***The Karen Peoples Party (KPP), which was formed by ethnic Karen living in Rangoon and Irrawaddy divisions, is one of the political parties seeking to contest in the upcoming election in Burma. A striking aspect of the KPP is that its leaders are retired military and civilian officials. The party's chairman, Saw Htun Aung Myint, once served as a colonel in the Burmese Navy, and its secretary general, Saw Say Wah, is a former police colonel.***

***In a recent interview with Htet Aung, chief reporter of The Irrawaddy's election desk, Saw Say Wah expressed hope for a free and fair election and explained why his party would be staying out of the polls in Karen State.***

**Question:** Your party's national policy states the importance of transforming the current political and economic conditions, including the country's administration. But your party also said that the things which need immediate attention are national stability, rule of law and the basic welfare of the public. What do you mean by national stability?

**Answer:** The wide social gap has adversely affected the country's stability and harmony. What I wish to say is, we have lost peace because we have lost unity. The development gap between different regions is one of the causes of these things. We also need to resolve ethnic conflicts.

**Q:** In what particular ways would your party handle the conflicts in Karen State, where some groups have reached a cease-fire agreement with the government and some have not?

**A:** Our party is not a well-established party yet. It is in the process of building itself. We are just sketching out our party's policies. While we were government employees, we were faithful to the government as individuals. At this point, too, we will work toward the country's development. Having said that, ethnic conflicts on the border are unavoidable issues. But now we are in no position to handle these problems—the capacity to do that is still beyond our reach. Once we have strengthened ourselves, we will cope with these issues gradually.

**Q:** What is your view of the government's plan to change armed cease-fire groups into border

guard forces?

**A:** We need to take a balanced view of that. Since the country must have a single army in accord with the [2008] Constitution, the government wants to have all armed groups under its administration. But on the other hand, it seems that they [Karen armed groups] will not disarm themselves until and unless they are assured of winning a uniform economic, political and social standard. Some groups may, for many different reasons, choose to give up their arms without achieving this goal, while others will not. So it will take time to resolve these issues gradually in a political way.

**Q:** While some Karen live in cities, most make their living as farmers in rural areas. What is your party's economic policy, and how will it help the rural population?

**A:** Our country would be better off under a full-blown market economy. Equality of rights is also an important principle. That's our party's basic policy.

**Q:** The government claims that Burma has had a market economy for the past 20 years. Are you satisfied with current economic conditions? Which parts of the economy do you think are weak?

**A:** In our view, the market economy is not fully developed. It has been based on favoritism towards certain groups. The rules don't apply the same way to everyone, so equal opportunities and equal freedom have been lacking.

**Q:** Do you mean that we should be able to do business as freely as our own capacity and financial means allow?

**A:** Not exactly. If we give capitalists completely free rein, then the poor will be left behind. We also need to consider the needs of workers and farmers. We will need a balance.

**Q:** In its party platform, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by Prime Minister Thein Sein, says that it will uphold “the right of farmers to work on their farmland,” but says nothing about their right to own their land. This suggests that the government will remain the landowner. What is your party's view on this issue?

**A:** Most Karen are farmers, so they want this issue of ownership to be made much clearer. Only with a clear sense of ownership will farmers have an incentive to increase their productivity. Without real ownership, the farmers may find themselves in difficult straits, since the government can distribute or confiscate lands at its own discretion. That's why our party's policy on this issue is that farmers should have a right to own their farmland.

**Q:** As part of the development of Burma's market economy, wealthy businessmen have started expanding into the agricultural sector. With their large financial assets, they have acquired farmlands to grow cash crops. Eventually, they will be able to monopolize the whole agricultural sector. What are your views on this situation?

**A:** The state wants to develop mechanized farming. But that has not succeeded yet because, as you know, most farmers are poor. We must encourage mechanized farming and simultaneously make sure that those who continue to use traditional farming methods don't have their land confiscated.

**Q:** How many Karen people live in Burma? And which parts of the country are they living in? Will your party only run in areas with large concentrations of Karen? Which major parties will you have to compete with in the election?

**A:** There is an estimated population of 8 million Karen in Burma. We can say 10 million if we include mixed Karen intermarried with people from other ethnic groups. An estimated number of more than 55,000 Karen, which is 0.1 percentage of country's population, are living in Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Pegu and Tenasserim divisions and Mon State. As a minority right [granted by the Constitution], we will have a Karen member of parliament [for Karen affairs] in those areas.

So we will desperately try to win seats in those areas which are crucial for the interests of Karen people. Our second priority is to win seats in the state and regional parliaments. But we will not run for seats in Karen State, where the situation remains complex due to border issues and armed ethnic issues. Our main competitors will be the USDP and the National Unity Party (NUP).

**Q:** The USDP is headed by the prime minister and several other ministers. During tours with government responsibilities, they are also rallying public support for their party. Some people complain that they should resign from their government posts and conduct campaigns at the same level as other political parties. What is your view on this?

**A:** We are not worried about that. From the very outset, this has been designed to maintain the government's control on power. They [the regime leaders] want to make a transition which suits them. We understand that. But if there is some sort of dishonesty in the election, the public will make its own judgments. If we do our best for the public, they will give us their support.

**Q:** Your party's leaders are mostly living in Rangoon and Irrawaddy divisions. How did they unite with each other and form a party?

**A:** It has taken us six years to set up a party. We started out as the Karen Development Committee, which is not, however, a legal entity. It was set up as a social organization for Karen people. From the outset, we knew that we wanted to form a political party if this kind of opportunity arose. Shortly after the endorsement of the 2008 Constitution, we had a discussion among ourselves. Mostly those from Rangoon participated in the discussions. After nearly 60 meetings, we were able to form a party.

**Q:** What message do you want to give to voters as a representative of the Karen People's Party?

**A:** I wish to express my hope that we will have a free and fair election. We want to tell the public not to engage in advanced voting, which is not in their control. We also wish to tell people not to

avoid voting, which can be problematic [for us]. So please make the right choice for the right person. That's our message to the people.