

Seeing so many Central Committee members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) assembled at their headquarters on March 29 was very encouraging. However, the reason for the gathering was a sobering one—a decision was to be taken that could very likely lead to the dissolution of the NLD as a political party in Burma.



A peculiar political quandary faced the members. The authorities wanted to totally destroy the NLD, but wanted to hold the party responsible for its own abrogation. It was a classic political trap.

More than 100 Central Committee members ultimately made a decision, through a majority vote, not to register for or contest the coming election. The people-based political party, born out of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, was apparently taking the decision to end its legal struggle for a democratic government in Burma. Why?

I think the NLD's decision lies first and foremost in the hearts and political ideology of its members—to oppose the unjust and undemocratic 2008 Constitution and the current election/party registration laws.

Who can even begin to deny that this constitution is a mandate for political tyranny and self-preservation? Please do not try to justify or act as an apologist for this edict. It is an empty argument.

However, we should consider whether we will have the power to change these laws by dissolving our party and simply walking out of the political arena. We must also prevent the appearance of falling into the military regime's transparent trap.

While the discussions at the March 29 meeting were at times heated, the three Central Committee members and the representatives from Rangoon, Kachin State and Tenasserim Division presented their viewpoints in cool-mannered tones, tempered of anxiety.

The overriding theme of the presentations was that it was still essential for us to maintain a political party—even if it's not the NLD—to continue the legal struggle and the march toward a civilian government.

We know that in the aftermath of this year's election, the Parliament will have no democratic opposition, similar to previous models under the rule of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party. Consequently, the country will be forced to swallow a legislative process that constantly favors the military regime.

We, the party, must ask ourselves if we would be abandoning our people by leaving them barren at the polls, without a pro-democracy voice. That is the question we most need to answer.

Some members are already exhausted after having been involved in the movement for a

considerable time. They have suffered from social and economic hardships due to their involvement in politics. They have always known the struggle would be a long one, and in so many instances, the changes did not come about the way they would have preferred. They may have expected supporters to take to the streets to protest the unjust laws. Their vote not to register—which is favorable to the regime—may have been born out of frustration.

In choosing to exclude ourselves from the legal struggle and work from outwith the Parliament, do we have any assurance that democracy can be attained, not to mention the struggles for equality and self-determination? Even if we worked from within Parliament, would we have the opportunity to work on these issues? Are we forsaking our right to struggle?

In a letter sent to the NLD Central Committee meeting, Aung San Suu Kyi said:

- she stands by the Shwegondaing Declaration;
- the NLD is not her property nor that of anybody else;
- she does not accept the 2008 Constitution nor the unjust party/ election laws. Therefore, she does not want the NLD to register for the election;
- the NLD will stand alongside the people even if it does not register, and will continue its struggle for democracy on behalf of the people; and
- she does not accept any attempt at factional disputes.

In the end, the NLD members at the March 29 meeting decided to dissolve the party through a majority vote. Many people were happy with this decision, but many were not. Some, who had lost loved ones in the struggle, were tearful. Nevertheless, we accept the way the decision was conducted, without exception.

In my opinion, the NLD voted this way for three main reasons:

- we admire Aung San Suu Kyi;
- we value a majority voice; and
- we want others to know that we will uphold democratic principles until the end.

However, one question remains to be answered: who will the people be able to rely on to work toward bringing democracy to Burma?

*Khin Maung Swe is a member of the NLD's Central Executive Committee. The military regime arrested and imprisoned him twice after he became an MP-elect in the 1990 election. He spent about 15 years in prison when he was detained for the second time. He was released in 2008. The views expressed here are his own.*

The original Burmese language version of this article can be read at:

<http://www.irrawaddy.org/bur/index.php/editorial/2009-02-27-05-56-44/2940-nld->