

What is to become of the democracy movement left unrepresented by the dissolution of the NLD after May 6?

After more than 20 years struggling against military dominated politics in Burma, the National League for Democracy (NLD), Burma's main opposition party, will cease to exist after May 6.



Whether the abolition of the party is blamed on the Burmese junta's restrictive election law or the way the NLD decided to demonstrate its displeasure against it, the party's disappearance will be a great loss for Burma.

At a time when the country needs a strong opposition, it looks doubtful that the smaller pro-democracy parties planning to contest the upcoming election can fill the vacuum created by the NLD's departure.

Yet what will really become of a political party seen as a symbol and rallying point of the democracy movement for the past two decades? What will become of Aung San Suu Kyi, its imprisoned party leader, when she is freed from her current detention? And what will become of the "uncles," the ageing but resolutely committed senior leadership of the party?

It is instructive to look back on the day the party made the fateful decision not to participate in the election so as to understand the consequences and choices after May 6.

Unanimity in providing emotional support for Suu Kyi, keeping to principle and standing resolutely against injustice—these are the trademarks of the NLD and were the core values underpinning the party's decision on March 29 to boycott the much-disputed election.

The NLD's firm stand against the election also demonstrated how much power imprisoned party leader Aung San Suu Kyi continues to wield both within the party and on the wider political process in Burma.

Some questioned the NLD's democratic credentials after the way the no-contest vote was cast following the disclosure of Suu Kyi's preference that the party boycott the election. Her stand—relayed by her lawyer just before the NLD party congress to debate the election—most

certainly influenced the vote of many of the 120 party leaders.

More astounding than the party's unanimity at the congress was that the NLD took the single decision not to contest the polls and provided no alternative. There was no plan B.

Behind the façade of unanimity, there were both cheers and disappointment at the decision. The purists who strongly advocate standing aloof from the polls got what they wanted, but now their party faces disbandment, and there is no clear future for them.

Despite personal disappointment, those who wished to see the NLD participate in the election respected the decision, but many were unhappy that the party offered no alternative. It was as if it had simply voted to end the history of a political movement solely to demonstrate its total disdain to an election and laws it sees as totally unjust.

This is where the inherent problem of the NLD lies: the absence of a viable strategy to battle military rule. As a result of a single decision not to contest the election on May 29, the party will have to disband itself without any strategic reorientation and without offering a way forward to either pro or anti-election factions.

Under the current restrictive election law, no extant party will be allowed to boycott the election. In his Labor Day speech, Burma's ruling leader, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, warned against any attempt to disrupt the election. If a disbanded yet defiant NLD attempts to organize a boycott of the election, there will be confrontation with the junta.

It is highly probable that some NLD members will go underground to continue their fight for democracy, a recipe for more confrontation with the junta.

The party's current plan of moving into social work is heartily welcomed, though it remains to be seen if it can truly shed its political image and work at the grass roots level in the social and developmental sphere, an area where the Burmese junta has failed miserably. This has the potential to change the junta's view of the NLD as a threat.

For now, the party's credentials on social work are limited, with its main efforts so far being focused on handing out financial and material support to families of political prisoners and conducting some HIV/AIDS-related work.

Though the aim of some party leaders to combine social and political work is plausible, it seems unlikely to be viable under the present circumstances.

While the junta's political wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, now the USDP, a political party, is blurring the line between political and social work, the NLD will find it extremely difficult to take the same path given the military perception of the NLD as a threat.

There is no plan to fill the vacuum left by an NLD dissolution, leaving nothing to address the voices and desires of moderates.

Some moderates from the NLD may opt to form a party of their own or join up with other pro-democracy parties to contest the upcoming election. But since strategic reorientation and reorganization is not on the party's agenda, the moderates and hard-line NLD factions will undermine each other in the fight for democracy.

The alarm bells were sounded by many who saw this coming before the NLD decided not to participate in the election. Observers in Rangoon say the two factions within the NLD have begun to alienate each other, threatening an acrimonious split.

It is too early to see what will become of the NLD and whether it will be successful in its transition to a non-political grouping. It is uncertain who will be its leader and how it will mobilize its party members, who will no longer be bound by party rules and affiliations.

Suu Kyi is unlikely to remain quiet, so she will continue to speak out against injustice when she regains her freedom. For many of the older members who have sided with her, 2010 does not seem to be the year to retire; they have devoted their lives for Burma and will continue to work alongside her whenever the opportunity avails.

It is also too early to say how moderates from the NLD will fare in the election without Suu Kyi and the party behind them. They may not get support from former comrades during the election, but if voters who reject the junta's blunt tactics perceive them as the true alternative to the NLD, they will have a chance of winning a fair number of seats in the parliament.

After May 6, the NLD will cease to exist, but could anyone have guaranteed the party's survival if it had decided otherwise and planned to fight every step of the way?

What is beyond doubt is that no matter what the NLD embodied and stood for—the aspirations of the Burmese people for democracy and a better life will continue, outlasting the formal existence of the party itself.