



Burma's Union Election Commission (EC) approved the registration of the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) on May 26. Irrawaddy reporter Ko Htwe interviewed the SNDP Chairman, Sai Aik Pao, about his party's activities and political objectives and the reason to contest the election.

Since then the SNDP has planned to contest the coming election in several states and divisions, campaigning with a policy calling for freedom from oppression and equality of basic social rights.

Born in Nam Kham in northern Shan State, Sai Aik Pao was the General Secretary of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) led by Hkun Htun Oo, who is currently in Putao prison in Kachin State serving a 93-year prison term. He resigned from the SNLD about ten years ago.

Question: As a Shan party, in which areas will the SNDP mainly contest the election?

Answer: Our main focus is Shan State, but we will contest the election in Kachin State, Kayah State and Mandalay Division too.

Q: You mean you will campaign throughout Shan State?

A: We will contest seats in 40 townships in Shan State and we will also contest seats in three townships in Kayah State where many Shan people reside. We will also run in at least six townships in Kachin State. Party's signboards are already in place and we have already formed township-level executive committees.

Q: *What kind of preparations are you making for the election?*

A: We are doing campaign activities.

Q: *Have you encountered any obstacles to campaigning?*

A: We haven't faced any difficulties so far. Police from special branch's information unit have been following us but haven't given us any trouble. They've even helped us when we needed it.

Q: *What is the situation like in the area you are campaigning? Are you able to do what you want and get things done?*

A: Yes, things are okay. We can do as much work as the Wa parties can.

Q: *Which party will be your main opponent?*

A: Well ... our main opponents will be the powerful political parties.

Q: *You mean parties like the Union Solidarity and Development Party [a proxy party of the ruling government]?*

A: Yes, they are the strongest and have solid financial backing.

Q: *What is your main reason for taking part in the election?*

A: Some parts of the 2008 constitution are unique. The 1974 Constitution used only a unicameral system but the current one allows a bicameral legislature with the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) and Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House). This similar to the American federal system. The United States is made up of 50 States and each state can send two representatives to the Senate no matter how small or big the State is. We will also have a similar system in which each State and Division can have equal representation in the Upper House, which offers 12 seats to each State and Division regardless of size. So it is a fair system, which is one of the reasons we are going to contest this election.

Another thing the 2008 Constitution gives us are the Region and State Parliaments that are made up of two representatives from each township. We will also have a Prime Minister and other ministers governing each State. We see the 2008 Constitution as a chance, as a big opportunity for our ethnic nationalities.

The 2008 Constitution is quite similar to the 1947 constitution that Gen. Aung San [the independence leader assassinated in 1947] and other leaders created. It distinguishes between the mandate of the central government and that of the States. State mandates include farming, forestry, fisheries, agriculture, animal husbandry, education, industry, ie economic activity at the municipal level. As for electric power, state governments can employ small and medium electricity generating enterprises. We have a lot of authority. This is our opportunity. If we don't compete in the election, we can't expect anything. But if we do, we can expect a state government that favors our interests.

Q: *What would you like to say regarding a review of the 2008 Constitution?*

A: That is the business of those who want to criticize the 2008 constitution. What I want to say is that this is an opportunity for us. After the election, we are going to have a state government with a state parliament and a Prime Minister. The flaw I see in the Constitution is that it guarantees the military an automatic 25 percent of seats in the state parliament that do not have to be contested. The civilian population will still have 75 percent of the representatives, however, so I don't see this as a problem.

Q: You were a member of the SNLD before, but it has decided not to take part in the election and yet you will. Why?

A: When we contested the 1990 election there was no constitution. This time we have a constitution. As I have explained earlier, we do have a lot of opportunities, so if we don't form a Shan political party, who will take care of Shan State? We are working with our hearts full of patriotism. If we don't contest, who will speak for Shan State? It's no use discussing it at teashops, we have to debate it in parliament. This is our opportunity. We will demand our rights, and we can talk about them within the framework of the constitution.

Q: What is your position on national reconciliation?

A: Let's talk about it in parliament.

Q: Is the SNDP determined to raise this issue in parliament?

A: Yes, we are. Unless we are united in building national reconciliation, we will fall further behind other countries. Even within ASEAN countries, Burma lags far behind the others. After the election, we must discuss how to bring prosperity to our country and not waste our time fighting each other. We should be fine by then.

Q: Do you have plans to form an alliance or work with any other party?

A: We will make friends with every party and avoid making enemies out of them. Our only concern is to serve the national interest.

Q: What do you think about the EC not yet approving registration of Dr. Tuja's Kachin Party?

A: I don't know.

Q: *What do you think of the movement behind the Union Solidarity and Development Party?*

A: They are running their party just like we are running ours.

Q: *Do you have the same opportunities as them?*

A: Yes, we do. In fact, we can operate better than them. For instance, we can make organizing tours to villages. We just need to inform and submit our request to the township EC one week prior to our trip.

Q: *What is your party's position on political prisoners?*

A: I think the new government will grant a general amnesty to political prisoners after the election. We have to do this. Putting political prisoners in jails is wasting our work force. If these people are free, we can listen to their thoughts, and that can be useful. By working together, we can build friendship and trust between different ethnic nationalities.

Q: *What do you think of the imprisonment of SNLD leader Hkun Htun Oo?*

A: I think there will be general amnesty after the election. Everybody will be happy then.

Q: *Does your party's policy mainly focus on the interests of Shan nationalities and Shan State?*

A: We are not only focused on Shan State but will be working for other States and Divisions as

well as for the whole Union. I trust that some of our party representatives will be seated in the lower and upper houses so we will be working together.

Q: *Do you believe you can win this election in the seats your party contests?*

A: Of course I believe it! I wouldn't be campaigning if I didn't believe we had a chance. I can't say we will win in every constituency we contest, however. It is rather like playing football, we are playing in the hope that we will win.