

MEMO ON MYANMAR

## Difficult Issues Clamor for Advocate's Attention



Soe Than Win/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi left the headquarters of her political party, the National League for Democracy, on Tuesday.

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BANGKOK — The jubilant throngs that greeted [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi](#), the pro-democracy leader, this past weekend in [Myanmar](#) confirmed that her huge popularity remains intact. But as she steps gingerly back into the swirl of political combat, she confronts difficult realities that will limit her ability to translate that popularity into fundamental change.

Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi is taking a conciliatory tone, at least for now, saying she bears no grudge toward her former jailers and suggesting that she might support the relaxation of

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international sanctions against the military government in Myanmar, formerly Burma. “If people really want sanctions to be lifted, I will consider this,” she said in an interview on Sunday. “This is the time Burma needs help.”

After seven years of isolation in her lakeside villa, she is now overwhelmed with supplicants and supporters seeking her ear. “I know I said I wanted to hear what the public is thinking,” she said during her rally on Sunday, perhaps only half joking. “But now that there are so many voices and so much noise, I don’t know what is being said anymore.”

In the coming weeks, she faces difficult decisions on uniting the opposition, the demands of armed ethnic minority groups, the sort of movement she hopes to shape and the degree to which she chooses to challenge the government.

She must also assimilate new realities that include the rising influence of China, the dispersal of wealth among well-connected businesses, and the emergence of new institutions and new political players as a result of parliamentary elections held just six days before her release. And looming above all these concerns are the ruling generals who, whatever their gestures or promises, remain determined not to cede power or to allow any real democratic opening.

A new Constitution, passed last year, sets up a bicameral national Parliament, 14 regional parliaments, a president, a cabinet and new government institutions that will give military rule a much more complex form.

All but the very senior members of the military junta were required to resign to run for office as civilians and were replaced by a younger generation of officers in their 50s whose personal agendas could conflict with those of the senior officers.

“It’s not the same environment that existed when she was taken into detention seven years ago,” said Priscilla Clapp, the former chief of mission in the American Embassy in Myanmar and a principal adviser to the [Asia Society](#) task force on United States policy toward Burma/Myanmar.

“She has come out into a different world, and I think she is trying to feel her way into it,” Ms. Clapp said.

Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi’s mandate is precarious, built purely on the gauge of an applause meter, without an organized base or formal platform to ground her. Her party, the National League for Democracy, was forced to disband when it declined

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to contest the elections.

On Tuesday, she made her first trip into downtown Yangon, formerly Rangoon, to file papers with the country's High Court asking to have her party reinstated, but analysts said the court was unlikely to rule in her favor.

While Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi has moved cautiously so far, some analysts said they did not expect this spirit of compromise to last. "She's always been confrontational, every time she has gotten out," said David I. Steinberg, a professor of Asian studies at the School of Foreign Service at [Georgetown University](#) in Washington, in an interview. "She has always tested the limits of how far she can go. I feel sure she'll try to quietly test the limits of what she can do."

She had been released twice before, in 1995 and in 2002, and both times she reached that limit. The outpouring of support for her was too much for the generals, and she was arrested and returned to detention.

Now 65, she has been under house arrest for 15 of the past 21 years.

Some people are asking not only what she might be able to accomplish now that she is free, but also how long she might remain free. She was returned to house arrest in 2003 after an attack by organized thugs on her motorcade that some people say was an assassination attempt.

"This is not an ordinary military dictatorship we are talking about," said Bertil Lintner, the author of seven books on Myanmar. "This is a military that has become expert at staying in power."

The liberation of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi says nothing about the broader motives of the military junta, Mr. Lintner said. "It's a public relations exercise for foreign opinion after a totally fraudulent election, rather than part of political reform, which it's not."

The generals may see this as a moment of national redefinition, within the boundaries they set.

Along with establishing the new Parliament, they have moved into a new capital and decreed a new flag, a new national anthem and a new name for their nation: the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (formerly the Union of Myanmar).

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“I don’t think there’s a place for Aung San Suu Kyi in that new state that the military has created,” Mr. Lintner said.

Although the bottom line of military control remains unchanged, this is a nation in some flux as it sets up its first civilian government since a 1962 coup and as the military enters a period of generational change.

“She has to maneuver among all of these difficult transitional questions,” Ms. Clapp said. “The country is in the middle of a transition the likes of which it has not seen for a long time. There are many different outcomes, so I think she’s going to be very careful.”

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