

Just before Thu Wai, the chairman of Democratic Party (Myanmar), arrived on an organizing trip at Dala Township in Rangoon recently, he found police in civilian clothes waiting for him.



“What is your business here?” Thu Wai asked the police.

“We are here to help you if necessary,” a policeman said. In fact, they were there to intimidate people interested in his party.

“When policemen in civilian clothes showed up, the people were frightened and afraid to approach us,” Thu Wai said. “We heard that some of the locals were also questioned by authorities after we left.”

Thu Wai's party is one of the pro-democracy political parties contesting the country's first elections in twenty years. Some parties are now making tours across the country trying to increase their membership and explain their policies.

Party leaders like Thu Wai say that party activities are more difficult to carry out following the latest election rules prohibiting parties from displaying flags or marching and chanting slogans in procession before or after a meeting.

The Peace and Diversity Party in Rangoon and the potentially largest ethnic party, the Shan Nationals Democratic Party (SNDP), also have reported the presence of security personnel in their meetings with local people.

Nay Myo Wai, the leader of Peace and Diversity Party, told *The Irrawaddy* on Wednesday: “I organized a political talk in North Okkalapa Township in Rangoon last month. The police arrived saying they just wished to observe the situation. But seeing them, people did not show up.”

The SNDP, which plans to contest 40 out of 50 constituencies in Shan State and in several constituencies in Burma's northern Kachin State, made an organizing trip to a number of townships in Shan State last month and faced similar situations.

“As soon as a walkietalkie beeps, the people know that intelligence personnel are among them. So they leave,” said Sai Tun Aye, an SNDP member.

All parties seeking seats in the national parliament are required to have at least 1,000 members within 90 days of being registered to contest in the polls.

Party officials of the Democratic Party(Myanmar) and the Peace and Diversity party said that they have now enough members and will submit their list to the election commission this week.

Nay Myo Wai said he will submit a list with about 1,200 members, perhaps by Thursday.

Election rules require a 500,000 kyat (US \$500) fee for each candidate who contests in a constituency.

“Money is the most difficult issue for us now,” Thu Wai said. “My party wants to contest at least 300 seats out of 320 in the National Parliament. But we have no money. I now have only 100

candidates who can pay the fee themselves. Others who wish to be candidates for our party are searching for money on their own.”

“We will contest mainly in lower Burma and only in major cities in ethnic areas,” he said.

With a strong campaign by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) led by regime Prime Minister Thein Sein, some pro-democracy parties are considering an informal electoral alliance in order to better their chances at winning seats.

News reports this week said that the Rangoon-based National Democratic Force, the Democratic Party (Myanmar) and the Union Democratic Party (UDP) would form an alliance.

But, NDF, a splinter party led by former senior members of the disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Democratic Party (Myanmar), said there was no specific plan for an alliance.

Khin Maung Swe, the political leader of the NDF which received government approval to participate in the election last Saturday, said, “At the moment, we still have no concrete plan to form an alliance with any party. We have to wait and see until after the candidate registration at the election commission.”

Another NDF official said the party would focus on seats for constituencies in major cities such as Rangoon and Mandalay and also in the capitals of Kachin State, Shan State and Mon State.

Rejecting the idea of an electoral alliance, Nay Myo Wai said: “If the pro-democracy parties share a democratic spirit, then it should be automatically understood that they won't contest in the same areas and townships.”

“People won't admit that they don't have no enough candidates to field due to financial difficulties and a shortage of man power. So are spreading word that they won't contest in

ethnic areas so as not to compete with ethnic parties. It is just to woo the ethnic people.”

Thirty-eight new political parties and five existing parties plan to contest the elections sometime later this year.

The Obama administration on Monday said the Burmese general election process is “flawed” and that the military government has not taken any step towards establishing democracy in the country.

The election date has not been set and the regime has maintained tight restrictions on political dissent in the country and has not provided any working space for political parties to communicate with the public.

“The nearer the election, the more difficulties we have,” Thu Wai said.