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Now, 22 years later, the party that I committed myself will cease to exist as a legal entity, and I find myself in exile, recalling days past and dreaming about new ways to keep the party alive.

Born in popular democratic uprisings led by Burmese students, the NLD has traveled a long and difficult road searching for democracy. Its members were sometimes attacked and killed and many, including me, received long prison sentences.

Politics is a matter of belief. When our belief in democracy was blocked by a military coup in 1988, young freedom fighters underwent a critical, decisive moment to decide how to carry on.

Many students chose armed struggle and went to border areas to join the ethnic armed groups while others chose to remain inside the country to continue overt or covert political activities.

Without hesitation, I chose to be a member of the NLD. My decision was influenced by the leadership of Suu Kyi. At the time, when my country badly needed a good leader, she, as a daughter of Gen Aung San, gained the trust of the people, including the support from the various groups that made up the 8-8-8-8 movement.

As an NLD youth leader, I had opportunities to work closely with Suu Kyi. I learned about her non-violent political strategy: civil disobedience against unjust laws. She taught me not to fear; instead, she showed me the way to drive fear out.

Suu Kyi is a woman of common sense. She uses very simple words with clear meaning. When we were in meetings, she always raised questions, starting with “why?” At first, I thought she

might not be able to speak Burmese well, as she had lived abroad for a long time. But she is articulate in Burmese.

Travelling extensively from northernmost Kachin State to southernmost Tanintharyi Division, Suu Kyi mobilized the people's power, facing challenges at various points. My admiration for her courage reinforced my commitment and confidence in the NLD.

Her civil disobedience activities were designed to pressure the junta to engage in a dialogue and to seek a political solution, but each time she ended up under house arrest.

Many more NLD members were arrested and many more fled to border areas. I hoped that Suu Kyi would come back one day to again lead the NLD. I believed it was my responsibility to wait and do what I could do.

The NLD went into a second phase without Suu Kyi, and it made the difficult decision to contest the 1990 election on September 25, 1989, while its key leaders were under detention. Kyi Maung, an ex-colonel and member of Gen Ne Win's Revolutionary Council, emerged as a key leader who brought the party to a landslide victory in the election.

I had opportunities to work with Kyi Maung, and I became a member of his election campaign team, working on his community outreach activities to meet the voters in his constituency in Bahan Township in Rangoon.

Kyi Maung was an advocate of military professionalism and an opponent of the military's involvement in politics. During one organizational trip, he told me that when he was a colonel, he was accused of being a mercenary by fellow military leaders because of his views on the role of military.

The NLD, which contested in the 1990 election, became a political melting pot where different strata of society such as politicians, intellectuals, ex-military commanders, artists, businessmen, technicians and even community leaders could easily mix.

After winning the elections, the NLD faced a new challenge regarding the military's transfer of power. The NLD members-elect of parliament gathered at Gandhi Hall and called for convening the parliament.

At this time, I was singled out and sentenced to ten years in prison for my political activities.

The NLD's third phase was marked when the party agreed to follow Notification No. 1/90 of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which stipulated that the transfer of power should be carried out on the basis of a constitution and that a national convention should be held to draw the constitution.

The junta pressured the NLD to oust Suu Kyi from the party. The then NLD leadership agreed on the grounds of the party's survival. I was saddened to hear the news while in prison.

Win Tin, one of the NLD's founding leaders who is very close to Suu Kyi, was at that time detained in the same building as I was in Insein Prison.

Win Tin was then a politician with a strong, moral courage, as he is today. He led political activities from inside the prison and worked to keep morale high among political prisoners. He was initially sentenced to three years in 1989, but because of his activities, he was tried by military courts and given an accumulative sentence of 20 years.

Win Tin initiated a "Suu-Hlut-Twayt" policy; "Suu" referred to the release of Suu Kyi and all political prisoners, "Hlut" for convening of Hluttaw (parliament) and "Twayt" for dialogue.

We even conceived an idea to form a parallel NLD structure, to establish a new network called "Struggle League for Democracy (SLD)" which would be composed of youth members, NLD organizers and members-elect of parliament.

When Suu Kyi was released in 1995, she regained her NLD position and again led the party. Her leadership led to a change: the NLD walked out of the National Convention. At that time, the NLD clearly understood that it had no chance of gaining a political solution through the National Convention.

From then on, the fourth NLD phase began, following from the formation of the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) in 1998 up to the Depayin incident in May 2003. Suu Kyi narrowly escaped that attack, but dozens of NLD members and supporter were killed and hundreds more detained across the country.

When I was released in 1999, I met with Suu Kyi several times at party headquarters. One time, referring to the example of South Africa's apartheid struggle which took almost a century, she told me that our struggle would be life-long and that we should prepare for that. One year later, she was again detained under house arrest.

The last time I saw her was before the Depayin incident. After her second release, she seemed confident that peaceful change would eventually come through a meaningful dialogue. But everything changed after the Depayin incident. All NLD branch offices were shut down. The NLD seemed to have little political activities, and it fell silent.

However, Suu Kyi and other detained senior leaders were quietly negotiating with the junta out of the public eye. According to a senior party leader, the outcome of the negotiation process was that Suu Kyi would be released on April 17 (Burmese New Year's Day) 2004 and the NLD would rejoin the National Convention.

It fell through at the last minute, however, and the fate of our country grown darker since then.

My hope rose again with the release of Win Tin and his active re-engagement with the NLD. The party became more active, but the recent political party registration law pushed the party into a corner. The NLD had to make its "life or death" decision on whether to re-register and contest the election. It chose not to register and participate in the election.

Beyond all the debate about the NLD, I am deeply worried about the future. After May 6, I hope to see the NLD flag remain at party headquarters, as a symbol of the party and the movement.

After May 6, the sixth stage of the NLD begins. The NLD headquarters may be shut down by force. The flag and signboards may be pulled down.

History clearly tells us that Burma's political organizations come and go, rise and fall, and eventually rest in history. The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League lasted about 14 years (1945-1962). The Burma Socialist Programme Party lasted about 17 years (1971-1988).

The NLD survived for 22 years. I strongly believe that the NLD structure will somehow continue to exist and its spirit will survive. It will continue its struggle against the challenges the country faces.

Although I am now in exile, I still hold my membership card with Suu Kyi's signature. My personal attachment to the NLD is deeply rooted in my heart. I will belong to the NLD in whatever situation it finds itself.

I agree with Daw Suu, when she said, "Nobody owns the NLD." But at the same time, we all own the NLD. It simply belongs to this age, the democracy movement and Burmese society.

*Moe Zaw Oo was an NLD youth leader in 1988 and is currently joint secretary 2 of the National League for Democracy (Liberated Area) based on the Thai-Burma border.*