

Leaders of Burma's opposition National League for Democracy have some hard choices to make because of Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition to the general election.

Once again, the unmatched power and influence Aung San Suu Kyi, detained leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), holds over her party may have shown their genuine impact—this time on the NLD's approach toward the planned general election.

The NLD's central committee is due to meet on March 29 to decide whether or not to contest the election, but Suu Kyi made her own views on the issue crystal clear on Tuesday, saying the party should not register under the recently promulgated election laws.

On March 20 (***Decision Time Approaches for NLD***), I wrote in *The Irrawaddy*: “If her (Suu Kyi's) preference [whether or not to contest the election] is made known to the central committee members before the voting, it may sway them towards the direction she chooses.”

The day before Suu Kyi made her position known, NLD Spokesman Khin Maung Swe announced that the party's central executive committee had agreed that the central committee should leave the final decision to Suu Kyi and party Chairman Aung Shwe.

Despite the weight of Suu Kyi's rejection of participation under current conditions, party Chairman Aung Shwe is known to be in favor of the party entering the election. But for now the party's decision seems to be skewed towards not contesting.

Three possible scenarios remain open for the party, although all bring problems and likely divisions. Although the choice appears to be straightforward—a simple “yes” or “no” to participation in the election—it is an extremely complex matter.

Scenario-1: The NLD decides not to contest the election

This is the most likely scenario now. In this case, the regime-drafted election laws require the party to disband.

Pragmatists or moderate factions are then likely to form a political party or two of their own and contest the election under a new banner.

The formal abolition of the party will create radicalism among those who remain loyal to it. Undoubtedly, the disbanded NLD will become an underground grouping and find a way to get back into the political arena.

Operating outside the legal and constitutional framework, it is likely to join forces with other opposition groups, both inside and outside the country, to discredit the military. Such action will lead to a head-on confrontation with the Burmese junta and its loyalists, especially following a decision evidently influenced by Suu Kyi's preference not to contest.

The NLD is not an underground organization, however, and its strength is not in mass mobilization. So the party may find itself in uncharted territory with aims that may be elusive if not entirely unrealized—unless it can persuade the Burmese to take to the streets and force the junta to renegotiate the terms of the Constitution.

If it cannot find political rhythm in underground movement the party is likely to eventually collapse under relentless pressure from the junta, which will surely mount a harsh repressive campaign against the party remnants.

In addition, 20 years of struggle have shown that a mass anti-regime movement cannot succeed without at least the tacit support of some key elements within the military.

Most importantly, the promulgation of unjust election laws was clearly designed with the purpose of forcing the NLD to opt out of the election on its own volition.

All in all, this scenario will play into the trap junta leader Snr-Gen Than Shwe has set up for the party. Besides, it may not provide the party with a strategy designed for all members with different views to follow. And unlike the Burmese junta, the NLD has not thrived in conflict,

which would be prolonged if the party failed to contest the election.

Scenario-2: NLD decides to participate, in the interest of survival

This possibility seems a long shot now. Ostensibly the NLD would have less than 60 days from its registration to complete the task of nominating its election candidates.

The NLD's strategy in the past 20 years has been to focus on its survival as a legal entity. If this remains its primary preoccupation, the party may try to adopt a step-by-step strategy. A first step would be to register so as to maintain the party's legality. It would then continue debating the broader strategy, giving it some breathing space.

If it wants to focus only on its legal survival, the party has two options. The first is to field only three candidates in the election, meeting the minimum requirement for any registered party—a half-boiled strategy. But the law also requires a party, at the time of registration, to inform the Election Commission (EC) early on whether it intends to contest throughout the country or just in one specific area, such as a state or region.

Once it declares its intentions to the EC and says that it will only contest in three constituencies, the party cannot change its mind. But the catch here is that if the party loses in these constituencies, it will likely face the axe and be abolished. To avoid this danger, the party would have to field and win in more than three constituencies in order to make sure that it remains legal in the post election period.

The second option, if the party is concerned only about its survival, is to get registered and prepared, and to make the decision before the end of the party registration period. This is also not without problems because voters may punish an undecided party. There is also a possibility that the EC, under the direct orders from the regime, might squash party registration at the last minute, citing irregularities in the registration process.

In this case, hard liners within the party will be proven right and the party may go back to the same confrontation mode similar to the first “not to contest scenario.” Under this scenario, emotion will run even higher and a sudden confrontation with the junta is likely.

In this scenario, taking a decision to “half participate” may seem a viable option for a short period of time, but in the long run the NLD would be losing an opportunity to take a decisive party stand on the issues at hand. And, unlike in 1990, the party does not have the luxury of time to prepare for the election, and leaving the final decision to the last minute may not be a good tactic.

Such a strategy could also make the voters believe that even though the NLD is a party of national calibre, the party only works for its survival and fails to put the interests of the voters and the nation first.

Scenario-3: The NLD decides to contest the election

In this case, the party will have to disown its detained leader Suu Kyi and all other party officials and members currently serving time in prison. The party expelled Suu Kyi and Tin Oo in 1989 under pressure from the junta, so taking a similar step this time should not be problem because she could be reinstated after her release from house arrest.

However, even if party Chairman Aung Shwe decides to enter the election it will upset the hard liners within the party. As a result, the divisions within the party will come to the fore.

Some disillusioned members might then resign although they would not become idle. They might be radicalised because of their belief that the party had abandoned its principled approach to democracy of the past 20 years and especially against the wishes of Suu Kyi.

Such a situation would create an acrimonious relationship among former comrades, and lead to the two camps undermining each other in the fight for democracy.

Under this scenario, contesting the election seems to be a good strategy for the long run. But there is a risk that it does not provide enough options for all with different takes on the election.

If the NLD does not know how to deal with those members who disagree with the party's decision to contest the election and takes drastic actions, the resentful hard liners may undermine any meaningful work the party will embark on after the election.

Ideally and acting according to the principles of democracy, the minority party officials who lose to the majority in favor of participating in the election should go along with the decision.

However, under the conditions where stakes are high and injustice glaringly apparent, and especially when the minority realizes that they are confronted with only one choice, making a rational choice or cooperating with the majority is unlikely.

In summing up, the NLD is caught between a rock and a hard place, with problems, dissatisfaction and disappointment present on whatever path it chooses. And whatever the choice, the party is likely to be deeply divided.

Yet somehow, the party must develop an all-inclusive strategy, allowing the engagement of moderates as well as hard liners to engage. Otherwise, the risk is that the NLD will follow the examples of its predecessors, such as the acrimonious split of the parliamentary-era Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League, which partly paved the way for the final and long-lasting entry of the Burmese military into the political arena.