



Khin Maung Swe, 67, is the leader of the National Democratic Force (NDF), a political party formed by former members of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD). After the NLD decided to boycott this year's election, Khin Maung Swe and a few other leading NLD members created the new party to contest the November polls, claiming that the election could pave the way for gradual democratic changes in Burma. With candidates running for 161 seats, the NDF is the third largest party in the election, following the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party and another pro-regime party.

In this interview with The Irrawaddy, Khin Maung Swe says that the NDF is ready to work together with Suu Kyi if she is released after the election and is even willing to disband if that is what she wants. While denying reports that his party is receiving financial support from Myanmar Egress, an NGO allegedly affiliated with Burmese military officials, he defends the NDF's right to receive support from any legal organization in the country. He also speaks about the NDF's alliance with other pro-democracy parties.

Question: *Did you recently say that you would scrap the NDF if Aung San Suu Kyi asks you to when she is released?*

Answer: Yes, I did say that. We are willing to dismantle the NDF, but will do so only if that is what Daw Suu desires. She won't easily understand us once she is freed. But we have other NLD leaders like U Aung Shwe and U Lwin who can explain that we have been on the right track. If she still disagrees with us at that time, then that's up to her. But she is most welcome if she wants to work together with us, because she is our leader and also the leader of Burma's democratic struggle.

Q: *Do you mean that you want her to join the NDF? Or do you want to solve disagreements with her before the election?*

A: I mean we can still work together in politics, even if we have different approaches. Our current disagreements on this coming election may not be reconciled for now. After all, the reason we disagree is that we are neither her subservient followers nor her personal

worshippers. We just have a very high regard for her shrewdness and her integrity. We are always ready to follow her leadership if we are able to work together toward the common goal of democracy and human rights after the election. But our negotiations will only happen if she wants to talk with us. There would be no point in shouting out loud that we want to talk with her. So it depends on her. But even if the differences persist, our attitude toward her as the democratic icon of Burma will not change at all.

Q: *We have heard that there is still a lot of resentment toward the NDF among NLD members. Would you still be willing to mend fences with the NLD if your party wins in the election?*

A: Even if we win, we are willing to scrap the NDF banner if we can reach an agreement with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to cooperate. We would be ready to do anything she desires. Those NLD members who hate us are merely succumbing to a personality cult. If the person they worship said OK, then they would go along with her decision.

Q: *Do you think that Suu Kyi might be willing to cooperate with you?*

A: I am not sure about that right now. But when she sees Burma's political landscape after she is released, I think she will at least talk with us. That's our hope. She may not be the leader of our party, but she is the leader of the Burmese public.

Q: *We have heard some harsh criticism of Suu Kyi's decision not to join the polls from people who later became NDF party members. Do these people share your views on cooperating with her?*

A: I can say that within the NDF, there is no one who would not agree to cooperate with Daw Suu. Also, what Daw Suu said was that it would be a violation of citizen's rights if people were forced to vote in this election. She never urged people not to vote.

Q: *There are some accusations that you and other NDF leaders are using Suu Kyi's name to benefit your party. What is your reaction to this charge?*

A: The name of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is common property. She represents 50 million Burmese people. If NLD members want a monopoly over her name and want to narrowly confine her role as the leader of the NLD, then they are wrong.

Q: *With just three weeks to go before the election, how is your party doing in terms of its budget and manpower?*

A: Our party can't even finance the campaign costs of our candidates, who are mostly self-supporting. Our headquarter has no money at all. But in terms of manpower, small groups of party members are touring villages and towns for the campaign.

Q: *Is it true that Myanmar Egress has financially backed your party? Why did you accept candidates close to that organization?*

A: No one representing Myanmar Egress has come us to give us any money. But certain individuals, like U Hla Maung Shwe [vice president of Myanmar Egress and the brother of a high-ranking military official], have personally helped some of our candidates financially. Why should we worry about Egress? Is it trading in opium? If Egress offered to donate money to us as a legal organization, we would not decline it. Also, regarding our candidates, please remember that we had only 15 days to register them. We struggled to get through that process. There are two or three candidates who joined us because Egress told them that we are a pro-democracy party.

Q: *Do you think the public should be clearly informed of which groups you are affiliated with and why some of your candidates are accepting funds from the Egress?*

A: Yes, the media should clarify these things for the public. But why should we publicize who is giving us such and such an amount of money while all the other parties are silent about this? After all, we are allowed to accept clean money from legal organizations within the country. We cannot reveal these issues before the election because people who are helping us may face threats. You know, there are parties linked with the ruling authorities. Through these links, these parties are receiving money from organizations like Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The media should point out these things instead of targeting us for accepting clean money from ordinary civilians.

Q: *Does your party share the political views of Egress? For example, one of its leaders, Nay Win Maung, recently stated that a majority of Burma's population supported the 2008 Constitution.*

A: What Nay Win Maung says is his own personal view only. It has nothing to do with us. I don't know what survey that is based on. All we know about Egress is that it supports good governance, does capacity-building training and sends students abroad. But as for us, we have repeatedly criticized that the Constitution was forcibly concocted and is undemocratic. We have made it clear that our policies are based on the principles of social liberalism and a market-oriented mixed economy that will lead to individual property rights, a full-blown market economy and democratic norms.

Q: *Do you think these things will really be achievable after the election?*

A: That depends on whether our country's revenues from natural resources are managed transparently. We will try to triple the current 3 percent budget for education and health. We will try to do that from within parliament.

Q: *But the parliament will likely be dominated by the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and other pro-regime parties.*

A: We cannot take it for granted that the USDP members of parliament will call all the shots. We have recently formed an alliance with five other democratic parties. This alliance is contesting 250 seats in the upper and lower houses of parliament. If we win all of these seats, we would all be in a viable position in the parliament.

Q: *What is the basis of this alliance? Isn't it just a symbolic gesture of solidarity?*

A: Our major allies are the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party and the Union Democratic Party, based in Rangoon. The reason behind this alliance is that we want to send a message to the public that we are all pro-democracy parties. If the people want to walk on the path of democracy, they should vote for us.

We also want to make it clear that we will work on the basis of equality for all ethnic peoples, acknowledging their aspiration to self-determination. We also share the view that we can strive towards the well-being of all the people only if we have in place a system of checks and balances governing the judicial, legislative and executive powers. When we are in parliament, we will try to work case by case with the joint cooperation of this party alliance.

Q: *With less than a month to go until the election, who would you say your main opponents are?*

A: In fact, we don't view any party as our rival. Our real opponents would be the laws that don't benefit the people. We will fight against these laws no matter which party promotes them. I mean the kind of law that maintains a monopoly over the economy of the country.

Q: *What about your relation with current NLD leaders? Do you still share any common principles with them?*

A: Yes, we share the desire for human rights and democracy. On what other basis could we talk with each other? But we are running for the election and they are boycotting it. The difference is that they are not moving on but just talking about what they want, while we are going forward in a practical way.

Our efforts to create a democracy will succeed only after we alleviate the country's social, economic and political ills. Only with the growth of the middle class can a strong basis for democracy be built. Democracy won't magically happen overnight after the election, nor will military rule suddenly vanish. So we will focus on "economic democracy" first, which we hope we can get within five years. Then we can proceed towards "social democracy" and "political democracy." If we work with political conviction, we will achieve these goals within the next decade, I believe.

Q: *Are you still confident that your party can win in this election?*

A: Sure, because we see signs indicating that, based on the responses from the public in several places like Kengtung, in Shan State. As long as there is no vote fraud or intimidation during the election, I am confident that we can win in this election.