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## Aung San Suu Kyi's risky strategy

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*Despite the transition to a hybrid civilian–military government in Myanmar, and a dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi and president Thein Sein, the opposition leader continued to call upon foreign governments to apply pressure against Naypyidaw, including sanctions, which harmed the general population more than those in power. This strategy ran the risk of being not only ineffective, but also counterproductive.*

Aung San Suu Kyi is in Europe, where she recently collected the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, awarded to her by the European Parliament in 1990 shortly after she was placed under house arrest by Burma's military government.<sup>1</sup> While on tour, she is speaking to senior officials and making public speeches.

As she has done on similar trips in the past, she is urging world leaders to put pressure on Burma's government to increase the scope and pace of reform. On one issue she has been quite specific, stating that

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aung San Suu Kyi Finally Collects Her 1990 Sakharov Prize', *RTE*, [Donnybrook, Ireland], 22 October 2013, [www.rte.ie/news/2013/1022/481997-aung-san-suu-kyi-strasbourg/](http://www.rte.ie/news/2013/1022/481997-aung-san-suu-kyi-strasbourg/).

‘the European Union must come out unambiguously on the need to change the constitution’.<sup>2</sup> She has also identified the armed forces’ ‘special position’ in Burmese politics as a key problem.<sup>3</sup>

This strategy of publicly calling upon foreign governments and international organisations to help her achieve domestic political goals is not new and, in the circumstances, is perhaps to be expected. However, it carries certain risks.

Between 1990 and 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi spent about 14 years under house arrest at the order of a ruthless military regime. While incarcerated, she had little scope to exercise her enormous popularity to political advantage inside Burma. However, she came to be highly respected outside the country and was able to use her considerable influence to gain the backing of powerful political figures, institutions and governments.<sup>4</sup>

During this period, Aung San Suu Kyi encouraged her foreign supporters to apply pressure against Burma’s military government. Accompanied in many cases by tough political and economic sanctions, they repeatedly called for her release and the release of other political prisoners, as well as recognition by the regime of internationally accepted human rights and the creation of a genuinely democratic government.

Since 2011, a new administration has been installed in Naypyidaw and Aung San Suu Kyi has been elected to parliament in free and fair by-elections. The armed forces have stepped back from day-to-day government and the international community is rushing in—some say with indecent haste—with advice and practical assistance.<sup>5</sup> Some issues identified in the past as obstacles to international engagement no longer seem to be problems.<sup>6</sup>

2 ‘Suu Kyi Urges World to Pressure Myanmar Leaders on Reform’, *Burma News International*, 22 October 2013, [bnionline.net/index.php/news/mizzima/16371-suu-kyi-urges-world-to-pressure-myanmar-leaders-on-reform.html](http://bnionline.net/index.php/news/mizzima/16371-suu-kyi-urges-world-to-pressure-myanmar-leaders-on-reform.html) [page discontinued].

3 Jonathan Stearns and Ian Wishart, ‘Suu Kyi Says Myanmar Must End Military’s “Special Position”’, *Bloomberg*, 22 October, [www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-10-21/suu-kyi-says-myanmar-must-end-military-s-special-position-.html](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-10-21/suu-kyi-says-myanmar-must-end-military-s-special-position-.html).

4 David I. Steinberg, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi and US Policy Toward Burma/Myanmar’, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.29, No.3, 2010, pp.35–59, [doi.org/10.1177/186810341002900302](https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341002900302).

5 Rowan Callick, ‘Companies Rush to Myanmar “New Frontier” for Opportunities’, *The Australian*, 24 May 2013, [www.theaustralian.com.au/business/economics/companies-rush-to-myanmar-new-frontier-for-opportunities/story-e6fgr926-1226649539387#](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/economics/companies-rush-to-myanmar-new-frontier-for-opportunities/story-e6fgr926-1226649539387#) [page discontinued].

6 Andrew Selth, ‘Burma and North Korea: Again? Still?’, *The Interpreter*, 10 July 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/07/10/Burma-and-North-Korea-Again-Still.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/07/10/Burma-and-North-Korea-Again-Still.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-again-still](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-again-still)].

Yet despite these welcome developments, and periodic discussions between her and President Thein Sein, Aung San Suu Kyi still seems determined to use her international standing to apply external pressure on Naypyidaw. This raises the question of whether such a strategy can deliver Aung San Suu Kyi the outcomes she seeks.

Diehard advocates of sanctions still claim that international pressure prompted the paradigm shift in policy that saw the advent of a hybrid civilian–military government in Burma and the launch of an ambitious reform program.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is no evidence to support such a view. Indeed, as US and other officials have admitted, sanctions were no more than a ‘modest inconvenience’ to the military regime, while making life more difficult for the civilian population.<sup>8</sup>

More to the point, the pressures applied by foreign governments and organisations, and their strong rhetoric, were in some ways counterproductive. By antagonising Burma’s military leadership, they encouraged their bunker mentality and the development of a garrison state. Aung San Suu Kyi’s public endorsement of sanctions against her own country and calls for regime change were seen by the generals as unpatriotic, if not treasonable.

Nor were incentives to reform any more successful. As Burma’s foreign minister put it in 2002: ‘[G]iving a banana to the monkey and then asking it to dance is not the way. We are not monkeys.’<sup>9</sup> Such behaviour on the part of the international community made the intensely nationalistic military leadership even more determined to resist external pressures and set their own agenda for a managed transition to a new system of government.

This is now the widely accepted explanation for the adoption of the regime’s roadmap to a ‘disciplined democracy’. It would be naive to claim that external factors did not play some part in the regime’s thinking, but it is clear that the policy changes seen since the 2010 elections stem largely from internal factors and the government’s interest in modernising Burma, not as a result of economic sanctions or foreign threats.

7 Mary Kissel, ‘Bush’s Burma Policy, Obama’s Victory Lap’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 November 2012, [online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB20001424127887324439804578115312833763472](http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB20001424127887324439804578115312833763472) [page discontinued].

8 Derek Tonkin, ‘Suu Kyi is Fighting, But How Long For?’, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 11 February 2011, [www.dvb.no/analysis/suu-kyi-is-fighting-but-how-long-for/14223](http://www.dvb.no/analysis/suu-kyi-is-fighting-but-how-long-for/14223) [page discontinued].

9 ‘Aiding Burma’, *The Irrawaddy*, November 2002, [www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=2768](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2768).

Given this conclusion, it is curious that Aung San Suu Kyi seems to be counting on Thein Sein's government being more responsive to external pressure than the former military regime. Even if the President and those around him were susceptible to such measures, the armed forces leadership is unlikely to be so, and its support is crucial not only for the continuation of the reform process, but also for any amendment of the constitution.

Bear in mind, too, that since 2011, foreign governments and international organisations have embraced Thein Sein and publicly praised his reform program. Naturally, they have reserved the right to discuss contentious issues like the 2008 constitution. However, the same governments have been anxious to not do or say anything that might interrupt the momentum of the reform process or reduce their newly acquired influence in Naypyidaw.

In any case, Aung San Suu Kyi has less influence on world affairs than in the past. The Burmese Government is not the only one that has changed. New administrations elsewhere are less in thrall to her iconic status and more sensitive to accusations of interfering in Burma's internal affairs. Aung San Suu Kyi herself has been criticised for failing to speak out in support of oppressed communities in Burma, such as the Muslim Rohingya<sup>10</sup> and the Kachin.<sup>11</sup>

It is also surprising that Aung San Suu Kyi would adopt a strategy that seems so much at odds with her current efforts to gain the trust of Burma's generals.<sup>12</sup> As she has acknowledged, the country cannot make the transition to a genuine democracy without the agreement and support of the armed forces. Nor can she become president without a constitutional amendment that is endorsed by the military bloc in parliament.

With all this in mind, some observers are asking whether Aung San Suu Kyi's continued requests to the international community to apply pressure on Naypyidaw are doing more harm than good. Whether or not foreign governments respond, such a strategy threatens to harm her already shaky relationship with Thein Sein. It is also likely to alienate the generals on whom she depends, not only for the realisation of her own leadership ambitions, but also for the further democratisation of Burma.

10 Azeem Ibrahim, 'The Rohingya of Burma: Betrayed by Aung San Suu Kyi', *The Huffington Post*, 17 May 2013, [www.huffingtonpost.com/azeem-ibrahim/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya\\_b\\_3287191.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/azeem-ibrahim/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya_b_3287191.html).

11 Nang Seng, 'I Feel Betrayed by Aung San Suu Kyi', *The Huffington Post*, 2 October 2012, [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nang-seng/i-feel-betrayed-by-aung-s\\_b\\_1924918.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nang-seng/i-feel-betrayed-by-aung-s_b_1924918.html).

12 'Aung San Suu Kyi Attends Burma's Armed Forces Day', *BBC News*, 27 March 2013, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21950145](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21950145).

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