

The Meaning of Suu Kyi's Release

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Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of National League for Democracy (NLD), who had been victorious in the elections of 1990 with a massive mandate and was denied her role in politics of the country, is once again in the news headlines in the International Press. Since 1989, she was kept in house arrest or confinement by the military on one pretext or the other. All efforts were made to make her irrelevant from shaping the destiny of the nation. Her supporters were prosecuted, jailed or compelled to seek asylum elsewhere. Her NLD party was banned and the situation was created in which opposition activities were projected as anti-national. The media was gagged and the gathering of the people was restricted even in the Buddhist Wats. The irritating restrictions were imposed on telephone and mobile connections, internet facilities, and free movement of the people inside the country. Yet the military was unable in its containment drive against Suu Kyi. Her widespread influence remained intact. She became more popular, charismatic and iconic. All those unhappy with the political system of Myanmar and concerned about the problem of food, clothing, shelter and price rise, do think about Suu Kyi, whose vision and wisdom are acknowledged at the global level. Suu Kyi is a Nobel laureate, a recipient of Sakharin and Nehru award, who is well known for her non-violent democratic ideas. Her views about democracy, human rights and federalism for the country are known through her lectures and interviews. She is against externally supported upsurge. She will not like any movement against the regime which may be launched on the pattern of the Arab World. The events that have taken place in the case of Husni Mubarak in Egypt or Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, are not treated well for national honour.

Hence Suu Kyi is keen to find out an indigenous solution for which co-operation and understanding of the military rulers are required. However, a section of the military, especially the followers of General Than Swe are apprehensive that if the military will remove all restrictions/sanctions against NLD and allow Suu Kyi to play her legitimate role in the politics of the country, it will be disastrous for the national unity and solidarity. She like Corazon Aquino of the Philippines will pose a formidable challenge to the privileges of the military. The Philippine experience was astounding that despite President Ferdinand E Marcos, having centralized all powers of the Government in his own hands had to resign in 1986 before the people's power and seek asylum outside the country. The movement led by Aquino was so popular and so powerful that his mechanism of suppression miserably failed. The military ideologues in Myanmar argue similar viewpoints and hence NLD remains banned.

The candidature of Suu Kyi to fight in the elections is made illegal. Her aspiration for top leadership has been declared unconstitutional because she is married to a foreign national.

Poverty ratio in Myanmar is increasing. Myanmar has tried to resolve its problem of food, clothing and shelter and proved miserable in that direction. China is foremost in extending assistance, economically and strategically but that is not sufficient enough to resolve the problems. The ASEAN, the EU, the UN and the US will like constructive engagements if the nation takes substantial steps to improve human rights situation. The US and the EU will certainly remove all trade sanctions and restrictions if the regime will take measures for reconciliation and democratization. As far as their relations with China are concerned Burmese intellectuals are unhappy, because under the situation, Myanmar is projected as the client state of China. It is therefore that the government has taken strong actions against Indian insurgents at Sagaing and thus ULFA and Naga bases have been destroyed. The military is trying to diversify relations to display that it is not dependent on China. The military regime is showing preference for the purchase of Indian arms and ammunitions. And both governments are exchanging friendly overtures. These developments are sonorous for India, but the larger question is whether such steps are sufficient to please the world community. The financial problems which have gripped Myanmar is acute. The value of Kyatt in terms of American dollars is fluctuating. The story of the price rise of essential commodities like rice, milk and fruit are rising. The Buddhist demonstrations of 2007 were against the steep rise of fuel price, palm oil, chicken and drinking water, which was crushed. There has been unrest in Shan, Karen and Rakhine areas. They feel isolated and marginalized because of the anti insurgency drives. A grand vision is needed to bring them to the mainstream and the military leaders desperately need the co-operation of the public for reconciliation and development. Only leader with credibility, stature and vision who can enlighten the system is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Her involvement in the efforts for reconciliation, reconstruction and development of the nation can prove useful, sincere and convincing. The wise leaders of the present system know this reality and recent developments suggest the overtures of the military leaders in that direction.

It is known that after the release of Suu Kyi from house arrest on 13 November 2010, it was stated by the authorities that she is completely free; there are no conditions at all¹. The Burmese state radio on 13 Nov 2010, reported that Suu Kyi has been pardoned on all charges. Brigadier General Khin Yi visited the house of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at 54/56, University Avenue Road, Yangon at 17:00 hrs on that date and read out a home ministry order stating

that she had been pardoned on all charges. After reading the amnesty orders, Brig General Khin Yi cordially greeted Suu Kyi and said that their main duty is to maintain the rule of law, peace and tranquility, and he would like to see peace and stability in the future journey of the state and Suu Kyi responded by saying that she had similar desire. The kind gestures of Khin Yi were assuring and pleasant in comparison with the outbursts earlier of the military leaders against Suu Kyi since 1989. Many leaders of the government have tried to contact Suu Kyi and in that endeavor, the efforts of U Aung Kyi, Minister of Labour and Social Welfare have been admirable, whose roadmap to work with civilian leaders has attracted the attention of President U Thein Sein. Aung Kyi has met Suu Kyi on several occasions and credit may be given to him for arranging a meeting between Suu Kyi and U Thein Sein for reconciliations, cooperation and development. The government invited Suu Kyi for talks and she agreed.

The meeting between President U Thein Sein and Suu Kyi was held at Nay Pyi Taw on 21 August 2011, which is regarded as a landmark in the politics of Myanmar. The agenda of the meeting was around the four points that had been finalized between Suu Kyi and Aung Kyi on 12 August 2011, and they were

1. to join hand in hand to carry out tasks for the government stability, peace and development.
2. to cooperate constructively for the country's economic and social development and for the development of the democratic system
3. to shelve disputed views and to carry out cooperative tasks on reciprocal basis, and
4. to continue dialogue²

The ambience of the venue where the meeting took place was aesthetically decorated, and the photograph of Bogyoke Aung San was kept in the background. The photograph of General Than Swe was missing. The efforts were made to recognize the contribution of Bogyoke Aung San and that of Suu Kyi, and a portrait of President Thein Sein and Suu Kyi standing next to each other were widely circulated. The contents of the dialogue included the release of political prisoners, political role of Suu Kyi and end to conflict with ethnic minorities, which may help Myanmar in getting development assistance and lifting of trade sanctions³.

The President Thein Sein has been advocating reforms in the political system and keeping globalization in mind, will like business relations with the international community. The understanding and cooperation with Suu Kyi will certainly pave the path in fulfilling those objectives.

So far the response of Suu Kyi has been positive. In fact, she had called for a dialogue with the General's immediately after her release, saying that it was key to bringing about national reconciliation. As the general public and the Generals both are feeling insecure, we have to work hand-in-hand to feel safe and secure. Tin Oo, NLD Deputy Chairperson is quoted as saying that we are seeing more positive developments. The Generals are showing more positive developments and Suu Kyi has been more focused on national reconciliation. I think the situation will be much better in near future. The statement of Tin Oo indicates that she has the mandate of her party to have dialogues with the military. It is interesting that the military is facilitating the meeting of foreign diplomats and dignitaries with Suu Kyi. When Vijay Nambiar, the UN Secretary General's special envoy to Burma visited Myanmar in the last week of November 2010, this meeting was followed immediately after the meeting with Foreign Minister. In the past, such meetings were organized by the military in the government Guest House under tight surveillance. But restrictions were lifted this time and Nambiar was also allowed to meet NLD central executive committee members. The change in the working environment was noted and positive opinions started coming out for reconciliation and confidence building.

Suu Kyi is keen to pursue the dialogue with the government. When the crowds gathered to welcome her release, she had stated "I am glad to see so many people here and so happy to be free. This is a time to be quiet and a time to talk. People must work in unison. Only then we can achieve our goal" ⁴. Subsequently while talking to reporters on 14th November, Suu Kyi gave a call for a second multi-ethnic Panglong Conference taking into consideration 21st century concerns. The first Panglong agreement signed on 12 Feb 1947 had accepted full autonomy in internal administration for the ethnic controlled frontier areas after independence from Britain. This agreement could not be enforced as Bogyoke Aung San was assassinated. When the country became independent, U Nu (1948-62) supported the idea of autonomy, but could not get the resolution passed through the legislature. His successor General Ne Win 1962-88 was strongly opposed to the idea of autonomy for provinces on ethnic basis. His successor, General Saw Maung (1988-92) was also opposed to the proposal of autonomy for any areas in the country. General Than Swe (1992-2010) who succeeded General

Saw Maung was also strongly opposed to conceding autonomy, but the present President Thein Sein has been talking of reforms in the system and thus the leaders have taken initiative to suggest ideas. NLD had a meeting with ethnic leaders at Kale on 22 October 2010, which called for a federal system based on equality and democracy to be established through a second Panglong conference. They declared their resolve contained in the Kale Declaration that dialogue with ethnic leaders is important. Suu Kyi has refused the idea of separatism and violence, but agrees with the broad objectives of the Panglong spirits. The ethnic leaders believe that Suu Kyi will carry on her father's mission to honor the agreement. Shan intellectual Khuensai Jai-yen said that, "Of course, the decisive authority is in junta's hands, but we have only Suu Kyi who holds Bogyoke Aung San's legacy to bring it from the military to us" ⁵

Thus we find changes in the politics of Myanmar. This is not to suggest that President Thein Sein will act like Suharto of Indonesia in 1998 or Thanom Kittikachorn of Thailand in 1973. He will not do anything to lose the confidence of the military generals but he is keen to transform the socio-economic image of the country. Suu Kyi and her followers have to understand the limitations of President Thein Sein and grab whatever opportunities offered for serving the interests of the people and the nation in the existing dispensation.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the charismatic leader of Myanmar, is keen to work for the nation. Her country has natural resources and manpower. Its geographical location between India and China, its connectivity with ASEAN countries, its linkages with Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Siam, makes her strategically important. It needs proper vision and direction for development. In retrospect we find that Burma was the richest of all the Southeast Asian nations during the colonial period and there is no doubt that the history can be repeated. Suu Kyi's involvement in the politics of the country will certainly lead the country on the path of development.

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