

What lies ahead for the National League for Democracy now that Burma's main opposition party has decided not to contest the election?

Burma's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), on Monday decided against registering for this year's planned general election. The decision was a response to the regime's unjust election laws, which were designed to prevent NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners from participating in the election or even remaining as members of their respective parties.

Until a few weeks ago, some senior NLD party leaders were believed to be considering participation in the election. However, after Suu Kyi said last week through her lawyer that she was personally opposed to taking part in the vote under the current circumstances, many party leaders apparently changed their minds.

The decision predictably met with a mixed reaction. Many Burmese both inside and outside the country expressed disappointment at the move, while many others, including activists and campaign groups in exile, applauded it.

For the NLD itself, it must have been an incredibly painful choice. The party is no stranger to setbacks—most notably when its landslide victory in the last election in 1990 was ignored by the regime—but this is the first time it has had to face dissolution.

Under the new election laws, any party that does not register for the election will be forced to shut down. After more than two decades as the standard bearer of Burma's democracy movement, it is almost impossible to imagine the future of Burmese politics without the NLD.

But as so many times in the past, the party felt that it had to put principles before anything else.

“We cannot expel Aung San Suu Kyi and others who are or have been imprisoned under this corrupt and unfair legal system. Without them, our party would be nothing,” Win Tin, one of the co-founders of the NLD, wrote an editorial published in *The Washington Post* on Tuesday.

As admirable as this stance may be, however, it is regrettable that the decision, approved by a unanimous vote of the NLD's 113 executive members, will effectively eliminate the party as a legally organized political force. Without the NLD, the party that won 80 percent of the seats in 1990, voters will be left with little choice in the coming military-controlled election.

What if the NLD had decided to take a different course? We believe that despite the obvious efforts by the regime to create an extremely uneven playing field, the NLD stood a good chance of winning a majority, because for many voters all over the country, it is still the only viable alternative to the status quo.

The generals who are determined to keep Suu Kyi and the NLD out of politics must be happy with the current decision.

What we would like to know now is what the NLD plans to do next. Will it go underground? Can Suu Kyi save the the party from being abolished? What is her next move?

Now that the NLD has decisively abandoned the strategy that has sustained it for the past 22 years—fighting the regime from within a legal framework—it remains to be seen how it will proceed. For the regime, however, it appears that everything is working out according to plan, at least as far as its efforts to remove the NLD from the picture are concerned.

The only question that remains is whether the NLD's decision will deprive the junta of its other coveted goal—legitimizing military rule. If the international community writes off the election now that the NLD has bowed out, the party may have accomplished something with its decision on Monday. But even if this does turn out to be the case, it may prove to be a pyrrhic victory at best.