

Released opposition leader Suu Kyi calls for talks with Burmese junta

K. Ratnayake

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A day after her release from house arrest, Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi made a public call yesterday for unity and reconciliation talks with the military junta. On Saturday the military junta in Myanmar (formerly Burma) released Suu Kyi, who had been held under house arrest since 2003, and has been under house arrest for 14 of the last 20 years.

Her release came six days after the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won rigged elections for national and regional assemblies.

Suu Kyi's call for talks, under these circumstances, belies the international media's claim that her release was a "victory for democracy." In her first public speech yesterday to thousands of NLD followers, from party headquarters in the former capital city of Yangon (Rangoon), Suu Kyi made clear gestures towards the junta.

The military regime released Suu Kyi in the face of increasing pressure by the Western powers, including the US and the European Union. Condemning last week's election as a "sham," the US and EU called for her release and for the military to ease the ban on her National League for Democracy (NLD), while threatening more economic sanctions against Burma.

She called for reconciliation talks, adding: "I am prepared to talk with anyone. I have no personal grudge towards anybody." She added: "I don't have any antagonism toward the people who kept me under house arrest...the security officials treated me well. I want to ask them to treat the people well also."

In a BBC interview, she discussed overtures towards the junta and proposed talks with the military strongman, General Than Shwe: "I think we will have to sort out our differences across the table, talking to each other, agreeing to disagree, or finding out why we disagree and trying to remove the sources of our disagreement... There are so many things that we have to talk about." She

admitted that there is a possibility that the military might re-arrest her.

In the past Suu Kyi and the NLD depended on requesting the US and EU to tighten economic sanctions on the military regime, hoping this would force their release. However, in an apparent shift, Suu Kyi indicated she would speak to Western leaders about lifting sanctions on the country. "If the people really want sanctions to be lifted, I will consider it."

She added: "We need everybody to help in this venture: Western nations, Eastern nations, all nations."

The junta did not make any public statements about why it released Suu Kyi. The NLD is still banned, and more than two thousand political prisoners belonging to NLD and other parties remain in jail. However, the military has not explicitly issued restrictions on Suu Kyi, such as travel plans, as it had previous times that it released her.

There are growing divisions inside the military itself over how to deal with rising social and international tensions. Sections of the military consisting of late General Ne Win's loyalists ran as the National Unity Party (NUP) against the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), garnering 54 seats in national and regional assemblies. An anonymous Burmese source told the *Christian Science Monitor* that the election "was engineered to create a new system in which the opposition would have a small voice."

The junta is manoeuvring to obtain Suu Kyi's help in deflecting international pressure and discontent among Burmese masses. Suu Kyi's willingness to help is a further indication of fear in ruling circles about an explosion of growing discontent among workers and the rural poor.

One major concern is the rising opposition in the working class. In February, 3,400 workers from several factories in the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone in Yangon struck for higher wages. In early March another 4,000

workers struck in the South Dagon Township No.2 Industrial Zone near Yangon. As in Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries, workers are entering into struggle to demand wage increases in line with rising prices.

A pro-Western bourgeois leader, Suu Kyi has a record of seeking reconciliation with the military rulers. When worker, student and peasant struggles erupted in 1988, the junta responded with brutal repression. Suu Kyi and NLD played a key role in ending the opposition movement by calling off protests in return for an election.

When elections were held in May 1990, the NLD won an overwhelming majority, reflecting mass hostility to the junta. However, the military overturned the results and continued holding Suu Kyi. The NLD did not make an appeal to the Burmese masses against the military regime, but turned to the Western powers for help.

In May 2002, Suu Kyi was released in a behind-the-scenes deal with the military. The military regime allowed the party to open some offices, and Suu Kyi was granted limited freedom of movement. However, the junta refused to recognise the 1990 election results. This move was clearly a move from the side of the junta to end the economic embargo imposed by the US and EU. These powers did not end the sanctions but demanded a power-sharing arrangement with Suu Kyi.

In May 2003, however, the military put Suu Kyi back under house arrest, as it began to fear that the people might rally to Suu Kyi to demonstrate their opposition to the military. Pro-military thugs violently attacked NLD activists.

With this political record, Suu Kyi is seen as a reliable, “pro-democracy” figure in the capitals of the Western imperialist powers. The US, UK and France have welcomed her release. They have also demanded the release of other political prisoners and that the military not place restrictions on Suu Kyi.

In a statement issued from Japan, where he was attending a regional economic summit after the G-20 economic summit in Seoul, US President Barack Obama said it was a “long overdue release” and called on the Burmese military to free other political prisoners. He added, “While the Burmese regime has gone to extraordinary lengths to isolate and silence Aung San Suu Kyi, she has continued her brave fight for democracy, peace, and change in Burma.”

Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, warned the junta not to impose new restrictions on Suu Kyi. British Prime Minister David Cameron branded her detention for 15

years a “travesty, designed only to silence the voice of the Burmese people.”

None of these powers have any concern for the democratic rights of the Burmese masses. They are seeking more access to Burma for their strategic and economic interests. In particular, the US is concerned about China’s rise as a global power and its growing economic and strategic influence throughout Southeast Asia, including in Burma.

Beijing has become the Burmese government’s main international protector and has developed close ties through investment, trade and arms sales. Chinese projects in Myanmar include several pipelines carrying oil or natural gas from Myanmar, or from tankers arriving from the Middle East, to China’s Yunnan province. Myanmar’s location allows some Chinese energy supplies to bypass the Strait of Malacca, which is controlled by the US and US-aligned states, such as Singapore and Indonesia.

Strategic rivalry between the US and China in Myanmar is part of a broader strategic rivalry throughout Asia, and particularly in Southeast Asia. In recent visits to Asia, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Cambodia not to become “too dependent” on other countries—that is, on China—and Obama held talks over a “comprehensive partnership” with Indonesia. In August, the US raised tensions with China by opening talks with Vietnam over deals to assist Vietnam’s nuclear program.

By releasing Suu Kyi, the Burmese junta is moving to facilitate diplomatic communications with the Western powers and prevent class and international tensions from spiralling out of its control. However, as Obama’s statements show, their policy will produce increasing demands and pressure on the Burmese regime.



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