

Burmese opposition leader visits Thailand

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A visit by Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to Thailand last week has exposed ongoing tensions with the Burmese military after she issued a warning to foreign investors at the World Economic Forum on East Asia.

In her short address on June 1, Suu Kyi told the gathering, packed with the representatives of transnational companies, that judicial reforms were necessary to make the safeguards for foreign investors promised by the Burmese government regime meaningful.

“Investors in Burma, please be warned—even the best investment law would be of no use whatsoever if there is no court clean enough and independent enough to be able to administer these laws justly,” she said. “Good laws already exist in Burma but we do not have a clean and independent judicial system.”

Suu Kyi called for assistance in education and training, warning that youth unemployment in Burma was a “time bomb”. She called for a “healthy scepticism” about the “reform” process begun under Burmese President Thein Sein, instead of what she described as “reckless optimism”.

In an obvious reference to the military, the opposition leader warned investors against investments that would mean “more possibilities for corruption.”

Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) represents sections of the Burmese bourgeoisie seeking to end the military’s economic as well as political dominance, was obviously exploiting the opportunity to put pressure on the government for further concessions.

The trip was the NLD leader’s first trip abroad in more than two decades. Previously, even when not under house arrest, she did not leave the country as she feared she would not be allowed to return. As well as attending the World Economic Forum, Suu Kyi visited the Mae La camp for refugees from Burma.

The opposition leader was feted by the Thai media, met with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, and received treatment normally reserved for visiting heads of government or state. At the same time, the Thai government clearly did not want to upset relations with the Burmese government. According to the *Bangkok Post*, Suu Kyi was quietly told not to engage in political activities in Thailand.

The Thai government is keen to ensure that Thai investors access opportunities opening up in neighbouring Burma. A huge project is already underway for a seaport and joint economic zone in Burma that would connect to Thailand and provide direct access to the Indian Ocean.

Suu Kyi’s speech struck a sensitive nerve in Burmese ruling circles. The military has made limited concessions to the NLD, allowing its members to stand in by-elections in April, as part of its efforts to reach a rapprochement with the Western powers and encourage foreign investment.

The government’s displeasure was made evident by President Sein, who cancelled his own appearance at the World Economic Forum. An adviser, U Tin Maung Thann, told the *New York Times* on Tuesday that Thein Sein was disappointed with Suu Kyi as her group did not share the details of her visit with him.

Two articles in the government-controlled *New Light of Myanmar* on Tuesday and Wednesday, written under pseudonyms, expressed concerns that Suu Kyi’s warnings would “shut the door” on investors and urged both Sein and Suu Kyi to work together for “harmony and unison”.

The Burmese government is no doubt worried about Suu Kyi’s trip to Europe later this month. She is scheduled to speak at an International Labour Organization conference in Geneva, at a ceremony in Oslo to receive her 1991 Nobel peace prize and to both houses of the British parliament.

The military-backed regime made a turn to the US and European Union as a means of lessening its economic, political and military dependence on China. This dependence developed after the massive protests and strikes in 1988 that nearly toppled the junta. The US and EU imposed heavy sanctions on Burma after Suu Kyi and the NLD won the 1990 election but the military abrogated the result.

Chinese investment has primarily been in infrastructure and the extraction of raw materials and energy. Chinese goods have undermined manufacturing and created serious economic imbalances, leading to unemployment, inflation and the potential for widespread social unrest.

The Obama administration has been making overtures to the regime since 2009 as part of its efforts throughout Asia to undermine Chinese influence. The US demands have included a political role for Suu Kyi as well as an ending of Burma's ties with North Korea and an end to the country's longstanding ethnic conflicts.

Last December, Hillary Clinton became the first US secretary of state to visit Burma in more than half a century, signalling a warming of relations. The military responded by allowing the NLD to stand in the April by-elections, having banned the opposition from standing in the 2010 national election. The US and EU have since suspended most sanctions on Burma. In a further indication of closer ties, US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta indicated during regional strategic talks in Singapore last weekend that Washington was prepared to re-establish military ties with Burma.

Suu Kyi remains a crucial political factor. In the April elections the NLD largely dropped its criticisms of the anti-democratic character of the military-drafted 2008 constitution, thus lending political legitimacy to the process.

The NLD shares the military's fear of social unrest. During the 1988 upheavals, Suu Kyi played a crucial role in ending the mass strikes and protests that threatened to topple the junta in return for the false promise of elections. The decision gave time for the military to stabilise its hold on power.

Suu Kyi and the NLD seek political and economic "reforms" only so far as they advance the interests of sections of the Burmese elite excluded from power by decades of military rule—and do not destabilise

bourgeois rule. Suu Kyi's speeches in Europe will be carefully tailored to meet those ends.



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