

US leaders fete Burma's "democracy icon"

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Burma's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi wound up an extraordinary 17-day tour of the United States last week, in which she was feted by the American political establishment. This lavish attention had nothing to do with democracy in Burma but was bound up with Suu Kyi's role in the rapid shift by the Burmese junta toward a rapprochement with Washington.

Just over 12 months ago, the Burmese generals were pariahs, denounced for their political repression. Now Washington is hailing Burma as a budding democracy. Suu Kyi is politically useful to the Obama administration to disguise the fact that the US is embracing what remains an anti-democratic, military-dominated regime.

Behind the enthusiastic welcome for Suu Kyi is the junta's decision to distance itself from China and seek closer economic and military ties with the West. For the Obama administration, this is an important element in its diplomatic and strategic offensive throughout Asia, aimed at undermining Chinese influence.

During her visit, Suu Kyi had over 100 engagements, including with President Obama at the White House on September 19. The private meeting was particularly significant as Obama had declined to meet with foreign leaders who were in the US for the United Nations General Assembly. There were also award ceremonies or speeches at the US Capitol building, the UN, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Asia Society, and the Atlantic Council, and appearances at universities and public forums.

Wherever she went, Suu Kyi was hailed as Burma's "democratic icon". US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton embraced Suu Kyi as "my friend" and senior

Republican Senator John McCain declared her "my personal hero". International Monetary Fund head Christine Lagarde said she was not easily intimidated, but "I'm intimidated to introduce tonight Aung San Suu Kyi."

Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) represent sections of the Burmese capitalist class whose interests were frustrated by the military's economic and political domination. The NLD has long advocated opening up the country as a cheap labour platform for foreign capital, especially from the West.

Facing a deepening economic crisis, the Burmese junta is now encouraging foreign investment while enacting cosmetic political reforms that enabled the election of Suu Kyi and other NLD members to the military-dominated parliament. Suu Kyi has quickly fallen into line. She toured the US not as a critic of, but rather as an ambassador for, the military regime. Speaking at the USIP, she praised the political and economic "reforms" of President Thein Sein, a former general, and called for a further easing of US sanctions.

The speech set the tone for most of Suu Kyi's public statements. "I do support the easing of sanctions because I think that our people must start to take responsibility for their own destiny," she said. "We should not depend on US sanctions to keep up the momentum for democracy. We have got to work at it ourselves."

US Secretary of State Clinton obliged, announcing during a meeting with Burmese President Thein Sein that the US would begin easing restrictions on Burmese imports. This was "in recognition of the continued progress toward reform and in response to requests from both the government and opposition," Clinton

said.

US corporations are eager to exploit any opportunities that open up in Burma to exploit the country's cheap labour and raw materials. However, the enthusiasm for Suu Kyi and the shift taking place in Burma is bound up with broader strategic issues that centre on countering Chinese influence in Asia.

China has been a principal investor and ally of the military regime since Western sanctions were imposed following the military's violent suppression of mass protests and strikes in 1988 and its abrogation of the 1990 election won by the NLD. Burma has been a source of raw materials for China, and also offered an alternative transport and pipeline route directly from the Indian Ocean to southern China.

All this is now in question as the junta orients to Washington. As well as economic relations, the US is seeking military ties with the junta that it has routinely denounced for decades. Speaking at the Center for Strategic and International Studies last month, US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell declared: "One of the institutions that has been largely left out of the engagement has been the military, and they play a critical role still inside the country." He spoke of the need to "engage responsibly" with the Burmese military.

A *Financial Times* article on September 20 entitled "US courts military contacts with Myanmar [Burma]" indicated that this "engagement" was already underway. "Discreet talks have been held between US and Myanmar defence officials about prospects for re-establishing training programs and exchanges with Myanmar's military," it stated.

Military cooperation is actively being considered. "Proposals discussed so far involve joint training through the Association of South East Asian Nations and through established channels such as US think-tanks and defence schools," the *Financial Times* explained. "It has been suggested that some Myanmar cadets could attend US military academies and the US's International Military Education and Training program for Myanmar could be restarted."

In February, the Japanese newspaper *Kyodo News* reported that the Burmese military had used Thai military contacts to express interest in joining the annual US-led regional "Gold Cobra" war games. US Secretary of State Clinton has previously hinted that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief David Petraeus might visit Burma this year—a move that would open up the possibility of intelligence sharing with the Burmese military.

The US is quietly re-establishing its ties with the Burmese military, which go back to the 1960s and 1970s, and, in doing so, undercutting any potential for the Chinese military to access Burmese facilities. Suu Kyi's stamp of approval for the junta, which retains its autocratic hold on power, has provided the crucial political smokescreen for the Obama administration's cynical manoeuvres.



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