

The junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association and the National Unity Party seek Rohingya Muslim support by offering incentives in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships in northwestern Arakan State.

The regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and the National Unity Party (NUP) are seeking Rohingya Muslim support by offering incentives in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships in northwestern Arakan State.

Speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Wednesday, Arakan Project coordinator Chris Lewa said, “The Township Peace Development Chairman (TPDC) in Maungdaw Township for the first time attended a meeting of the leaders of the Rohingya madrassah (Koran-based schools) on Monday in Alel Than Kyaw in northern Arakan State to raise funds for the schools.

“The chairman offered a donation 400,000 kyat (US \$400) to the madrassah committee and 450 turbans for the students,” Lewa said. “This is first time I’ve ever heard of TPDC making a donation to the mosque in Arakan State.”

The USDA and NUP began campaigning in Arakan State about two months ago.

Tun Tun, an Arakanese who lives on the border of Bangladesh, said the NUP has targeted north and south Buthidaung Township. In that area, about NUP 40 members from Buthidaung have sought support village to village, offering low-income residents 2,000 kyat (\$2), rice and clothing. They are also telling residents they will provide them with temporary identity cards (ID) that would allow them to vote and to travel free in Arakan State.

He said that border authority officials are working with the campaign to provide the ID cards.

Sources in the area also said that Burmese authorities have brought in prominent pro-junta Muslim businessmen from Rangoon and Buthidaung to mobilize Rohingya support for the NUP, a party formed from the former Burma Socialist Programme Party led by former dictator Gen Ne Win.

The Rohingya are the second largest ethnic group in Arakan State, after the Arakanese. Rohingya are in the majority in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships in the northern part of the state. They comprise nearly 30 percent of the state's population of 2.75 million people.

Tin Soe, an editor with the Bangladesh-based *Kaladan News Network*, said the NUP and USDA discussed issuing ID cards to the Rohingya Muslim after a visit by Prime Minister Thein Sein and Deputy Prime Minister for Home Affairs Brigadier Gen Phone Swe to Arakan State in March.

"I believe that they are using the people during the election," he said. "I haven't seen any ID cards issued to the people. They're just talking about it." He said that USDA members have also talked about repairing the local mosque or building a new one.

According to the new electoral law, foreign registration ID card holders, people who being considered for citizenship and people holding a temporary identification card may vote if they are 18 or older.

In 2008, the Rohingya were allowed to vote in the constitutional referendum if they held temporary ID cards.

Normally, Rohingya are not recognized as citizens of Burma even though many were born in the country and have lived in northwestern Arakan State all their lives. In the past, many bribed authorities in Arakan State to get ID cards.

The Rohingya, a stateless minority people, face harsh treatment by Burmese authorities. They are prohibited from traveling outside Arakan State and are further marginalized by other discriminatory laws.

Meanwhile, a new Arakan political party, the Union of Myanmar National Force Arakan State Party, has been formed to compete in the election in Arakan State.

In the 1990 election, among 26 constituencies in Arakan State, 11 constituencies went to the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD). The ALD has said it will not take part in the election this year because it believes the 2008 Constitution is undemocratic.