



Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD): The Politics of Integrity and Commitment

Event

The Central Executive Committee meeting of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), held on March 16 and 17, 2023, made a momentous decision that it will not re-register as a political party under the new Political Party Registration law of 2023. Explaining its decision, the SNLD cites that the junta authorities have yet to announce a date for the General Election, and that the party finds substantial security challenges to travel to consult with party members (mainly in Kayah and Kachin States).



“(I) will not exchange political dignity for personal opportunity or money. Being a human, I can stand with pride and dignity, even without money. Democracy and ethnic affairs are two sides of the same coin, neither of which is more important than the other. The SNLD has been pursuing a genuine federal union since before the 2008 constitution. In our current times, there is an additional task for the party, fundamentally revising the 2008 constitution which does not reflect the will of all ethnic nationalities, while continuing our ongoing work in our existing struggle to end military dictatorship and end majoritarian chauvinism.”

Khun Htun Oo

From a speech given prior to his death



Preliminary analysis

This is the second time in history that the SNLD has decided not to register under the existing system. The first time was in response to the 2008 constitution adopted by State Development and Peace Council (SPDC) which the SNLD disapproved of, refusing to contest the 2010 General Election. The SNLD refused to register as a political party, and was subsequently legally annulled. At the time, the junta's Election Commission had adopted a new political party law that instructed parties to re-register within sixty days of the law's enactment or face deregistration. The SNLD, known for its struggle for democracy and ethnic self-determination, which had won the second-most seats in the 1990 elections and the third-most seats (both assemblies combined) in the 2015 elections, could again be annulled in the near future.

The new political party law of the junta, enacted in late January 2023, is a draconian law that poses serious challenges to political parties to resist the regime's patronage and manipulation. The SNLD's decision can be construed as a valiant refutation of the military council's legitimacy while the entire population of Myanmar is struggling with intensifying civil conflict and open violence. On the other hand, the new law demonstrates that the junta has no intention to move toward a smooth political transition by treating civilian political forces who truly represent the public as equal partners and by sharing political space with them in the process. The motivation of the military is more clearly seen as an attempt to maintain dominance over other actors, treating other political players as its subordinates or proxies. The planned form of elections will be difficult to accept as a legitimate 'political exit' for the junta. It will neither mend worsening civil-military relationships nor relieve popular grievances against the military.

The SNLD's decision not to register as a political party under the junta's new law seems to be neither a mere populist political stance nor a policy to avoid the belligerent online attacks against them. The decision rather, is important in keeping with the party's historical traditions, and it can be argued that the decision demonstrates SNLD's continued commitment to Politics of Integrity and Commitment. 'Integrity' here refers to the SNLD undertaking its political actions based on "principles" and "values". The SNLD seems to be pursuing a goal of "conflict transformation" rather than "conflict resolution" by attempting to address the underlying causes and power relationships of the Myanmar crisis, rather than aiming for resolution of the immediate causes of the conflict.

The SNLD's decision seems to be a rejection of the military's claim that the coup occurred due to irregularities in the 2020 elections. The SNLD calls for a fundamental system change, to not simply acquiesce to the demands of certain political forces and regional countries to resolve the crisis by the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the recognition of election results, and convening of parliament. Sai Lek, General Secretary of the SNLD, responded to a VOA interview on March 19 that "rather than changing the government, (I mean) the system needs to be changed. The whole CEC of SNLD understands that we need a system change that is important, and we will put it forward to the whole of the party membership". This is clearly reflected in the late SNLD's chairman, Khun Htun Oo's vision of fundamental system change — "until the establishment of a genuine federal union as a historic duty". The party stands on that principle and stands with dignity.

The SNLD is committed to uphold the desire and interests of all Myanmar's population, including the people of the Shan state. The journey to building a federal union in Myanmar is riddled with frustrations and disappointments, especially for non-Bamar ethnic leaders who may be hesitant to get involved in inter-Bamar conflicts. In history, whenever there are non-negotiable conflicts arised between Bamar actors, especially those that are non-negotiable, can disrupt progress and even halt union-building efforts altogether. Therefore, some non-Bamar ethnic leaders argue that the solutions to the Myanmar crisis should be based on addressing the dual-dimensionality of the problem: the mainland Bamar crisis and the non-Bamar struggles. Only after each dimension of the crisis has been addressed can non-Bamar ethnic groups enter into a comprehensive peace with mainland Bamar. While this lack of confidence in union-building collaboration is the prevailing mood, the SNLD has never confined itself to Shan politics alone and instead has always pursued nation-building goals by engaging in the collective struggles of the entire country. This is the SNLD's commitment to Myanmar.

The SNLD is also committed to its alliance. Though the SNLD maintains its focus and dedication, some of its allies have changed since coming in to power. They have since treated the SNLD unequally as a junior partner. Since 1988 the SNLD and the National League for Democracy (NLD) together struggled against all odds fraternally, hand in hand. However this relationship changed in 2015 when the NLD was elected to power. The NLD's attitude toward the SNLD was one of superiority, and the NLD began offering the SNLD only official positions and titles rather than to cooperate and coordinate on policy formation and deployment.

Sai Nyunt Lwin, the SNLD’s current chairman, once recounted his experience of such a patronizing treatment from the NLD as a political lesson to learn from. Despite this, the SNLD remains committed to keeping its political principles intact and disciplining its political messages, rather than resorting to scandalizing its allies. In the wake of the 2021 military coup, during the harshest oppression against the NLD, the SNLD decided to stand together with the NLD and other allies, including the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) and UNA++. The SNLD refuses to allow the junta to dictate its destiny, and its decision to not re-register as a political party is evidence of this principle.

The SNLD serves as a good example of a political party that displays political maturity by staying committed to its principles of truthfulness, on union-building and maintain strong relationships with its allies, rather than seeking individual end-goals or reacting to setbacks in a disgruntled manner. Sai Lek, General Secretary of the SNLD, told of the same spirit in an interview with VOA: “We are preparing our way together with our existing alliance, with our future alliances, with individuals, and with organizations, towards a federal democratic system”.

Scenario forecast

The SNLD has currently decided not to re-register as a political party, however it could reverse its decision if the political climate became favorable to do so. The SNLD also chose to not register as a political party under the previous junta in 2010, but subsequently re-registered in 2012, after witnessing some promising developments of the Thein Sein administration’s liberalization and after consultation with its NLD ally.



“In our party, we have people with over 34 years of experience, we know as much as we should about our opponents, friends, and allies. When coming to Myanmar politics, we are cautious not to react recklessly. We are not the ones to act as others tell us. We will do what is right, by ourselves, and by our own decision. I would like to make it crystal-clear to you all that we will not change sides easily, simply for the sake of office positions, for finance, or due to pressure.”

Sai Nyunt Lwin
Chairman, SNLD
From the party’s National Congress
speech in 2022.



■ Capacity and Participation of Youth and Women in the SNLD

In its 35-year history, the SNLD has had two remarkable developments. The first development is that it has transformed from an “ethnic-based political party” to a “region-based political party”, and again in 2018, the SNLD pursued the doctrine of a “party based on policy.” Along with these developments, the party increased youth, middle-aged, and women’s participation in the party, and this is apparent in the 2020 General Election.

Sai Kyaw Nyunt, First Joint Secretary of the party is extraordinary as the party’s youth leader, and he relentlessly led initiatives in Myanmar’s peace process. Other youth and women actively worked in the party as well as different levels of parliament, which built a good foundation for realizing SNLD goals. The women representatives particularly displayed brilliant abilities. Nang San San Aye, an elected representative to Shan State Hluttaw from Sibaw’s No. 1 constituency was particularly well recognized for her proposals and discussions. Nang Kham Aye, an elected representative to the national Pyithu Hluttaw via the Namtu Township constituency, is similarly renowned for her intelligent discussion.

Nang Kham Aye is also a Central Committee member of the SNLD and is active not only in the parliament but also in the popular movement. She bravely pursued organizing public fora for ethnic-based political dialogues (at the Shan Nationalities level) in December 2017, despite threats and obstruction by Myanmar’s military. She successfully organized fora in Panlong, Lashio, Kyauk Mae, Kali Kun Heng, Tachilek townships, and in Mandalay. On December 17, 2017, when Nang Kham Aye was a discussant at a Panlong public forum, the meeting was forced to stop by Colonel Htay Aung of the local command. She courageously insisted that “an elected representative cannot be limited like this.” She then continued the discussion in both the Shan and Bamar languages on human security and national security, topics which the military had forbidden discussion. Moreover, in her deliberation in the Hluttaw, she raised many issues of the authorities’ mismanagement and demanded action be taken.



Sai Kyaw Nyunt
First Joint Secretary
SNLD



Nang Kham Aye
Central Committee Member
SNLD

The junta could exert pressure or otherwise threaten and harrass the SNLD for its decision to not register. The international community should keep a watchful eye on the situation and should warn the junta against politically punishing the SNLD. Various forms of diplomacy and international pressure are crucial to make change in Myanmar a reality, but the real agent of change remains the political and civic forces inside the country. It must be recognized that these



“(If the party is annulled), it is a political vicissitude. We experienced similar in 2010 with the military junta. Though we contested the 1990 elections and won several seats, there was a tradition that these parties were revoked when they could not adhere to certain laws and orders which followed. Later though, they were reintroduced back to the national political arena through political necessity. We do not expect much as this is the simple political fluctuation of up and down.”

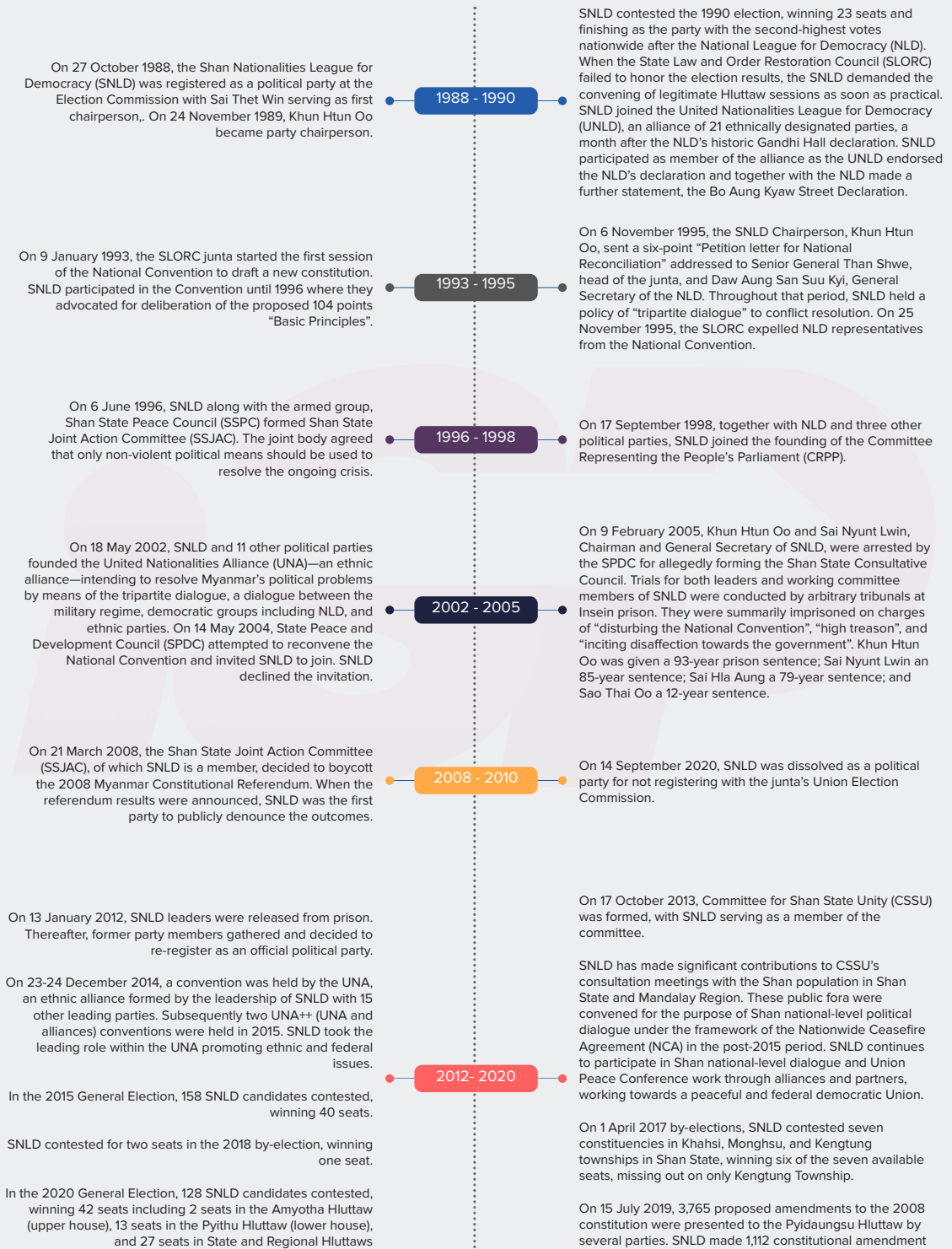
Sai Lek

General Secretary, SNLD
From Myanmar Now interview
on January 13, 2023.



civic forces are innovative and resilient to struggle, survive, and grow again. Regardless of whether the SNLD exists in the form of an official political party or not, the international community must continue to value its voice and listen to it. The SNLD will continue to stand as a formidable and commendable political force that should be included in the all-inclusive dialogue towards a sustainable solution for Myanmar. ■

■ Timeline of SNLD Efforts Towards Federal Democracy 1988-2020

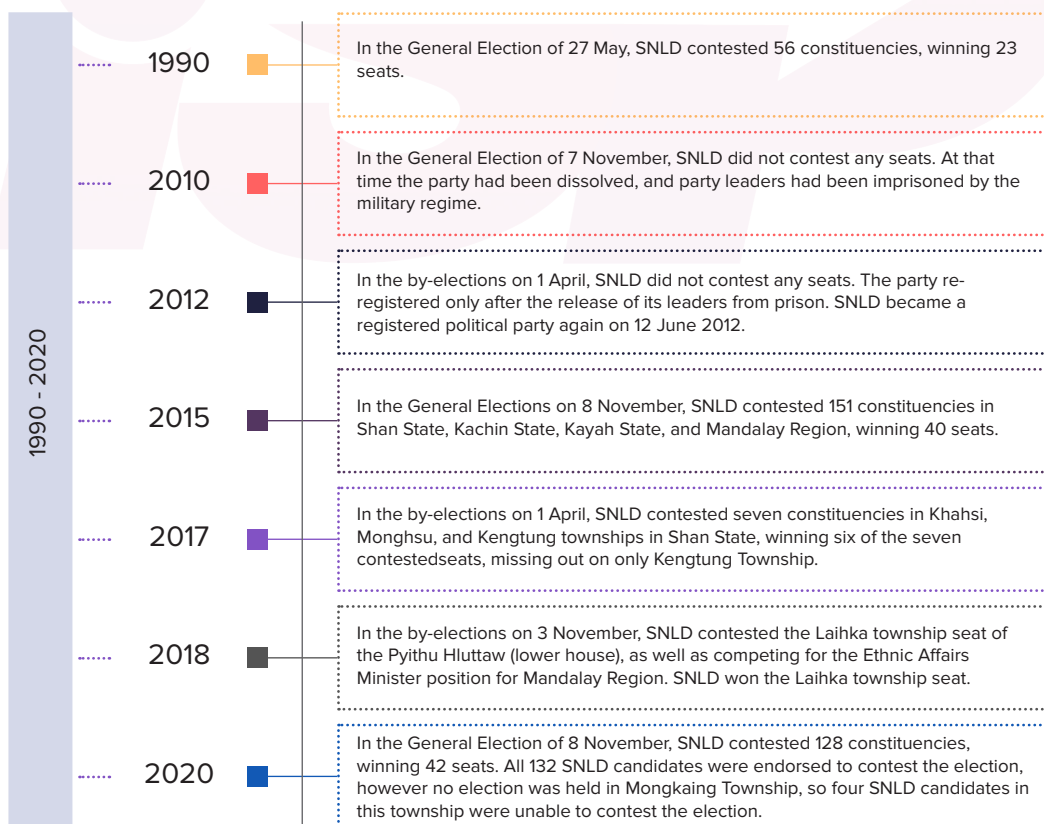


■ SNLD Electoral History 1990-2020

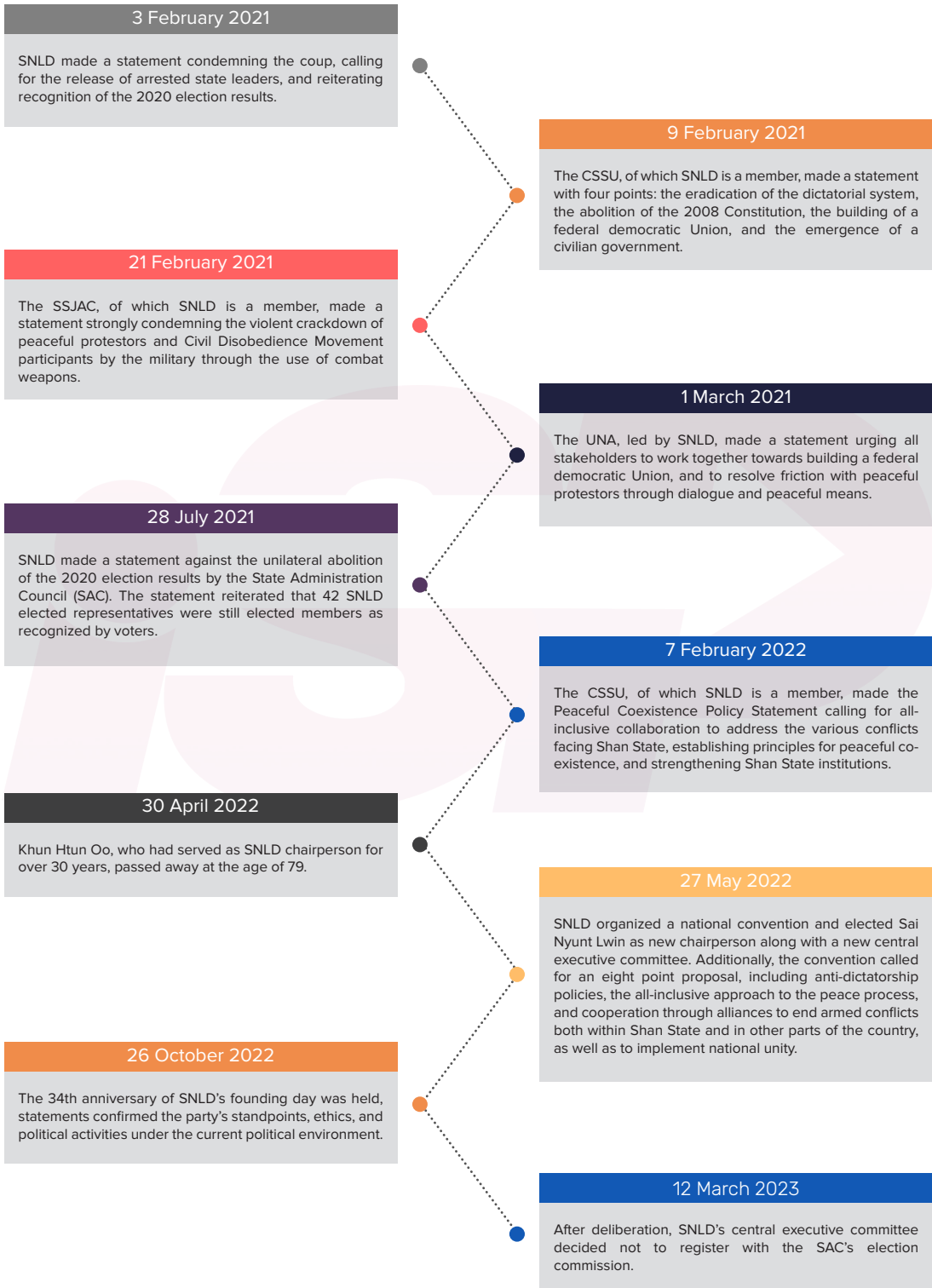
Election Year	Number of Candidates	Number of Seats Won	Percentage of representatives elected in SNLD contested seats
1990	56	23	41.07 %
2015	151	40	26.49 %
2017	7	6	85.71 %
2018	2	1	50.00 %
2020	128	42	32.81 %

Note: The elections in 2017 and 2018 were by-elections. The percentage of elected representatives in each election is calculated against the total number of seats contested by SNLD, not the total national number of seats nor the total number in each Region or State.

■ Chronology of SNLD Performance in Elections 1990 to 2020



■ Chronology of SNLD Post-coup Activities 2021-2023



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