

When Aung San Suu Kyi comes to call

(10:24 AEDT, 3 December 2013)

Aung San Suu Kyi's first visit to Australia, from 27 November to 2 December 2013, was in most respects a predictable exercise in hero-worship and cautious diplomacy, but it also highlighted several aspects of Australian policy towards Myanmar that demanded closer attention.

At one level, Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to Australia last week was all high praise, inspiring speeches and standing ovations. At another level, it was hardheaded politics, diplomatic signals and muted criticisms. At times, history was simplified or rewritten to suit the occasion. In other words, there were no surprises and on all sides the visit was considered a resounding success.

Wherever she went, Aung San Suu Kyi was given a rapturous reception. She is clearly held in high regard by the Australian Government, the public and most members of the Burmese community (the Kachins boycotted the visit to protest her failure to speak out against recent military operations in Kachin State).¹ The Nobel laureate's many qualities and accomplishments were acknowledged with awards, honorary degrees and other accolades.

¹ Deborah Snow, 'Aung San Suu Kyi: Kachin Ethnic Group Boycotts Visit to Opera House', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 2013, www.smh.com.au/national/aung-san-suu-kyi-kachin-ethnic-group-boycotts-visit-to-opera-house-20131127-2yadu.html [page discontinued].

As packed auditoriums in three capital cities found, Aung San Suu Kyi is a capable and polished performer—quite comfortable in the public eye. In private meetings, too, she can be a persuasive advocate of her party's political causes and its wider aspirations for her country.

In her public speeches and media interviews, Aung San Suu Kyi stressed the themes of 'national reconciliation' and 'the rule of law'. She also embraced 'honest politics' and 'principled compromise'. She rejected the label 'democratic icon', emphasising that she had in fact been a practising politician ever since the formation of her party in 1988.² She said little specifically about her ambition to become President of Burma in 2016.³

In public and private, Aung San Suu Kyi emphasised that Burma was only at the beginning of the road to a true democracy and that, without major constitutional reforms, real progress towards that goal could not be achieved. On a number of occasions, she warned Australia against accepting the status quo and trying to strengthen relations with the current government in Naypyidaw. Instead, she sought support for her own party and its long-term goals.⁴

How Australia might do this, however, was not made clear. The country's aid, expertise and moral support were welcomed, but how Canberra could or should intervene in sensitive areas of Burma's domestic politics was not spelt out, at least not in public. Nor was there any discussion of whether attempts to influence internal developments in Burma may prove counterproductive—for example, by provoking a backlash from nationalists and other hardliners.⁵

There was some questioning of Aung San Suu Kyi's positions on contentious issues like the repression of Muslims in Burma, the military campaigns against certain armed ethnic groups and her relations with the

2 'Daw Aung San Suu Kyi AC: In Conversation with Dr Michael Fullilove', Lowy Institute, Sydney, 29 November 2013, lowyinstitute.org/news-and-media/videos/a-conversation-with-aung-san-suu-kyi [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/news-and-media/multimedia/video/daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-ac-conversation-dr-michael-fullilove].

3 'Aung San Suu Kyi Seduces Australia with Presidential Ambitions', *Xinhua*, [Beijing], 29 November 2013, news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-11/29/c_132927795.htm [page discontinued].

4 Australian Associated Press, 'Suu Kyi to Australia: Smart Money's On Us', *News.com*, 28 November 2013, www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/suu-kyi-to-australia-smart-moneys-on-us/story-e6frfku9-1226770386242.

5 Andrew Selth, 'Aung San Suu Kyi's Risky Strategy', *The Interpreter*, 30 October 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/10/30/Aung-San-Suu-Kyis-risky-strategy.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aung-san-suu-kyis-risky-strategy].

country's armed forces. However, it was always respectful, even gentle by Australian standards.⁶ She was clearly expecting such issues to be raised and had little difficulty in avoiding direct answers, usually by referring to broad principles and historical examples.

Aung San Suu Kyi's enormous popularity is both a boon and a burden. It will help her achieve some goals, but it will also pose real problems. There is no way she can meet everyone's high expectations, either at home or abroad. As she noted several times during her Australian tour, she has already had to make some difficult choices regarding her own and her party's future. There will be many more such challenges in the years ahead.

Back home, Aung San Suu Kyi faces a much more demanding audience. Her leadership style, policies and performance have been subject to criticism, not only by members of the government and armed forces, but also by people within her own party. Some ethnic communities and other sectors of Burmese society are unhappy with what The Australian National University's Nicholas Farrelly has described as her personal transformation 'from symbol to strategist'.⁷

Also, her popularity worries many conservative Burmese.⁸ Not only does it pose a threat to the armed forces' continuing control over the political process, but also they fear the outcome of elections in 2015, which, if free and fair, would likely give the NLD a large majority in the national parliament. The prospect of a relatively liberal, populist civilian president, supported by a fractious and inexperienced party, troubles them deeply.

She may be widely admired, but Aung San Suu Kyi's future, and that of her country, is far from certain.

6 'Aung San Suu Kyi Calls for "Genuine Democracy"', *7.30 Report*, [ABC TV], 28 November 2013, www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3901329.htm.

7 Nicholas Farrelly, 'Suu Kyi Carries Great Expectations', *The Canberra Times*, 29 November 2013, www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/suu-kyi-carries-great-expectations-20131128-2ycry.html [page discontinued].

8 Sanay Lin and Simon Roughneen, 'A Suu Kyi Presidency Would Bring "Chaos", Says Firebrand Monk', *The Irrawaddy*, 28 November 2013, www.irrawaddy.org/burma/suu-kyi-presidency-bring-chaos-says-firebrand-monk.html [page discontinued] [now at www.irrawaddy.com/election/news/a-suu-kyi-presidency-would-bring-chaos-says-firebrand-monk].

As a footnote to my previous post,⁹ it is worth recording that, throughout Aung San Suu Kyi's Australian visit, most of the officials, journalists and academics she met referred to her country as 'Myanmar', or used neutral formulations such as 'your country'. The Australian National University acknowledged the controversy over the country's name but rejected what Chancellor Gareth Evans described as 'linguistic authoritarianism'.¹⁰

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has said that she 'adopted the Government's protocol in relation to the use of Burma or Myanmar', but this now seems much more flexible than under the former Labor Government. During a joint press conference with Aung San Suu Kyi at Parliament House on 28 November, the Prime Minister referred to 'Burma' and 'the Government of Burma'.¹¹ Whether this was a courtesy to his guest, who still uses the country's old name, or is hard evidence of a policy change is difficult to judge.

It may have simply been a gaffe. After all, this was the same occasion when, in an apparent attempt at empathy, the Prime Minister told the world's most famous political prisoner: 'I was an opposition leader myself for four years.'¹²

9 Andrew Selth, 'Australia and the Burma/Myanmar Name Debate', *The Interpreter*, 27 November 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/11/27/Australia-and-the-BurmaMyanmar-name.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-and-burmayanmar-name-debate].

10 'Aung San Suu Kyi at ANU', November 2013, new.livestream.com/canberradcc/AungSanSuuKyi [page discontinued].

11 Tony Abbott, Prime Minister of Australia, 'Joint Press Conference with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi', [Transcript], Canberra, 28 November 2013, www.pm.gov.au/media/2013-11-28/joint-press-conference-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi [page discontinued] [now at pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-23121].

12 'Myanmar Opposition Leader Aung San Suu Kyi Says Mercy Important in Asylum Seeker Debate', *ABC News*, 29 November 2013, www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-28/aung-san-suu-kyi-weighs-in-on-asylum-debate/5123282.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.