

Rock star welcome for Suu Kyi on Myanmar campaign trail
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KAWHMU (Myanmar), Feb 11 — Crowds of thousands lined the streets cheering and tooting horns as Myanmar Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi hit the campaign trail for the first time today in a bid to become a lawmaker in the country's parliament.

Riding in a convoy of three dozen cars and flanked by hundreds of motorcycles, the leader of Myanmar's long struggle against military dictatorship waved and smiled as crowds chanted "long live mother Suu" en-route to the constituency where she will contest April by-elections.

"I'm very encouraged to see so many more people than I expected, showing us the support and warm welcome," Suu Kyi, 66, shouted from a car sunroof on her arrival in Kawhmu township, about 30km outside the commercial capital, Yangon.

"We need your strength, for the people," she said to the crowd, much of which held aloft her pictures alongside that of her late father and independence hero, Aung San.

The decision to contest the by-election represents a giant leap of faith for Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party after two decades being harassed and sidelined by the former military junta, which made way to a nominally civilian government 11 months ago.

The NLD boycotted the widely flawed 2010 election but last year accepted an olive branch from the government after President Thein Sein, the former junta's fourth-in-command, reached out to Suu Kyi, who regards the reform-minded ex-general as sincere and trustworthy.

Rare rally

Suu Kyi's convoy crawled along the road as dilapidated, overloaded trucks shuttled in crowds of Burmese carry NLD flags in an outpouring of excitement at a rare rally in a country tightly controlled for 49 years by an army that brutally suppressed pro-democracy activism.

"I wish I had more time to talk to you but I'm afraid I cannot stop now. I'll try to spend more time to talk with you," shouted Suu Kyi, dressed in a traditional ethnic Kayin outfit worn by the people of her constituency.

Her bid for a parliamentary seat is largely symbolic, with only 48 seats up for grabs in the by-elections, meaning the NLD can only secure a tiny stake in the national legislature.

The last time the NLD contested an election was in 1990, when its landslide win was ignored by the junta. Suu Kyi did not run in the poll because she was held under house arrest.

It remains to be seen exactly what Suu Kyi could achieve in a parliament stacked with military appointees and lawmakers allied with a well-heeled party widely believed to have

been formed and funded by the old regime before it stepped aside.

But the elections will be closely watched by the international community as a litmus test of the government's sincerity towards reforms, which have so far included the release of an estimated 650 political prisoners and ceasefire talks with ethnic rebel armies.

Diplomats and analysts expect the polls will be free and fair, despite irregularities in the 2010 election, because the participation of Suu Kyi, the charismatic darling of the international community, would be a powerful endorsement of its fledgling democratic system.

A clean poll is also a pre-requisite for the lifting of Western sanctions that are currently under review, as foreign governments seek to bring the vastly underdeveloped but resource-rich nation out from the cold after two decades of isolation. — Reuters

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