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BANGKOK — If Burma's military regime goes ahead with its promised general election this year, some 27.2 million voters will be deprived of the chance to cast a ballot for the political party that has come to symbolize democratic hope in that oppressed nation.

This is the scenario taking shape after the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by pro-democracy icon and party leader Aung San Suu Kyi, decided on Monday to boycott the general election.

A damning indictment on the South-east Asian nation's first parliamentary poll in two decades, the NLD decision was hardly a surprise. It endorsed the unequivocal message that was delivered days before by Suu Kyi, through her lawyer Nyan Win, to over 150 central committee members and party representatives who met in Rangoon, the former capital.

Suu Kyi, who has been placed under house arrest for over 14 of the past 20 years, had said "she will never accept registration (of her party to contest the poll) under unjust (electoral) laws."

"The NLD's decision not to register the party and contest the elections will be a big loss for the people," says Win Min, a Burmese national security expert at Payap University in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. "There are many people who wanted to vote for the NLD. They will be sad even though they will support the boycott."

Yet the NLD's position may have been exactly what Burma's strongman, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, favored, Win Min explained to IPS. "It seems the NLD played into Than Shwe's hands. He wanted to avoid a repeat of the 1990 election outcome."

In that last election in Burma, also known as Myanmar, the newly formed NLD secured 82 percent of the 485 parliamentary seats up for grabs. But the military regime, which had been in power since a 1962 coup, refused to recognize the results.

It is little wonder why the five election laws rolled out by the junta this month were aimed at avoiding a repeat of its 1990 poll defeat, and the NLD's activism that followed.

The Political Parties Registration Law, for instance, was targetted to keep Nobel Peace Laureate Suu Kyi out of contention by declaring that "people who are serving a prison term cannot form a political party" and that "people who are serving a prison term cannot be a member of a political party."

Suu Kyi, one of the over 2,200 political prisoners in Burma, was convicted of violating the terms of her house arrest when US national John William Yettaw swam to her home last year.

By opting for a boycott, the NLD hierarchy has opted to remain loyal to its popular leader rather than ditching her to meet electoral requirements and contest the poll. "Without any objections, all the party leaders reached a consensus not to register the party and join the election because

the junta's election laws are unjust," Khin Maung Swe, a senior party official who attended the Mar. 29 meeting, was quoted as having told 'The Irrawaddy' magazine run by Burmese journalists in exile.

Yet it is a high-stakes political gamble, for the NLD may have placed itself in an awkward position by taking the moral high ground instead of following pragmatic politics. The NLD ignored the "big picture in Burmese politics and the important role it has to play in helping to transform the country towards a democracy," a senior official of a Southeast Asian country told IPS. "Democracy is a process, not a morality play."

Even Western governments who have been trenchant critics of the junta are not all in agreement with the NLD's move. "It is a disappointing decision. It disregards the variety of opposition opinion inside the country," a European diplomat who regularly visits Burma observed in an interview. "The NLD discredits those who will form parties to contest the election."

Between 11 to 15 political parties are expected to register before the May 7 deadline, a number much lower than the nearly 100 that registered to contest the 1990 election.

The coming poll may come to haunt the NLD in other ways, too. "This election will be a referendum on the popularity of the NLD," says Benjamin Zawacki, Burma researcher for the London-based rights lobby Amnesty International. "The test will be whether people participate and vote or acquiesce to the NLD's call to boycott the poll."

"It is political brinkmanship on the part of the NLD," Zawacki told IPS. "Should they succeed and people boycott the poll, it could fundamentally change the political landscape of Myanmar. But if they fail – if voters ignore the boycott and vote for other parties – then it could spell the end of the NLD as a political party."

The risk that the 2010 election may sound the death knell for the NLD has not been lost on the party hierarchy. "Our party can die, but not our political movement," was how Nyan Win, Suu Kyi's lawyer and NLD spokesman described the party's sentiment ' *The Irrawaddy*'.