

PERSPECTIVE

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Understanding Ethnic Political Parties in Myanmar: The Cases of Mon and Karen States

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ethnic parties lost to the National League for Democracy in the 2015 Myanmar general elections. Nowadays, across the country, they are consolidating their positions. This trend is more obvious in Mon State and Karen State.
- In Mon State, Mon political parties and other political forces have reached an historic agreement to merge into a single party.
- In Karen State, three out of the four political parties in the state have already merged. But much more needs to be done to forge them into a united Karen party.
- In order to defeat the NLD, or even to secure half of the constituencies in their respective states, Mon and Karen political parties may have to consider either cooperation or alliance with the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which is currently the main opposition party.

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In preparation for Myanmar's 2020 general elections, two major Mon political parties and the third force of Mon activists who have called for the unification of ethnic-Mon based parties reached a historic five-point agreement¹ on 6 August 2018 to create a new Mon party.² This agreement seems to have shaken into action other ethnic political parties from various ethnic and dialectic groups that suffered an embarrassing loss to the Burman-dominated National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 2015 general elections.

In fact, ethnic parties' mergers are not completely new. Since before the 2015 general elections, ethnic political parties were urged by members of their communities and religious leaders to unite, but this never materialized to a significant extent. And after the 2015 elections, two Kayah political parties active in Kayah State merged into the Kayah State Democratic Party³ in August 2017. This merger was followed by the mergers in February 2018 of four Karen political parties⁴ active in Karen State into the Karen National Democratic Party. However, Kayah State is small, and the Karen political parties that merged are not powerful.⁵

But the merger of nearly all Mon parties and other Mon political forces in Mon State into one party is drawing more attention from the mass media and is serving as a wake-up call to ethnic political parties across the country. Karen political parties headquartered in Yangon and in Hpa-An are now striving again to succeed in the merger process that failed in 2016.⁶ Four Kachin political parties also announced that they had reached an agreement on 11 August 2018 to merge into a single party called 'the Kachin State Party.'⁷ Seeing the current political environment,⁸ many observers have reckoned that ethnic political parties are growing stronger and will become effective contenders in the upcoming elections.

MON STATE IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Starting with Myanmar's 1990 general elections, Mon political parties have played an important role in Mon State. In the 1990 elections, the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF) contested seats in Mon State and also Karen State, where Mon people stand out as the second most numerous ethnic group.⁹ The MNDF won five seats—four in Mon State out of 20 seats in all, and one in Karen State.¹⁰ It was thus the fifth largest party out of 93 parties in Myanmar vying for seats that year.

In the 2010 general elections, the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP) contested seats in Mon and Karen States and won three seats in the former, out of 12 in all, and one in the latter¹¹ in the Upper House. It also won three seats in the Lower House out of 10 in all and nine seats out of 20 in the Mon and Karen State Assemblies. It was again the fifth largest party in terms of seats won out of the 37 political parties contesting the polls.

In the 2015 general elections, three Mon political parties – Mon National Party (MNP), the AMRDP and the Women's Party (Mon) – contested in Mon State. However, all Mon parties were severely defeated by the NLD in their own state, winning only 4 seats out of 42 in the three levels of the legislative branch.

Table I. Election results of three general elections in Mon State (1990, 2010 & 2015)

No.	Constituency	1990 election ¹²		2010 election ¹³									2015 election ¹⁴							
				Upper		Lower			State				Upper		Lower	State				
		NLD	MDF	USDP	AMDP	USDP	NUP	AMP	USDP	NUP	AMP	NLD	MNP	NLD	USDP	MNP	AMRDP			
1.	Mawlamyine	2	-	2	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	2	-	1	2	-	-	-		
2.	Kyaikmaraw	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	1	-	-		
3.	Chaungzon	2	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	-	1		
4.	Thanbyuzayat	1	1	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	2	-	-	-		
5.	Mudon	1	1	1		1	-		1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	-		
6.	Ye	1	1	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	2	1	1	1	1	-	1	-		
7.	Thaton	2	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	1	-	1	2	-	-	-		
8.	Paung	2	-	1	-	-	1	-		1	1	1	-	1	2	-	-	-		
9.	Kyaikto	2	-	1	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	1	2	-	-	-		
10.	Bilin	2	-	1	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	1	2	-	-	-		
	Total	16	4	9	3	6	1	3	11	2	7	11	1	10	16	1	2	1		
	Grand Total	20		12		10			20			12		10		20				

THE CURRENT POLITICAL CONTEXT IN MON STATE

Mawlamyine, the capital of Mon State, is known for its strong nationalism and for being the birthplace of the 969 movement,¹⁵ which served as the roots of the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) in 2013.¹⁶ Since nationalist Buddhist monks were inclined toward the USDP,¹⁷ some observers reckoned that the NLD might lose votes in the state. But instead, the NLD won a landslide victory in Mon State in 2015. Currently, there are three Mon political parties headquartered in Mawlamyine, but observers have mainly focused on the MNP and the AMRDP. The MNP, the successor to the MNDP,¹⁸ boycotted the 2010 elections. The AMRDP, set up in 2010,¹⁹ participated in the elections that year. Both parties contested the 2015 elections but lost heavily to the NLD. In the 2017 by-elections, both again contested in Chaungzon constituency but lost to the USDP.²⁰ Mon activists and monks have repeatedly called for Mon political parties since before 2015 to merge into a single party collectively representing the Mon population. However, the Mon parties did not reach an agreement until the first half of 2018. Some members of Mon parties together with activists known as the third force left the existing parties and decided to set up a new Mon party, the Mon National Representative Party (MNRP),²¹ to put pressure on the MNP and the AMRDP. Finally, the MNP and the AMRDP agreed to merge²² on 21 July 2018, and representatives from the MNRP decided to abandon their plan to set up a new party. On 6 August 2018, as a historical milestone for Mon political parties, representatives from the combined party and representatives from the third force reached an agreement to form a single political party.²³ The new name of the party has not been chosen yet.

KAREN STATE IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Compared to Mon political parties, Karen political parties seem to be unstable and more fragmented. In the 1990 general elections, three Karen parties²⁴ put up candidates, but only the Karen State National Organization KSNO²⁵ won a seat.

In the 2010 general elections, three Karen political parties²⁶ had candidates. They won five seats out of twelve in the Upper House of the Union Parliament for Karen state; three out of seven in the Lower House; and seven out of fourteen in the Karen State Assembly. In comparison, the USDP won six, four and six seats, respectively, at the three levels.

In the 2015 general elections, six Karen political parties²⁷ contested seats in Karen State. However, as in Mon State, ethnic political parties in Karen State were severely defeated by the NLD. They took only one seat in the Karen State Assembly.²⁸ This meant that the Karen parties' losses were worse than those of the Mon parties.

Table II. Winners of three elections in Karen state (1990, 2010 & 2015)

No.	Constituency	1990 elections ²⁹					2010 elections ³⁰											2015 elections ³¹								
		NL D	K S N O	P O L L U 32	D O N U 33	M N F	Upper					Lower			State			Upper		Lower		State				
							U S D P	P S D P	K S P D D P	S K D D P	A M D D P	U S D P	P S D P	K S P D P	U S D P	P S D P	K S P D P	K S D D P	A M D D P	N L D	U S D P	N L D	U S D P	N L D	U S D P	K S P D P
1.	Hpa-An	3	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	2	-	-
2.	Hlaingbwe	1	1	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	2	-	-
3.	Hpapun	2	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	2	-
4.	Thandaunggyi	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	1
5.	Myawaddy	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	2	-	-
6.	Kawkareik	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	2	-	1	-	2	-
7.	Kyain Seikgyi	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2	-	1	-	1	1	-
	Total	10	1	1	1	1	6	3	1	1	1	4	2	1	6	4	2	1	1	1	2	6	1	1	3	1
	Grand Total	14					12					7			14			12		7		14				

THE CURRENT POLITICAL CONTEXT IN KAREN STATE

Like Mon State, Karen State is known as a stronghold of Buddhist nationalism.³⁴ It was shaken by religious disputes between Buddhists and Christians when Buddhists began building a stupa in a church compound in Hpa-An Township on 21 August 2015.³⁵ In addition, Karen State is home to several Karen ethnic armed groups – such as the Karen National Union, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and the Border Guard Force³⁶ -- that have ceasefires with the government. However, these circumstances did not have negative electoral consequences for the NLD. After their embarrassing losses in the 2015 general elections, all Karen political parties, including those headquartered in Hpa-An and those headquartered in Yangon, gathered in Yangon in January 2016³⁷ to discuss the merger process, without any success. In February 2018, four Karen political parties headquartered in the state – the PSDP, KDP, KSDDP and KUDP - decided to merge into a new party, called the Karen National Democratic Party (KNDP).³⁸ However, at the last minute, the powerful PSDP decided not to completely join in

the merger process, saying that it would serve as a back-up party to the KNDP in the 2020 general elections. Instead, PSDP contributed party members to the KNDP, one of whom served as chairperson of the new party.³⁹ Another two Karen parties, the KNP and the KPP,⁴⁰ are headquartered in Yangon, but their main focus is outside Karen State. In an interview with the KPP in Yangon on 8 August 2018, I learnt that Karen political parties were again holding meetings to discuss the creation of a single Karen party to represent the whole Karen people.

POTENTIAL WINNERS IN MON AND KAREN STATES IN THE 2020 ELECTIONS?

An analysis of 2015 voting figures for the Lower House released by the UEC indicates that the combined total of votes received by Mon and Karen parties in their respective constituencies in each state was lower than those received by the NLD. The combined vote results indicate that both Mon and Karen parties will not have an easy time catching up with the NLD. Assuming that all Mon parties had combined their support, Mon parties would have won only one seat. But had the votes received by all Mon parties and by the USDP been combined, they would have won up to six seats out of 10 seats. Similar results would occur on the same assumption in Karen State. Had Karen parties combined their ballots, they would have won only one seat, but had the votes received by all Karen parties and the USDP been combined, together they would have won up to three out of seven seats. The tabulations below for Mon and Karen States indicate total numbers of ballots received by the NLD and by all ethnic parties in Lower House races and then by the NLD and by all ethnic parties together with the USDP.

Table III. Comparison table of combined votes of Mon parties as opposed to the NLD and combined votes of Mon parties and the USDP as opposed to the NLD (Lower House)

2015 General Elections					
No.	Constituencies	NLD	Mon parties (MNP, AMRDP, WP-Mon)	NLD	Mon parties (MNP, AMRDP, WP-Mon) + USDP
1.	Mawlamyine	75,151	5,817	75,151	36,029
2.	Kyaikmaraw	21,447	15,404	21,447	33,423
3.	Chaungzon	23,580	13,101	23,580	29,714
4.	Thanbyuzayat	23,889	12,889	23,889	25,889
5.	Mudon	28,663	18,127	28,663	32,484
6.	Ye	30,406	31,755	30,406	42,955
7.	Thaton	48,283	-	48,283	23,107
8.	Paung	32,831	11,440	32,831	34,188
9.	Kyaikto	42,139	2,165	42,139	22,839
10.	Bilin	35,341	-	35,341	22,446

Table IV. Comparison table of combined votes of Karen parties as opposed to the NLD and combined votes of Karen parties and the USDP as opposed to the NLD (Lower House)

2015 General Elections					
No.	Constituencies	NLD	Karen Parties (PSP, KDP, KPP, KNP)	NLD	Karen Parties (PSP, KDP, KPP, KNP) + USDP
1.	Hpa-An	71,281	20,280	71,281	55,272
2.	Hlaingbwe	31,290	12,333	31,290	29,455
3.	Hpapun	(3,988)	404	3,988	5,635
4.	Thandaunggyi	13,247	13,986	13,247	20,632
5.	Myawaddy	21,738	3,714	21,738	14,384
6.	Kawkareik	21,728	7,727	21,728	25,055
7.	Kyain Seikgyi	11,551	2,107	11,551	11,010

CONCLUSION

The NLD is under intense scrutiny by analysts within the country,⁴¹ with the slow pace of the economy, the political turmoil in Rakhine State, and the stalled and uncertain peace process being referred to as its key challenges. The 2017 by-elections⁴² were a clear signal to the NLD to make reforms and do better. However, despite the loss of votes over Chaungzon⁴³ in Mon State, the NLD has again alienated local people in Kayah State by pushing ahead with the erecting of a statue of General Aung San in Loikaw, the state capital, in July 2018.⁴⁴ Taking advantage of the situation, the USDP is now engaging more with ethnic political parties.⁴⁵ It has announced that it will not contend in Rakhine State and Shan State in the coming by-elections on 3 November 2018,⁴⁶ signaling that it may further extend its non-competition policy in elections in ethnic regions to the 2020 general elections.⁴⁷

The 2015 general election data indicate that a merger of Mon parties and a merger of Karen parties may not be enough to effectively contend with the NLD in Mon and Karen States. However, making a strategic alliance or some kind of arrangement with the USDP may produce stronger outcomes for ethnic parties. Current political developments concerning ethnic parties obviously threaten the NLD's position in Mon and Karen States in the 2020 general elections. But given the fact that those parties⁴⁸ believed to be close to the USDP failed in the last general elections, it is uncertain if ethnic political parties will decide to make a risky alliance with a USDP led by former generals from the Myanmar Armed Forces.

¹ “The agreement on the emergence of a single Mon political party,” Royal Hinthar Hotel, Mawlamyine, 06 August 2018: 1) The merger and the emergence of a single Mon political party is agreed upon. 2) The composition of numbers of different levels is agreed. 3) One out of 13 proposed names is to be chosen as the name of new Mon party. 4) The rest of (Mon political force) are welcomed to the new party. 5) More discussions are to take place.

² Field Research Mission, meeting with Mon political parties in Mawlamyine, Mon State on 07 August 2018

³ BNI Multi Media Group, “New Kayah State party officially registered,” 15 August 2017, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/karenni-state/item/3373-new-kayah-state-party-officially-registered.html>. The new party is the result of a merger between the Kayah Unity Democracy Party and the All Nationals’ Democracy Party (Kayah State).

⁴ The Myanmar Times, “Four political parties merge in Kayin State,” 06 February 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/four-political-parties-merge-kayin-state.html>. Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party (PDSP), Karen Democratic Party (KDP), the Karen State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP) and the Karen Unity Democratic Party (KUDP) agreed to be merged.

⁵ Field Research Mission, meeting with Karen political parties in Hpa-An, Karen state on 08 August 2018. The PSDP, one of the powerful Karen parties, quit the merger process at the last minute, saying that it wanted to continue to maintain its party’s name while serving as an auxiliary party of the newly founded KNDP, to which it would also contribute human resources to KNDP.

⁶ BNI Multimedia Group, “Karen Political Parties to Unite,” 04 February 2016, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/mon-state/item/1458-karen-political-parties-to-unite.html>

⁷ BNI Multi Media Group, “Kachin parties come together by establishing Kachin State Party (KSP),” 13 August 2018, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/kachin-parties-come-together-establishing-kachin-state-party-ksp> The Kachin Democratic Party (KDP), the Kachin State Democracy Party (KSDDP), the Kachin National Congress (KNC), and the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UDPKS) have agreed to abolish their parties and to participate in politics as the new KSP.

⁸ The Myanmar Times, “NLD government to face tougher challenges in 2018,” 04 January 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/nld-government-face-tougher-challenges-2018.html>

⁹ According to the 1983 Census, 57.1 % Karen (361,544), 17.1 % Mon (112,137), 14.1 Burmese (89,587) lived in Karen State. Please note that the latest 2014 Census still has not mentioned race. Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, “1983 Population Census: Karen State,” p. 14 & p. 15 (http://www.dop.gov.mm/sites/dop.gov.mm/files/publication_docs/1983_karan_census_report.pdf)

¹⁰ The MNDF won in Kyaikmaraw (2), Mudon (2), Ye (1), Thanbyuzayat (2) in Mon state and Kawkaik (2) in Karen state 1990 general elections. “1990 multi-party democracy general elections,” Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangyaung (2), P. 33

¹¹ Upper House: Chaungzon, Thanbyuzayat, Ye in Mon State & Kawkaik (2) in Karen State; Lower House: Chaungzon, Thanbyuzayat, Ye; State Assembly: Kyaikmaraw (2), Chaungzon (1), Thanbyuzayat (2), Mudon (2), Ye (1), Ye (2), Paung (2) in Mon State & Kawkaik (2) in Karen State were won by AMRDP in the 2010 general elections. Burma Fund UN Office, “Burma’s 2010 elections: A Comprehensive Report,” January 2011, P. 33

¹² 1990 MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY GENERAL ELECTIONS, Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangyaung-2, 01 February 2003, p. 23 (http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990_elections.htm)

¹³ Union Election Commission (<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၀အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>)

¹⁴ Union Election Commission (<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၅အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>)

¹⁵ Field Research Mission, meeting with Mya Zedi Sayadaw Bhadana Vimala Buddhi, Mawlamyine, Mon State, 07 August 2018.

¹⁶ The Myanmar Times, “Ma Ba Tha to celebrate its birthday,” 25 May 2016, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/20498-ma-ba-tha-to-celebrate-its-birthday.html>

¹⁷ Reuters, “Myanmar radical monk endorses ruling party in election, raps opposition,” 04 October 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics/myanmar-radical-monk-endorses-ruling-party-in-election-raps-opposition-idUSKCN0RY08I20151004>

¹⁸ The Irrawaddy, “Mon National Party (MNP),” <https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/party/mon-national-party-mnp>

¹⁹ The Irrawaddy, “All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP),” <https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/party/all-mon-regions-democracy-party-amdp>

²⁰ Mon News Agency, “USDP wins Chaungzon seat by over 7,000 votes,” 03 April 2017, <http://monnews.org/2017/04/03/usdp-wins-chaungzon-seat-by-over-7000-votes/>

²¹ 7-Day Daily Burmese, “Two Mon parties agree to merge,” 01 July 2018, <http://www.7daydaily.com/story/130143>

²² The Myanmar Times, “Two ethnic Mon parties merge for 2020 election,” 03 July 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/two-ethnic-mon-parties-merge-2020-election.html>

²³ 7-Day Daily, “Three Mon parties agreed to be merged,” 07 August 2018, <http://www.7daydaily.com/story/133462>

²⁴ Three Karen political parties participated in the 1990 general elections—the Karen State National Organization (KSNO), the Union Karen League (UKL) and the Karen National Congress for Democracy (KNCD)

²⁵ The KSNO won in Hlaingbwe (1) in 1990 general elections. “1990 multi-party democracy general elections,” Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangaung (2), P. 37

²⁶ Three Karen political parties in the 2010 general elections—the Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP), the Karen People’s Party (KPP), and the Karen State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP)

²⁷ Six Karen political parties participated in the 2015 general elections:- the PSDP, the KSDDP, the Karen Democratic Party (KDP), the Karen United Democratic Party (KUDP), headquartered in Hpa-An, and the KPP and the Karen National Party (KNP), headquartered in Yangon

²⁸ Karen News, “NLD Win Karen State As Karen Political Parties Fail,” 16 November 2015, <http://karennews.org/2015/11/nld-win-karen-state-as-karen-political-parties-fail/>

²⁹ 1990 MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY GENERAL ELECTIONS, Khin Kyaw Han, MP-NLD, Yenangaung-2, 01 February 2003, p. 23 (http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/1990_elections.htm)

³⁰ Union Election Commission (<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၀အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>)

³¹ Union Election Commission (<http://www.uecmyanmar.org/pages.php?pagename=၂၀၁၅အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲ>)

³² Patriotic Old Comrades League

³³ Democratic Organization for Kayan National Unity

³⁴ The Myanmar Times, “Kayin tells Muslims to report all travel plans,” 26 September 2017, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/kayin-tells-muslims-report-all-travel-plans.html>

³⁵ The Myanmar Times, “Minister promises Christians removal of dream-inspired stupa,” 08 September 2015, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/16360-minister-promises-christians-removal-of-dream-inspired-stupa.html>

³⁶ The Myanmar Times, “Kayin State’s armed groups: Reunification or separation?” 27 October 2014, <https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/12076-kayin-state-s-armed-groups-reunification-or-separation.html>

³⁷ Karen News, “Five Karen Political Parties to Unite Into One,” 29 January 2016, <http://karennews.org/2016/01/five-karen-political-parties-to-unite-into-one/>

³⁸ The Myanmar Times, “Four political parties merge in Kayin State,” 06 February 2018, 06 February 2018 <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/four-political-parties-merge-kayin-state.html>

³⁹ Field Research Mission, meeting with Karen political parties in Hpa-An on 08 August 2018

⁴⁰ The KPP is the oldest Karen party, founded in May 2010, and the only Karen political party that won a seat in Karen State in the 2015 elections.

⁴¹ The Myanmar Times, “NLD Government to face tougher challenges in 2018,” 04 January 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/nld-government-face-tougher-challenges-2018.html>

⁴² The Irrawaddy, “NLD Should Take By-election Results as a Wake-Up Call,” 04 April 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/nld-take-election-result-wake-call.html>

⁴³ Frontier Myanmar, ”NLD must heed by-election lessons,” 04 April 2017, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/nld-must-heed-by-election-lessons>

⁴⁴ The Myanmar Times, “Locals protest against General Aung San statue,” <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/locals-protest-against-general-aung-san-statue.html>

⁴⁵ Union Solidarity and Development Party, “USDP meets with Karen political parties,” 26 May 2018 (<http://www.usdp.org.mm/?cat=7>)

⁴⁶ USDP, “Announcement on approving candidates for 2018 by-election,” 12 July 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/pyikhinephyomyanmar/>

⁴⁷ The Irrawaddy, “USDP Talks 2020 Elections, Peace Process,” 11 July 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/made-ready-fulfill-wishes-expectations-needs-people-usdp>

⁴⁸ The NDF, NDP, and SNDP won no seats in the 2015 general elections; they were viewed as being closer to USDP.

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