in hand with Suu Kyi and to opt for the boycott strategy.

Those parties that plan to participate with the intention of focusing on the people's betterment, believing they could make changes from within, should not gamble on the fate of the nation with

their dreams.

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