

BURMA

The Proof of The Pudding

The release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi after some 20 months of house arrest was welcomed around the world. But don't hold your breath for substantial political change any time soon

By Bertil Lintner/CHIANG MAI

CELEBRATIONS OVER THE May 6 release of Burma's opposition and pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, are premature. For starters, the haphazard manner of her release suggests that no firm deal has been struck with the country's military government on the freedom of movement and political activities of both Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD). That could spell

trouble in the future. Furthermore, the regime's track record does not inspire confidence about its commitment to reconciliation and democracy.

After inviting the world's press to Rangoon for the event, the ruling junta realized that everyone wanted to know about the terms of Suu Kyi's release—they hadn't even talked to her about the key issue. "She was undoubtedly able to get

THE MALAYSIAN MAN IN THE MIDDLE

Retired Malaysian envoy Razali Ismail has been widely credited with playing a pivotal role in advancing Burma's reconciliation process with his low-key, nonconfrontational approach over the past two years. But, despite Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest, it will be some time before Razali's diplomacy can be judged—he defines success as the holding of a free and fair general election.

Contrary to conventional wisdom that the country's future would be decided by the world's major players, the United States and Europe, Razali has gone some way to crafting an Asian solution to a most intractable Asian problem. His close links with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad have helped considerably.

"The fact that he is Asian, that he is Malaysian, and backed by a regime the longevity of which the Burmese military respects—all these things have worked out well," says David Steinberg, a specialist on Burma at Georgetown University in the U.S. "The American style of banging the table and screaming isn't appropriate in this case."

But Razali, as United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special envoy to Burma, represents the entire international community

and not just one section of it. And while decade-long coercion in the form of boycotts and political isolation has demonstrably failed to induce democratic change in Burma, cosying up to the ruling State Peace and Development Council obviously isn't the only factor at work lately. The U.S. and Europe have maintained the pressure, producing a combination of sanctions and engagement that seems to offer the best prospects of results.

Still, unlike his Peruvian predecessor and some of the other UN officials assigned to work on Burma in the past, Razali has been able to persuade seemingly implacable foes to meet regularly and develop confidence and trust in each other. And they give much of the credit to Razali. Even as he was named in an international press report over the appearance of a possible conflict of interest in Burma between his commercial and diplomatic ventures, he was being praised by the Burmese rivals for transforming their struggle from confrontation to cooperation.

"He has been very helpful in giving his thoughts and opinions on what is going on in the world and what should happen," says Col. Hla Min, a military spokesman. "He has done it in such a friendly way

THE REGION

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to see foreign aid reinstated than a commitment to political change.

They note the regime's past record of failing to honour pledges for change. For example, intelligence chief Lt-Gen. Khin Nyunt in January last year urged the international community to resume aid "because of positive developments" in Burma. The appeal came a few days after United Nations special envoy Razali Ismail, who has played a key intermediary role (see accompanying story *on page 12*), announced that Suu Kyi and the ruling officers had opened a dialogue. But the West had since become increasingly frustrated with the apparent lack of progress in the talks.

Thus Suu Kyi's release has been welcomed by all parties and, despite scepticism about the junta's motives, there are signs for hope. Both sides have compromised and appear to have shifted from their hardline positions.

The NLD leader, whose party was robbed of its landslide win in the 1990 general election and almost destroyed by the military in the following years, told reporters that the talks had advanced beyond the confidence-building stage and would now start to tackle thorny issues

such as the constitution and the economy. But she admitted there were no specific arrangement for future talks.

While Suu Kyi indicated she would exercise restraint in her nationwide movements-her bid to travel outside Rangoon in September 2000 had prompted the regime's last clampdown on her and the NLD-she rebutted suggestions that she was going soft on the government. The

"FOR ALL PEOPLE IN BURMA TO ENJOY BASIC freedom-that would be a major breakthrough for democracy"
AUNG SAN SUU KYI, BURMA'S PRO-DEMOCRACY LEADER

daughter of Burma's founding father, Aung San, said her goals remained the same and she would continue calling for trade, aid and tourism boycotts until there was real change.

Meanwhile, the Western world will keep the pressure on the regime until it sees signs of real movement. On April 11, the European parliament called for tougher European Union sanctions, including an investment ban, if dialogue between the military and democracy activists fails to make headway in the next six months.

In the United States, President George W. Bush welcomed Suu Kyi's release but stressed that the U.S. wanted to see concrete steps towards political reform and reconciliation, including prisoner releases, before any review of U.S. sanctions.

Western powers are convinced that it is their tough policy that forced the junta to make concessions, while Burma's Asian neighbours have always argued that

quiet diplomacy is more effective. But, as the Western diplomat in Rangoon puts it, "The regime does not like any kind of external interference."

And there's the rub. Analysts fear that the government is only making cosmetic changes under duress and that, as in its peace talks over the years with various ethnic-minority rebels groups, it will never bargain or compromise on substantive political issues. And if there is no give within a reasonable time, Suu Kyi will withdraw her pipe of peace. □