

Leaders of Burma's National League for Democracy say that if Monday's decision not to participate in the planned general election results in the party being banned it will still survive as a political movement.

Leaders of Burma's National League for Democracy (NLD) say that if Monday's decision not to participate in the planned general election results in the party being banned it will still survive as a political movement.

The NLD executive committee decided unanimously on Monday not to register the party for the election. The election laws promulgated by the regime state that any party that fails to register by a deadline in early May will cease to exist legally.

Observers say the regime is sure to outlaw unregistered parties and to proceed with the general election, expected to take place in October or November.

"Our party can die, but not our political movement," said the NLD's key spokesman, Nyan Win.

The NLD executive committee's decision not to register was prompted by the election laws, which members described as unjust and unlikely to result in a fair and inclusive election.

The laws excluded from participation in the election anyone serving a criminal sentence—a provision that barred Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners. In order to participate in the election, the NLD would have had to expel Suu Kyi from the party.

Veteran NLD leader Win Tin said the election laws and the 2008 Constitution would entrench military rule for another 20 years.

Win Tin said this year's election would repeat the injustice of the 1990 poll, when the regime ignored an overwhelming victory by the NLD, which contested under official restrictions.

If the party had decided to forget the result of the 1990 election and had chosen to contest this year's poll it would have sacrificed its dignity, Win Tin said.

Although the party's future is now in doubt, veteran Rangoon politician Thakin Chan Htun said it would develop a secret strategy.

Support for the central committee's decision came from the prominent Rangoon-based ethnic Arakanese politician Aye Thar Aung, who is secretary of the Committee Representing the People's Parliament (CRPP). He said the decision was in line with CRPP policy and would allow the party to perform more effectively than if it had agreed to contest the election.

Aye Thar Aung also said the 2008 constitution would not protect the rights of Burma's ethnic minorities.

Pessimism, however, was expressed by Shwe Ohn, a long-time ethnic Shan politician who formed a coalition of ethnic political parties, the United Nationalities League for Democracy.

“The role of the NLD is slowly disappearing,” he said.

Win Tin, however, disagreed and said the NLD would still command massive popular support. The image of Suu Kyi would certainly not disappear, he said.

Win Tin said the party would work together with grassroots people such as workers, farmers and ethnic leaders who are members of the CRPP. It would also seek the support of the international community.

David Scott Mathieson, a Burma expert with Human Rights Watch, said the international community, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, should send a strong message opposing the Burma election.

“They [international and regional community] needs to come up with a united and strong message that the environment for the election is not inclusive,” Mathieson said.