

Senior leaders of the National League for Democracy will meet on Monday to discuss the way forward after deciding not to run in this year's planned election.

Senior leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Burma's main opposition party, will meet next Monday for their first meeting since deciding earlier this week not to register for this year's planned election—a move that could spell the end for the party that has led the country's democracy movement for the past 22 years.

Since the decision was reached at a meeting of party delegates from around the country on Monday, Burmese and foreign observers alike have been wondering how the NLD plans to proceed. So far, however, it has given no indication of what its next move might be.



“We can't say exactly what we will do next, but there are many different ideas. It's something we will have to decide,” said Han Thar Myint, a member of the NLD's Central Executive Committee, speaking to *The Irrawaddy* on Thursday.

Asked about the possibility of a crackdown on the NLD now that its legal status is in question under new laws that require parties to register for the election or face dissolution, Han Thar Myint said that even if the party is abolished, its members should not be subject to arrest.

He also dismissed suggestions that the NLD had deliberately raised the stakes by refusing to register the party for the election on the grounds that it would require it to expel members, including its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who are serving sentences for criminal convictions.

“This has nothing to do with the Naung-Yo tactic,” he said, referring to a famous battle in which the 16th century general and future king Bayintnaung burned his troops' rafts to let them know there was no turning back, forcing them to fight to the death.

He said the NLD leaders decided not to register because they had been left with no other choice.

“In practical terms, and as a matter of principle, there was nothing else we could do,” he said.

Since the meeting on March 29, several Western diplomats have visited the NLD's Rangoon headquarters to show their support and to sound out the party's leaders on their future plans, while many ordinary Burmese have also taken a strong interest in the decision, which has so far gone unmentioned in the state-run media.

"People are really paying attention to this," said a source in Rangoon, speaking on condition of anonymity. "It has completely changed the mood on the street. Everyone wants to know what the NLD will do now."

He added that many people sympathetic to the NLD's decision to effectively boycott the election are now planning to apply for party membership to show their support.

However, not everyone is happy about the decision.

"I didn't like the decision, but I am loyal to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," said Khin Maung Swe, an NLD executive who previously advocated registering. He said that he and others who shared his views did not speak out against the decision at the meeting, but privately he expressed the opinion that it was "suicide" for the party.

Similar views were also expressed in the international media.

"A boycott was the only option if the party was to remain true to its democratic ideals. But it was, probably, a mistake," *The Economist* wrote in an editorial on March 31, framing the party's choice as being "between political suicide and a crippled half-life as a legal party."

In *The New Yorker*, George Packer wrote: "[T]he regime is still doing best: by its own brutal rigidity, forcing the opposition into a rigid and, perhaps, a self-defeating response."

Some Burmese political observers also said that the NLD show have taken a more strategic approach.

"They could have bought time until the deadline and applied for registration without expelling Suu Kyi," said one Burmese exile. "Then the regime would have been forced to reject the party under its own laws."

"That would have exposed the oppression of regime and given international players time to intervene. And it would have changed the headlines from 'NLD rejects the election' to 'NLD rejected by regime.'"