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BANGKOK — Is pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi condemning the opposition party that she heads in military-ruled Burma to political irrelevance or, worse still, a burial ahead of forthcoming elections?

That is the question gnawing at the National League for Democracy (NLD), whose 20-member central executive committee and 110-member central committee are set to decide on March 29 if the party will contest this year's poll.

The tough decision for the party to make follows Suu Kyi's unequivocal statement asking her party to boycott Burma's first general election in two decades.

Suu Kyi, who has been shut away for over 14 of the past 20 years, conveyed her views on Mar. 23 to her party leadership through Nyan Win, her lawyer. "She will never accept registration (of the NLD as party contesting the poll) under unjust laws," Nyan Win said, following a visit to Suu Kyi's lakeside colonial home in Rangoon, the former capital, where the Nobel Peace laureate is under house arrest.

"But her personal opinion is not to give orders or instructions to the NLD," the lawyer was quoted as saying. "She has asked the NLD to decide democratically."

Suu Kyi's comments come in the wake of five election laws that the junta released in recent weeks, confirming that it was on course to meet its promised 2010 general election to create a "discipline flourishing democracy."

Yet while these laws also appear to be designed to exclude the likes of Suu Kyi, the NLD and other political figures from the electoral process, rather than pushing a free and fair election that the international community has demanded.

The NLD, which is among the 10 existing political parties, was asked to re-register in order to contest the poll, the date of which has yet to be announced.

But registration under the new election laws means accepting the junta's invalidation of the results of the 1990 general poll, which the NLD won with a thumping majority but the military-regime refused to recognize and officially abrogated this month.

Through the new party registration law, the junta in Burma, or Myanmar, as it is also called, has forced the NLD to choose between keeping Suu Kyi in its fold or ensuring its own survival as a party.

After all, the law requires parties to ditch members who were convicted of crimes from contesting the poll—and Suu Kyi was convicted of violating the terms of her house arrest when US national John William Yeattaw swam to her home last year.

The excessive powers of the new elections commission, whose decisions cannot be challenged till the next poll, and the tough criteria for candidates to be eligible and to register have also led critics to call the new election laws unjust.

Little wonder why there is disquiet within the NLD ranks in the wake of the remarks of their iconic leader. "It is a very difficult time for NLD members," admits Thein Oo, a party member elected to the 1990 parliament who now lives in exile. "Do we register or not? She is our leader and we cannot separate her from the party."

"We are not surprised by her views," he said during a telephone interview from Mae Sot, a Thai town close to the Burma border. "Everybody knows that this election will not be free and fair, and if the NLD does not contest, the poll will not be credible."

Analysts call this the worst crisis the NLD has faced in its 20-year existence.

If the NLD does not register within a 60-day deadline that ends on May 7, it will be declared a non-existent political entity—at least on paper. Subsequent use of the NLD banner could result in arrests and long prison terms for its party activists.

Since its creation to contest the 1990 poll, the NLD has survived many repressive measures by the junta, including the detention of more than 400 party parliamentarians and activists. The party offices across the country were shut for over a decade, except for the NLD's Rangoon headquarters.

"My concern is that if the NLD opts out of the elections, it will be abolished as a party," says Aung Naing Oo, a Burmese political analyst living in Thailand. "It will help the military government, which wants to keep the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi out of contention."

If the party's officials vote to follow their leader, it will confirm the position the NLD has always taken – "to make policies based on human rights and justice and always take the moral high ground," he told IPS. "But that will open the NLD to questions if it has concrete policies and a political strategy to come into power."

Analysts say that the fact that Suu Kyi and the party she founded have been "one and the same" from the start is the NLD's Achilles heel. "It is quite sad to say they have been deficient in terms of policy formulation on economics, health, foreign policy, and why they deserve to be elected," says David Scott Mathieson, the Burma researcher for Human Rights Watch, the New York-based global rights lobby. "That's the brass tacks of a political party."

"Sitting out an election such as the one in Burma is not going to change the outcome," Mathieson adds in an interview. "The expectation of a political party, besides governing, is to contest elections."