

A convoy of cars and motorbikes flying their political flags started their regime-friendly campaign in Rangoon, Mandalay and other cities last week.



This was in spite of the fact that the political campaign period has not started yet, and the date for elections this year is still anybody's guess.

On June 10, a large crowd gathered near Theingyi Market in downtown Rangoon after seeing the political flags of the Union of Myanmar Federation of National Politics party (UMFNP), which feature the emblem of a peacock that is similar to the political symbol of the now-disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD) opposition party.

Within hours, rumors spread that an anti-government protest was taking place, but it was merely a peaceful stand-off between members of the party, the local police and a crowd of people, said 46-year-old Aye Lwin, a renegade 88 Generation student member who now leads the UMFNP.

"The police stopped our cars when they saw the flags," he said. "Gradually, a large crowd of people gathered around us and wanted to follow us to show their support," said Aye Lwin, who has been traveling around the country since 2005 and distributing pamphlets that condemn economic sanctions against Burma. He supports the election this year as a chance for positive change.

"I contacted the special police force for help to control the crowd, and I asked them to tell the local police to let us go," he said.

"People were just surprised to see them going around with their political flags," said an editor in Rangoon, describing the incident. "Since Aye Lwin and his guys have been enjoying a good relationship with the regime officials for some time, they don't seem to be concerned about the local police."

The police finally let Aye Lwin's convoy go, but a few days later officials with the Election Commission in Kamayut Township asked him to appear and sign a statement pledging that he would no longer carry out campaign activities that disrupt the state's law and order.

Aye Lwin said he did not sign the statement, and he made more political rounds in Mandalay and Sagaing divisions with motorbikes that carried party flags—a rare scene so far this year.

“When we saw peacock flags on the streets two days ago, we thought NLD members were taking to the streets, but it turned out to be Aye Lwin's group,” said a resident in Mandalay on Tuesday.

To date, 32 political parties have been officially registered by the Election Commission, which has a wide leeway in regulating activities through the regime's election laws.

Other political parties are conducting information tours across the country, but with the exception of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein, many of the parties do not enjoy the same degree of tolerance from the authorities as Aye Lwin's UMFNP.

“We would be immediately arrested if we go out on the streets now for a political activity,” said Phyo Min Thein, the chairman of the Union Democratic Party (UDP).

“We are not in a position yet to go out and campaign,” he said. “We just try to meet our old friends and tell them about what we're doing. The difference between Aye Lwin's and a party like ours is that he is seen as anti-democratic after having worked with the government.”

Since Aye Lwin is viewed as supporting the regime, his party is shunned by many opposition groups and even some foreign media based in Rangoon. However, he is often invited to meetings with European diplomats in Rangoon, most recently with the top US diplomat for Asia, Kurt Campbell, who was visiting the country last month.

“People like whatever Aung San Suu Kyi does, but they don't recognize legitimate political activities like mine,” Aye Lwin said.