

Four leaders of the National Democratic Force (NDF), a party formed by former members of the recently disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD), have been told they must seek a pardon for past acts of treason before they will be allowed to run in this year's election.



Thein Soe, the head of Burma's Election Commission (EC), informed the four at a meeting in Naypyidaw on Friday that if they want to run in the election, they will have to submit letters of appeal to the Burmese regime for attempting to form a parallel government in late 1990.

The letters must also state their willingness to work with the government to achieve "national reconciliation," Thein Soe told the NDF leaders.

The party's founder, Khin Maung Swe, and three other leading members—Tin Aung, Tha Saing and Sein Hla Oo—have all served long prison sentences on charges of treason for their role in efforts to form a government after winning a landslide victory in Burma's last election in 1990. The regime has never acknowledged the outcome of that election. The four men were all elected in 1990.

Dr Sein Win, the cousin of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi, fled the country to avoid prosecution in connection with the case. He later went on to form the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, the democratic opposition's Washington-based government in exile.

According to Tha Saing, the NDF's chairman (1), he and the other three former NLD members involved in the case are required to state in their appeal letter that they have served their sentences and are no longer involved in efforts to form a parallel government.

He added that they would consult with lawyers before responding to the demand to submit letters of appeal. In particular, he said, they were considering challenging the requirement on the grounds that a clause in the 2008 Constitution states that laws cannot be applied

retroactively to past cases.

The clause is seen as a move to grant immunity to the ruling generals for crimes committed during their more than 22 years in power.

"We regret that this has happened," said Tha Saing. "We didn't expect it, because the government has already approved our party, and our names were on the list when we applied for registration."

Asked if they would be allowed to take part in the election if they refused to submit the appeal letters, NDF leader Khin Maung Swe said: "It is clear that we will be allowed to run if we submit the letters, but not if we don't. But I can't say right now how I will decide."

Tha Saing added that he hoped to be able to retain his position in the party even if he is not allowed to run in the election.

At the meeting in Naypyidaw, NDF leaders expressed concern that some township-level EC officials were former members of the Union and Solidarity Association, a regime-backed civic organization that has been officially transformed into the Union and Solidarity Party, led by the junta's prime minister, Thein Sein.

In response, the election officials told the party leaders that the election commission is 90 percent perfect, but that they would try to improve it.

The NDF is aiming to contest constituencies in Rangoon, Mandalay, Magwe Divisions, the Eastern part of Shan State, Mon State, Chin State and Kachin State.

Thirty-nine new political parties and five existing parties plan to contest the elections sometime later this year. While several registered political parties are struggling to surmount financial and logistical constraints imposed by the election commission, USDP members led by the regime ministers are reportedly starting to canvass support across the country.

According to election observers in Rangoon, political parties will be allotted only two weeks for campaigning.

On Wednesday, the opposition leader Suu Kyi said that the Burmese election is "absolutely unlikely" to be free and fair because the election date has not been set and political parties will not have enough time to campaign.