

All is farce when it comes to Burma's newly released election laws. However, it wasn't unexpected. If the laws had been even a little fair, it would have been like a fantasy dream come true.

The question now is how the opposition groups, especially the National League for Democracy (NLD), will proceed within the framework of the laws.

Detained Aung San Suu Kyi and more than 2,000 political prisoners are barred from all election rights: from contesting in the election to being a member or leader of a political party to casting a vote. "Unjust" and "repressive" are the words Suu Kyi used to describe the laws in a meeting with her lawyers on Thursday.

Ironically, junta authorities have given a green light to the reopening of the offices of Suu Kyi's NLD. But don't be fooled by that: the junta wants the NLD to contest the elections, but not under Suu Kyi's leadership.

The party registration law has put additional pressure on the NLD and other parties, which have 60 days to register with the Election Commission. If it registers, the party will have to expel its leader, Suu Kyi, in accordance with the law, or risk dissolution. One of the main ethnic parties, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, also will have to expel its leader, Hkun Htun Oo, who is serving a lengthy prison sentence.

If political parties choose not to contest the election, they will be dissolved under the law, which requires parties to contest in at least three constituencies. The NLD has no choice but to conform to the law, if it wants to remain a viable opposition in which its leaders' voices can be heard. Also, without the party as base of operation, individual leaders will be even more vulnerable to harassment, intimidation and arrests.

Practically speaking, the more political parties that contest in the election, the more legitimacy the junta gains. The generals are also better prepared in this election, trying to do everything possible to ensure the NLD doesn't pull an upset like it did in the 1990 election, where it swept to victory in a landslide.

The 17 members of the Election Commission, which is chaired by former army general Thein

Soe, were handpicked by the junta. The huge junta-backed civic group, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, is in the process of forming a spin-off political party or parties to take part in the election. Expect them to play dirty and do everything they can to ensure victory for their candidates.

The NLD and other main opposition parties are in a box with no way out. If they contest, they will lose; if they don't contest, they will vanish from the scene. And now they have less than 60 days to make a decision.

As for outside pressure or new strategies, it seems all efforts are floundering. The US's new pro-engagement policy has not convinced the junta to make even the smallest concession or compromise.

"The US approach was to try to encourage domestic dialogue between the key stakeholders, and the recent promulgation of the election criteria doesn't leave much room for such a dialogue," US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said in Bangkok on Friday.

"We're very disappointed, and we are concerned. It's very regrettable. This is not what we had hoped for, and it is a setback," said Campbell, who met with high-ranking generals last year.

As the election looms closer, more pressure and demands will be made on the junta, including the release of Suu Kyi. But they won't have any impact.

The regime is determined to continue down its infamous road map. So, what next?

In responding to the unfair election laws, Suu Kyi said, "The people and political forces have to respond united to such an unjust law." Is that her signal that the NLD and other parties should not contest in the election?

The NLD and other parties are facing the classic Shakespearean question: to be, or not to be?

For the NLD, whatever it decides to do, it has nothing to win. For the junta, it looks like it has nothing to lose.

Kyaw Zwa Moe is managing editor of The Irrawaddy magazine. He can be reached at kyawzwa@irrawaddy.org