

The party of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, founded more than 20 years ago to challenge military rule in Burma, held a final gathering at its headquarters before its forced dissolution.

RANGOON — The party of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, founded more than 20 years ago to challenge military rule in Burma, held a final gathering Wednesday at its headquarters before its forced dissolution.

The National League for Democracy, which won a 1990 election but was denied power by the army, held an early celebration of Suu Kyi's June 19 birthday, an occasion on which it gives children of political prisoners financial aid for their education.



The League declined to re-register as a party this year, which new election laws required to contest an election supposed to be held sometime later this year. The League says the laws are undemocratic and unfair, and its non-registration is tantamount to an election boycott.

At the party's central office in Yangon, desks were being cleared, paper files tied up and locked away in cupboards and party property was inventoried. Under the law, the party becomes "null and void," at midnight Thursday.

However, Suu Kyi has instructed her party not to take down the party signboard or party flag featuring the "fighting peacock" after the deadline. She told her party members through the party spokesman that "she will never turn her back to the people or her struggle for democracy."

It is not clear what action authorities could take against such activity. The junta is intolerant of dissent, and has long repressed its opponents. According to the UN and human rights groups, there are more than 2,000 political prisoners nationwide.

Meanwhile, Burma's highest court rejected an application by Suu Kyi to annul some articles of the party registration law. Her filing in High Court last week challenged rules that included a bar on a convicted person being a member of a political party.

Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for 14 of the past 20 years, was convicted last year of illegally harboring a visitor, an eccentric American who swam uninvited to her lakeside home.

The court also rejected an application to have seated the parliament elected in 1990.

About 150 members of the National League for Democracy gathered at their dilapidated two-story headquarters near the foot of Rangoon's Shwedagon pagoda for Suu Kyi's 65th birthday celebration. Several foreign diplomats also attended.

"We cannot hold Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday at the party headquarters on June 19 though we will hold a religious ceremony at one of the member's house on Daw Suu's birthday," said Dr. May Win Myint, an elected candidate in 1990 and a senior party member. 'Daw' is a term of respect for older women.

"We are wrapping up our party work at the headquarters but we will carry out our political activities in any possible manner and continue with other social welfare projects," she said.

Party spokesman Nyan Win said the party "may cease to exist under the law" but will continue to carry out social activities while party members will individually engage in political activities.

"We will survive as long as we have public support," Nyan Win said.

The new election laws in fact allowed the League's branch offices to reopen earlier this year, some seven years after they were shut by the government, which was anxious to demonstrate it was allowing the resumption of political activity ahead of the planned polls.

It remained unclear whether the branch offices would be permitted to stay open in some capacity after the party's headquarters closes.