Early this month, six pro-democracy parties formed a political alliance to win the election and to work together in parliament. However, a few days after its formation, the alliance was shaken by a dispute over a donation to the National Democratic Force (NDF), the leading democratic party. The Myanmar Post, a local journal, reported that Hla Maung Shwe, a Rangoon-based businessman who is close to the ruling generals and an executive board member of the Union Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI), gave financial support to some candidates who will run under the flag of the NDF.

Htet Aung, chief reporter of The Irrawaddy’s election desk, interviewed Dr. Than Nyein, the chairman of the NDF, about the donation and the resignation of Party for Democracy and Peace (PDP).

He also interviewed Aung Than, the chairman of the PDP and a supreme court lawyer, about the PDP’s resignation from the alliance.

Interview with Dr Than Nyein:

**Question:** According to the Political Party Registration Law, parties are allowed to receive donations from individual citizens or organizations and to set up a business of their own in order to raise party funds. Why did the dispute over the money that your party received from a businessman occur?

**Dr Than Nyein:** A party can operate its activities only if they have funds. We received the money in accord with the law issued by the Election Commission. We can’t do anything which is outside the legal framework. In this case, only those who criticized us will know why they targeted us.

**Q:** Taking the example of elections in Burma and in the world, an election-related financial dispute among political parties usually happens only after the election. What do you think of the timing?

**A:** [Laughing] If it’s a real problem that needs to be tackled, we don’t hesitate to do it. But we don’t need to solve it if someone is just trying to make trouble for us on purpose.

**Q:** Hla Maung Shwe is a businessman widely known as having a close relation with the ruling generals, as well as one of the founders of Myanmar Egress, a social organization working in the field of education. What do you think his intention was when he talked to the media about his financial support of political parties?
A: He wrote a personal letter to apologize to us for what happened. In the letter, he explained that he didn’t give an interview to the Myanmar Post regarding his financial support, but he did talk to one of his friends about that. The journal got this information through his friend. Therefore, we don’t think that he had any intention to harm our party.

Q: Aung Than, the chairman of Party for Democracy and Peace (PDP), said the reason their party resigned from the six-party alliance is that from the legal point of view, the NDF can’t accept the money from Hla Maung Shwe who currently has a position in the UMFCCI, which is a junta’s institution, and it [the donation] can’t be in accord with the law. How do you respond to that?

A: The candidates that Hla Maung Shwe helped are less than five, and as far as I know, there may be two or three candidates [who received money from him]. In fact, he helped only a few candidates who are friendly with him. We can’t bar our candidates from receiving such financial support. However, we didn’t know about that in advance. Regarding the issue that U Hla Maung Shwe has a relation with the junta and has a position in a government institution, it is better to ask him directly and for me not to answer on his behalf.

We tried to increase our strength through an alliance of the democratic parties that have a vision that we can do work together for the betterment of the country. We took the responsibility to explain what we were doing honestly. The PDP secretary attended the meeting in which we explained the dispute to the alliance members. After accepting our explanation, the PDP secretary himself gave an interview to the media, saying that it was just a [his party’s] concern. But later, the party changed its mind and sent us a letter of resignation from the alliance. It is up to them, but we will continue to work for the unity of the democratic forces in the future.

Q: The current five-party alliance will contest the election in about 220 seats, or nearly one-third of the total 664 seats of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (a combination of the upper and lower assemblies). Do you see any effort to weaken the democratic alliance through the financial donation?

A: At this time, we see no indications of efforts to weaken our alliance. But we want to avoid such cases in the future.

Q: Do you plan to expand the alliance membership from the current five parties?

A: We have ongoing discussions. Currently, as the election is so close, we are busy with election campaigns, but in the post-election period we will continue to work at forming a democratic alliance in parliament.

Interview with Aung Than:
INTERVIEW

Q: If a businessman who donates money to a political party also holds a position in an institution which is part of the junta, what are the legal questions regarding the junta and the political party?

A: When political parties were allowed [by the junta] to form, there was information widely circulated in the public that the junta not only formed its own party but also would support the formation of other parties. Since then, the people have been confused about which parties receive the junta's support and which parties exist independently.

In this situation, U Hla Maung Shwe, the chairman of Myanmar Fisheries Federation, talked to the Myanmar Post and said that he gave financial support to the NDF. Because U Hla Maung Shwe has connections with the junta, we have to consider whether he is an independent individual or not. We need to analyze his intention on why he didn't donate to the junta-backed USDP, and why he donated to the party that is challenging the USDP. In the context of Burma, he can't do that because he holds a position in a institution formed by the junta.

Q: Should the Myanmar Fisheries Federation be defined as a junta institution?

A: Yes, it is. The UMFCCI, in which he is an executive board member, is an institution of the junta. To hold a position in the institution, you need the junta's nomination. Therefore, if a person takes a position, it is understood that the junta appointed him. A person like Hla Maung Shwe can't give financial support to a rival party of the USDP without the consent of the junta. Now, because we haven't seen any action taken by the junta against him, we concluded that this financial support has some strings attached.

From the beginning, the NDF has publicly declared that they face financial shortages. But within a very short period of the 14-day candidate registration process, the party managed to register more than 150 candidates.

If we do the math for the candidate registration costs to the party, based on 500,000 kyat (US $500) for each candidate, that is a lot of money. Therefore, if the party needed to pay something back for such financial support, we can't see it as an independent party and our central executive committee decided to resign from the six-party alliance.

According to the law, when parties receive donations, the money must be from the legal earnings of the donors, and it must not be [associated with the government] or with foreign assistance. However, we also needed to take into account the political image associated with the donations. When we look at the position of the donor, we see him as a controversial person.

Q: What if Hla Maung Shwe were an ordinary businessman not associated with any of the junta's institutions?

A: If so, there would be no problem. But in the current situation, an ordinary businessman wouldn't dare to speak out publicly about his donation to a political party. In this case, U Hla Maung Shwe made it public on his own. Therefore, there must be a reason behind it. In Burma, no businessman dare to do it. We must not forget to consider this point.