

The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) led by Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein opened all its offices nationwide, including the party headquarters in Napyidaw, on Friday morning.



Thein Sein attended the opening ceremony in Naypidaw, together with other government ministers, who are now the executive members of the USDP. All were dressed in green and white—the typical colors of the uniforms worn by students and teachers in Burma.

Speaking at the opening of the Rangoon party office, the city's mayor, Aung Thein Linn, said the party would not accept any form of interference in the election. Charges that the election would not be free and fair were mere fabrications, he said.

According to Aung Thein Linn, expected to be a USDP candidate in Rangoon's South Okkalapa township, the party has a membership of 20 million people.

Several USDP candidates officiated at the opening of offices in the Rangoon townships in which they will be standing for election. Although party officials said recently that students are not encouraged to join in party politics, a group of at least 500 people including students and teachers were instructed to join the party's divisional-level offices.

Members of the Myanmar [Burma] Maternal and Child Welfare Association led by wives of junta officials and also members of Swan Arr Shin—thugs used by the regime to crack down on dissidents—also joined in opening ceremonies.

Residents in Rangoon said that ordinary civilians were also being recruited to join the party. "Many people in my neighborhood go there [to party offices] since they heard that they would be

paid 1,000kyat [US 1\$] and served tea if they join," said one resident.

At a ceremony opening the USDP headquarters in Mandalay, Aung Kyaw Thar, the party leader for the Mandalay division, claimed the party has a membership of 2.8 million people in the whole Mandalay division.

In ceremonies in Mandalay, members of ethnic groups such as Mon and Kokang were also asked to attend, together with businessmen and shopkeepers from the city's market. Mandalay mayor Phone Zaw Han, a USDP candidate for election to the regional parliament, and Minister of Health Dr. Kyaw Myint also attended.

One of the party pamphlets distributed in ceremonies in Mandalay reads: "In the election, it is important to use the ballot wisely and correctly."

It continues: "Various forms of systems and governments have changed under different periods. At this coming transition, priority must be given to the peace, tranquility and well-being of the nation and the people."

The party officials were instructed to play the party's songs over loudspeakers during the opening of the USDP offices.

"All offices across the country were opened with those songs," said a party official. The songs contained lines such as "The USDP is the party that loves the nation. It is the party that would safeguard the country. It is as brave as the king of lions," the official said.

An official in Rangoon said that the USDP was violating the regime's election laws forbidding political parties from holding large gatherings and by playing songs over loudspeakers.

The military regime created the USDP on Apr. 29, when Thein Sein and 26 ministers and senior officials officially formed the party out of the regime's mass civic organization called the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA).

"They shamelessly changed the USDA into a political party," said a resident of Rangoon's Pazundaung township. "No doubt only the USDP will win the election, no matter whoever participates in it."

According to party sources, retired army colonels and majors will also run in the election as candidates. Some regime proxy parties under different names have also been set up by former military and police officials.

The deadline for registration of candidates is Aug. 30. One party official said the list of USDP candidates had already been drawn up.