



“At this point, if we turn our back on the 1990 election results and talk about taking part in the 2010 election, the NLD will be shamed,” U Win Tin tells The Irrawaddy.

U Win Tin is a founding member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which was formed in 1988. He is also a well-known journalist in Burma. He was detained in 1989 and served 19 years in prison. He was released in September 2008. He spoke to The Irrawaddy on the issues of international economic sanctions, the 2010 election, the regime’s 2008 Constitution and the current position of the NLD.

Question: *How much does the lifting of Western economic sanctions on Burma relate to national reconciliation?*

Answer: In our politics, these two factors are related. If there is a US dialogue, the military regime is involved in the process. The sanctions now control them somewhat. Even if the sanctions can’t be said to strengthen us [the NLD], it is at least a rein on the junta. It’s something like tying down a brutal giant with many ropes so that we can survive.

I think there are three kinds of sanctions. First, there are sanctions that can affect ordinary people. For example, the US sanction [on the importation of Burmese textile products] caused unemployment in the garment factories. Second, there are sanctions that can directly affect the military generals and their cronies. Third, there are many countries that imposed arms embargos on Burma. Among these three kinds, we don’t have anything to say about the sanctions affecting the military and its generals, but we will step in to talk about easing the sanctions that affect the people.

I think if there is an ease in sanctions, it can probably lead to national reconciliation. The new US policy will be carried out while maintaining the existing sanctions. It is a drama which will include a variety of scripts, such as sadness, pleasure, and Nhit Par Thwar [a dance with a main actor and actress]. The last script of the drama, we expect, will be Zat Paung Khan [a peaceful end]. Therefore, we can’t predict now the role of sanctions in political dialogue and reconciliation. Things will unfold more before the 2010 election.

Q: *What is your opinion on the announcement of the regime to hold the election as scheduled, and their preparations?*

A: on March 27, Snr-Gen Than Shwe said he will not review the Constitution. Recently, he

again declared that the Constitution has already been approved by the people and the elections will be held systematically. He said that political parties must respect the Constitution, and parties that work responsibly will be protected by the government. It means that if they believe some political parties are not responsible in their work, they will take action against the parties. These two facts are significant.

His words can be translated into these points: Political parties must keep quiet. All the principles have been set out for the pre-election campaigns: don't talk about the demands from [the NLD's] Shwegondine Declaration. I think he also warned other politicians, including from the National Unity Party (NUP) [transformed from the former ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party], who said the Constitution can be amended in the future. It looks like the parties must follow their way.

Q: *What do you think the democratic forces and ethnic organizations should do in regard to the election?*

A: There is still a way out. Although they denied a review of the Constitution, I still have hope for a political dialogue. If we demand it with a united stand, I think we have a way left. I think Snr-Gen Than Shwe's words are related to the new US Burma policy. He bluntly responded to the US demands on the election and its relations with the opposition groups. But politics is an unending process no matter how decisive the general is in his words. The situation is changing. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also asked the US to engage with both sides. Whatever Snr-Gen Than Shwe says, I expect the US policy will open a way for relations with the regime.

Q: *What are your views on some politicians who want to take part in the election?*

A: Regarding this election, my stand is even a bit different from the NLD. I accept the NLD's stand on the Shwegondine Declaration. The statement demands a release of all political prisoners, a review of the Constitution and to hold a free and fair election under international supervision. What we mainly want is political dialogue.

U Thu Wai and U Khin Maung Gyi of the NUP said that the situation will change in the next 10 to 15 years. They will take part in the election. They didn't consult with us. I don't agree that we should take part in the election.

We must create a situation conducive to the participation of all parties. We believe that all the parties should demand a more flexible Constitution at the outset. If the Constitution is amended, we can have a democratic space to some extent and can talk and work in parliament. If we accept the current situation, no amendments can be made, and there will be no rights for democratic forces or ethnic nationalities.

Yes, the Constitution offers a parliament where we can have a political platform from which to talk. But we must understand that under this Constitution, we can't make any decision or move forward. That's why I say we must demand a review of the Constitution before the election.

Q: *What do you want to amend in the 2008 constitution?*

A: There are about a dozen things that should be amended. What I can say now is we can't accept the sixth basic principle of the Constitution: "the national political leadership role" of the military. The fact that more than 75 percent of the parliamentary vote is needed to amend the Constitution should be amended. Regarding the rights of ethnic nationalities, the fact that the President will appoint the chairmen of the Hluttaws (Parliament) in the Regions and States should be amended. That is important for the ethnic nationalities.

Q: *What are your thoughts on the debate inside the NLD over whether the party should take part in the election?*

A: Our leaders have their roots in the democratic struggle. I led a Burmese media union and spent about 20 years in jail. Therefore, I have evaluated the situation in terms of the goals of our democratic struggle. I think and talk in this way.

A central issue is the results of the 1990 election [a landslide win for the NLD]. We can't throw away the results like a piece of paper or a leaf. In the NLD, there are people who have safeguarded the party for the past 20 years. For me, I do things based on the spirit I had during the democratic struggle in 1988. Some party leaders base their thinking on rationality. There are differences in our ways of thinking and working.

Some in the party think the regime can change its attitude, but I don't think so. We have different views in this respect. They think the regime can become flexible and take positive steps and make some compromises. But the regime is stubborn, and it tries to do all that it can to hold on to power.

The youth organizations, monks, democratic forces and ethnic nationalities outside the country are all talking about a boycott of the election. Inside the country, there are some political groups that talk about contesting the election, but they are not a strong force even though they have important leaders.

Democratic and ethnic forces inside and outside the country are decisively saying "No" to the election. On the other hand, some so-called third forces and a few cease-fire armed ethnic groups are willing to take part.

The NLD won the election in 1990, but to date the party hasn't been allowed to carry out the election results. At this point, if we turn our back on the 1990 election results and talk about taking part in the new election, the NLD will be shamed. In the future, the political scenario will be clearer, after the NLD finally decides whether to contest the election or not.