

A leading member of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has told visiting Australian officials that the newly formed party has sufficient finances because it has inherited funds from the junta-backed civic organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), according to a source who attended the meeting but who spoke to The Irrawaddy on condition of anonymity.

The remarks were made by Myint Oo, a leading member of the USDP, which is headed by Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein, and told to Australia's Deputy Secretary of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Hugh Borrowman on Wednesday during their meeting in Rangoon.

The Australian Embassy in Rangoon would not comment about the meeting when The Irrawaddy contacted it on Thursday.

The meeting was also attended by representatives of three other political parties—the National Unity Party, the Democratic Party and the Union Democratic Party.

Myint Oo also told the Australian delegation that the USDP will provide the registration fees for some of their candidates, but that other candidates were in a financial position to cover the costs by themselves, the source said.

Parties must pay 500,000 kyat (US \$500) for each candidate that it fields in the election.

Short on funds and with limited manpower at their disposal, several political parties in Burma are looking to pool their resources ahead of this year's election. They say they are facing severe financial constraints that limit their ability to function effectively.

The USDA is a state-sponsored mass civic organization formed by the junta in 1993. It claims to have more than 24 million members nationwide, including civil servants and members of the military. The USDA Central Panel of Patrons include Snr-Gen Than Shwe, Prime Minister Thein Sein and other government ministers.

On April 29, Thein Sein and 26 ministers and senior officials formed the USDP to contest the election later this year. The Election Commission officially recognized the USDP as a political party on June 8.

Meanwhile, members of the USDA have been canvassing for donations for the new party. In addition, the USDA has recently offered small loans to many low-income workers and farmers around Rangoon, sources said. Stallholders who lost their businesses when Rangoon's Mingalar Market was destroyed by fire last month have been invited to apply for loans from the USDP.

Two members of the Election Commission, Dr. Tin Aung Aye and Win Kyi, met with the Australian officials in Naypyidaw on Tuesday, according to state-run newspapers.

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