

If there is to be a new beginning, it's the NLD decision to forgo the bogus legality of the party's existence so that a mass political movement can organically re-emerge.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) colleagues have effectively diminished the credibility of the military generals' election in Burma by refusing to register the party under unjust election laws.

At the same time, the regime's Asian friends such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are also widely expected to endorse the outcome of the election, with Asean Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan euphemistically framing the charade as "a new beginning."

Negative reactions—from the *Economist* to *The New Yorker*, from *Reuters* to the *Christian Science Monitor*

—should dishearten neither the NLD rank and file nor their worldwide supporters. For not a single commentary or news article appears to be informed by the mechanics and history of social movements.

Nor does the general media coverage and commentary appreciate the hardcore reality on the ground that nothing short of system implosion will bring hope and possibilities for a real new beginning for the Burmese people. Some authoritarian and/or near totalitarian systems are just beyond gradual reform.

The NLD's decision to, in effect, dissolve itself as a "legal" entity is actually a brilliant strategic move from an organizer's perspective, not a vain moral statement as many self-styled pundits on Burma have wrongly asserted.

A political movement which aims to attack the foundations of the very same repressive system needs no "legal" recognition by Burma's de facto regime, not when the latter has been hell-bent on obliterating it by any means necessary.

Had the NLD decided to comply, if only grudgingly, with the regime's registration ultimatum it would not only have let down the 2,000 plus dissidents behind bars who continue to resist the regime, it would also have deprived the party itself of the power to inspire future waves of activists and mobilize public and international support.

To belabor the obvious, the regime-certified NLD has long been paralyzed as a political party operating at the whim of the regime, with the sole operational office in its decrepit headquarters in downtown Rangoon: the military regime has sealed off numerous NLD local offices across the country, while jailing hundreds of competent NLD operatives and organizers, as well as able leaders and forcing others into exile.

In fact, the NLD operating as a “legal” party with one office in the country has made the regime’s surveillance exceedingly easy. All that the spooks need to do to intimidate party members is station themselves outside NLD headquarters and take pictures of who goes in and out or follow them.

Another reason behind the NLD’s decision to risk legal dissolution of the party appeared to have been to stave off external efforts, by both the regime and other elements, to split the NLD on the election issue.

Aung San Suu Kyi and the senior leadership were fully aware of efforts that attempted to undermine highly respected leaders, including Win Tin, by painting them as “unreasonable hardliners.”

At the same time, the pro-election voices within the NLD (for instance, Khin Maung Swe with little or no national or global standing) were being promoted in the media and foreign policy circles as moderates or pragmatists because they were easier to manipulate politically by those who stand to gain from the sham elections, with the purpose of deliberately fracturing the NLD.

According to NLD sources some of the external players who attempted this “divide and rule” tactic were representatives of the aid sector, certain Western diplomats, foreign and local commercial interests, self-styled civil society stakeholders with hidden personal agendas, and last but not least, the regime’s political agents operating in the guise of social entrepreneurs and independent local journalists.

As a matter of fact, the near unanimity of the NLD decision to categorically reject the regime’s attempt to constitutionalize what is in effect a political apartheid speaks volumes about Suu Kyi’s leadership and her till able to rally her colleagues to close ranks when it comes to life and

death matters for the party.

Burma “expert” and sometime adviser to Western oil interests, Robert H. Taylor who, by his own admission, has crafted statements for the Burmese regime, was recently quoted as saying the NLD will fade into history. History would be nothing without historical ironies.

Over the past decade, a worldwide cabal of Western interests and their hired mouths from, you rightly guessed, oil, gas and natural resource industries, as well as national security establishments and the global aid industry, have been rooting for unconditional re-engagement with the morally repugnant generals while quietly discrediting Aung San Suu Kyi as “stubborn” and “too moral,” a spin originally manufactured by the regime’s psychological warfare division straight from the Ministry of Defense.

It is conveniently forgotten that Snr-Gen Than Shwe and company are interested in engagement with the outside world, but only on its own terms. Like Teheran’s ayatollahs, the paranoid regime in their capital tellingly named “Abode of Kings” is unable to see engagement efforts as anything other than a global plot against the generals. The regime’s new capital Naypyidaw is a graveyard of all past unconditional engagers—from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and US Sen. Jim Webb to Dr. Ibrahim Gambari and, most recently, Prof Joseph Stieglitz.

If there is to be a real new beginning, it is the NLD’s collective decision to forgo the bogus legality of its party’s existence so that a mass political movement with multiple focal points and leadership circles can organically re-emerge.

Burmese of different ethnic and religious backgrounds should now be able to join and declare themselves as “NLD,” be they residing in the military-controlled “black areas” of the country or in the “white” or liberated zones, that is, armed resistance and cease-fire territories or within the diasporas.

The NLD or future oppositions will have no shortage of supporters, sympathizers and potential members in multi-ethnic and dispersed people seething with a deep sense of pervasive injustices and grievances.

There is another Burma which most Burma analysts fail to see, which is pregnant with potential for new political movements and grassroots-driven societal transformation.

The rank and file of the armed forces, according to numerous army deserters, have become not only disillusioned with the regime's nationalist propaganda but have also been personally disgusted with their greedy and abusive superior officers.

The civil servants abhor the destruction of professional bureaucracy. The peasantry that makes up the country's majority lives under economic conditions considered worse than those under the British rule at the height of the Great Depression in the late 1920s and 1930s. The urban business class, including even the regime's cronies, can't stand their kleptocratic patrons in generals' uniforms.

The ethnic minorities, who make up 30 to 40 percent of the total population, harbor a deep sense of injustices regarding the ethnic and socio-economic inequalities—all hold the generals responsible for their plight.

Burmese soil is fertile for political mobilization which will eventually induce system implosion, especially given the potential new waves of social movements that are likely to demand justice, equality and democratization in nearby geo-political and economic regions, including China, Thailand, Vietnam and Bangladesh.

*Dr Zarni is a research fellow on Burma at the London School of Economics and visiting senior fellow at the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. He founded and headed the Free Burma Coalition from 1995 to 2004.*