

Burmese junta refuses to release opposition leaders

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27 June 2003

Despite mounting international pressure, the Burmese military junta has refused to release opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained more than three weeks ago with other National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders. Her ongoing incarceration and isolation makes a mockery of official claims that she is being held in “protective detention” for her own wellbeing.

Suu Kyi was arrested on the night of May 30 after the regime staged an attack on her convoy in a remote area of northern Burma. As many as 70 of her supporters died when a pro-government mob, numbering in the hundreds and armed with sticks, clubs and rocks, descended on the vehicles. Many were members of the military-sponsored Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA). Some were disguised as Buddhist monks.

Villagers told a BBC journalist who visited the area that locals had been press-ganged into joining the attack without being told who was the target. Others explained that a group of convicts had been taken from Mandalay prison and trained at a nearby army camp then, on the afternoon of the attack, moved to a house near the scene.

The junta has denied any involvement but immediately used the incident to unleash a crackdown on opposition supporters and groups. Fearing protests, the government ordered the shutdown of universities two days after the attack. It also sealed off NLD offices throughout the country and began to round up and detain party members.

Despite the government’s claim that Suu Kyi is being held for her own good, she has been held under the country’s draconian state protection law, which provides for detention without trial for 180 days at a time without access to lawyers or family members. Under this law, a detainee can be kept up to a total of five years without any avenue of legal appeal.

UN special envoy Razali Ismail has been the only foreigner permitted to visit Suu Kyi. He told a press conference: “What I can say is that where I met her was

absolutely deplorable.... She’s uncowed and feisty; she was outraged that this had happened to her.” The junta has refused to allow messages and calls, including from US Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Foreign Secretary Mike O’Brien. Last Friday, military authorities allowed the International Red Cross to visit other NLD leaders but not Suu Kyi.

The May 30 attack was the most violent crackdown on the opposition since the military’s brutal repression of mass unrest throughout the country in September 1988, when more than 3,000 people were killed in the capital of Rangoon alone after soldiers opened fire on anti-government protesters. As part of a deal with the military, Suu Kyi called off the 1988 protests in return for national elections in 1990. The NLD won the poll overwhelmingly but the junta refused to recognise the result.

The latest arrests mark a sharp break with attempts by the military, under considerable international pressure, to reach a political accommodation with Suu Kyi and the opposition. After 19 months of house arrest, the junta released the NLD leader in May last year and allowed her limited freedom of movement. The NLD was allowed to reopen some of its offices but any recognition of the 1990 election result was firmly ruled out.

The regime eased the restrictions on the opposition in a desperate bid to end the economic sanctions imposed by the US and European powers. However, over the past year, Rangoon has faced further demands for steps toward a power-sharing arrangement with Suu Kyi, backed by threats of further restrictions.

Last November, US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly warned: “[I]f progress remains elusive, Burma must consider the possibility that other countries may join in measures with the US, such as a ban on new investment.” In April, the European Union (EU) increased the number of Burmese government officials on a visa blacklist and extended the existing economic and arms embargo for

another year.

Government spokesman Colonel Hla Min expressed the junta's frustration with the economic restrictions when he told the BBC on June 20: "Instead of giving us time, instead of giving us encouragement and a pat on the back, they are always coming with threats, like sanctions and more sanctions." From its standpoint, the junta gained nothing by easing restrictions on the NLD, which, in the weeks before the May 30 attack, was beginning to gain public support.

Initially, Suu Kyi adopted a cautious approach following her release from house arrest and sought to reach a compromise with the junta. As recently as March 14, she told the *Democratic Voice of Burma* that she wanted to resolve the further release of political prisoners through dialogue. But her rallies were beginning to attract crowds, particularly in the countryside, where people took the opportunity to show their opposition to the junta.

On May 29, a day before the attack on her convoy, Suu Kyi held a rally at Monywa that attracted tens of thousands. Two days previously, on May 27, for the first time since her release, she publicly called for the 1990 election results to be implemented. Both the growing public support for the NLD and Suu Kyi's insistence that her party form government will have contributed to the junta's decision to crack down on the opposition.

Suu Kyi's arrest has prompted expressions of outrage from the US and European governments. President Bush expressed concern on June 2 and called for Suu Kyi's release. US Secretary of State Powell warned in a column in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 12 that "the thugs who now rule Burma" have "to understand that their failure to restore democracy will only bring more and more pressure against them and their supporters".

The US Congress has strengthened economic sanctions by imposing a ban on Burmese manufactured goods. Washington intends to freeze Burmese government assets in the US and expand a visa ban to former and present government leaders. Under US pressure, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued a mild rebuke to the junta at the recent ASEAN meeting in Cambodia.

However, the Bush administration's professed concern for democratic rights in Burma is completely hypocritical. Washington is supporting Suu Kyi as a means of ending military rule because it regards the junta as an intolerable barrier to foreign investment and the exploitation of Burma's reserves of raw materials and cheap labour.

Like the former Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia, the

Burmese regime exerts direct control over large sections of the country's economy, despite limited attempts at market reforms. Some 40 percent of all investments are funnelled through the state-owned Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited, established in 1990 to oversee joint ventures. Suu Kyi and the NLD, on the other hand, have pledged to implement a program of economic restructuring, aimed at opening up the Burmese economy to foreign investment.

Washington's hostility to the Burmese generals is also a product of the junta's close relations with China. The installation of a pro-US government in Rangoon would strengthen US efforts to isolate China, which Bush declared in his 2000 election campaign to be a "strategic competitor". Under the banner of its "global war on terrorism," Washington has been building closer military ties on a vast arc along China's borders, stretching from North East Asia through South East Asia to the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Burmese junta finds itself boxed into a corner. Incapable of resolving the country's immense economic and social crisis, the military leaders have only one response to growing social unrest—brutal repression. Shortly after the May 30 arrests, military intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt signalled further harsh measures when he praised the 1988 military massacres as a necessary means to "maintain law and order". Nyunt is considered one of the more "liberal" elements of the junta and the chief architect of the attempt to reach a rapprochement with Suu Kyi.



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