

Myanmar's resistance icon is off to a rocky start as she embraces a new role as party boss in a fragile democracy.

Suu Kyi's precarious pivot

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL
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CAREER SHIFT: Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was a living symbol of resistance to military dictatorship during her years of house arrest.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi is making a career change, from icon of liberty opposing Myanmar's junta to party boss in a fragile new quasi-democracy. The transition hasn't been easy.

At a talk in London in June, a student from the Kachin ethnic minority asked why Suu Kyi (a majority Burman) seemed reluctant to condemn a bloody government military offensive against Kachin rebels. The conflict has displaced some 75,000 people.

Suu Kyi's answer was studiously neutral: "We want to know what's happening more clearly before we condemn one party or the other."

The Kachin community was livid. The Kachinland News website called her reply an "insult." Kachin protesters gathered outside her next London event. An "open letter" from 23 Kachin groups worldwide said Suu Kyi was "condoning state-sanctioned violence."

That a woman so widely revered should arouse such hostility might have seemed unthinkable back in April. A landslide by-election victory propelled Suu Kyi and 42 other members of her National League for Democracy into Myanmar's parliament. Not anymore. Once idolized without question for her courageous two-decade stand against the old junta, Suu Kyi now faces a chorus of criticism even as she emerges as a powerful lawmaker here.

She has quickly become an influential voice in the country's newly empowered parliament. Still, ethnic groups accuse her of condoning human-rights abuses by failing to speak out on behalf of long-suffering peoples in Myanmar's restive border states. Economists worry that her bleak public appraisals of Myanmar's business climate will scare foreign investors. Political analysts say her party has few real policies beyond the statements of its world-famous chairperson. She must also contend with conflict within the fractious democracy movement she helped found.

International critics have seized upon her ambiguous response to one of Myanmar's



ROCK STAR: Suu Kyi autographing the blouse of a student in the new parliament building in the capital Naypyitaw. Fans flock her almost wherever she goes. **REUTERS/SOE SEYA TUN**

REUTERS TV



See the video on prisoner to politician: <http://link.reuters.com/kub87s>

most urgent humanitarian issues: the fate of 800,000 stateless Rohingya Muslims in remote western Myanmar. There, clashes with ethnic Rakhine Buddhists have killed at least 77 people and left 90,000 homeless since June.

Spurned by both Myanmar and neighbouring Bangladesh, which hosts 300,000 refugees, many Rohingya live in appalling conditions in Rakhine State. The United Nations has called the Muslim minority "virtually friendless" in Buddhist-dominated Myanmar. The violence erupted in June, days before Suu Kyi's first trip to Europe in 24 years.

"Are the Rohingya citizens of your country or are they not?" a journalist asked Suu Kyi in Norway, after she collected the Nobel Peace Prize she was awarded in 1991

while under house arrest.

"I do not know," said Suu Kyi. Her rambling answer nettled both the Rohingya, who want recognition as Myanmar citizens, and the locals in Rakhine, who regard them as invaders. The reply contrasted with the moral clarity of her Nobel speech, in which she had spoken about "the uprooted of the earth ... forced to live out their lives among strangers who are not always welcoming."

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

Suu Kyi's moral clarity helped make the former junta a global pariah. Her new role as political party leader demands strategic ambiguity as well. She must retain her appeal to the majority Burmans and Buddhists, without alienating ethnic minorities or compatriots of other faiths. She must also engage with the widely despised military, which remains by far the most dominant power in Myanmar.

Her political instincts have been appar-



OPPOSITION LEADER: Suu Kyi striding the halls of parliament, where she quickly emerged as an influential voice. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**

ent to Myanmar watchers since 1988, when she returned after spending much of her life abroad. Amid a brutal military crackdown, she emerged as leader of the democracy movement. She spent most of the next two decades in jail or house arrest and yet remained the movement's inspiration.

"I don't like to be referred to as an icon, because from my point of view, icons just sit there," she said in a lecture on September 27 at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "I have always seen myself as a politician. What do they think I have been doing for the past 24 years?"

Suu Kyi declined multiple interview requests from Reuters for this article.

Myanmar's reforms have accelerated since she was freed from house arrest in November 2010, days before an election stage-managed by the military installed a quasi-civilian government. This year, it has freed dissidents, eased media censorship and started tackling a dysfunctional economy.

Myanmar's emergence from authoritarianism is often compared to the Arab Spring. Yet its historic reforms were ushered in not by destabilizing street protests, but by former gener-

A family of destiny and tragedy

A month before Aung San Suu Kyi was born, on June 19, 1945, her family moved into a two-story mansion near Yangon's Kandawgyi Lake. Built on a small hill, it resembles the house from Hitchcock's "Psycho", but with a real-life history of horror.

An older brother drowned in the garden pond, while a younger sister died in infancy. Then, in July 1947, six months before his country gained independence from the British, her father, General Aung San, was assassinated. He was 32. Suu Kyi was two.

After the assassination, the government granted the family land on the shore of nearby Inya Lake. Suu Kyi grew up at this now-famous address: 54 University Avenue.

She was educated in Delhi and Oxford, where she met and later married Michael Aris, a Tibet scholar. They had two children, Alexander and Kim, and for the next 15 years she was an Oxford housewife.

Since childhood, Suu Kyi had been "deeply preoccupied with the question of what she might do to help her people," Aris wrote in 1991. "She never for a minute

forgot that she was the daughter of Burma's national hero, Aung San."

Suu Kyi returned to Yangon in 1988 to nurse her dying mother and was swept up in a pro-democracy uprising against military rule. Soldiers crushed it, and Suu Kyi spent most of the next 21 years imprisoned in her own home.

Aris was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1997 and, refused a visa by the junta, died without seeing his wife again. Visits by Alexander and Kim were also stopped.

Kim, now 35, was reunited with his mother soon after her release from house arrest in 2010. Alexander, 39, lives in Washington State, but didn't see Suu Kyi during her whirlwind U.S. trip.

Nor did her estranged brother Aung San Oo, now a U.S. citizen living in San Diego. They have fought a 12-year legal battle over the house on University Avenue. A Yangon court in June awarded Aung San Oo a half-share in the two-acre property, but Suu Kyi's lawyers said she will appeal.

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als such as President Thein Sein.

Suu Kyi's role was pivotal. A meeting she held with Thein Sein in the capital of Naypyitaw in August 2011 marked the start of her pragmatic engagement with a government run by ex-soldiers. She pronounced him "sincere" about reforming Myanmar, an endorsement that paved the way for U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Naypyitaw last November and, earlier this year, the scrapping of most Western sanctions.

A saint-like reputation for unwavering principle can be unhelpful in politics, a murky world of compromise and negotiation. So can adulation, which generates expectations that not even Myanmar's "human rights superstar" - as Amnesty International calls her - can fulfill.

Suu Kyi realizes this. "To be criticised and attacked is an occupational hazard for politicians. To be praised and idealized is also an occupational hazard and much the less desirable of the two." She wrote that 14 years ago.

Today, she regularly visits her parliamentary district of Kawhmu, a small and impoverished rice-growing area near the commercial capital Yangon. On a recent morning, as she was driven in an SUV along Kawhmu's potholed roads, villagers spilled

out of their huts to cheer for "Mother Suu."

Kawhmu's problems - household debt, lack of electricity, joblessness - are Myanmar's writ small. "Some villages around here have no young people," says Aung Lwin Oo, 45, a carpenter and member of the National League for Democracy. "They have all left to work in Thailand and Malaysia."

UNGLAMOROUS WORK

Suu Kyi's first stop that day was the Buddhist monastery. There, she prayed with the monks and met representatives from two villages to settle a money dispute. Then she ate lunch with NLD members at a tin-roofed wooden bungalow - the party's Kawhmu headquarters - and discussed drainage issues with local officials.

Her new job is unglamorous, but aides say she relishes it. "She enjoys political life," said Win Tin, an NLD elder and long-time confidant. "She enjoys it to the utmost."

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Aung San Suu Kyi

Myanmar opposition leader



ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: Suu Kyi discussing irrigation issues with officials in her constituency of Kawhmu in southern Myanmar. REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

She is also adapting to life in Naypyitaw, the isolated new capital built from scratch by the junta, where she lives in a house protected by a fence topped with razor wire. In the Lower House of parliament, the colourful garb worn by many ethnic delegates lends a festive atmosphere. Sitting near Suu Kyi is an MP from Chin State who wears a head-dress of boar's teeth and hornbill feathers.

Men in green uniforms, however, dominate one side of the chamber. Myanmar's constitution, ratified after a fraudulent referendum in 2008, reserves a quarter of parliamentary seats for military personnel chosen by armed forces chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, a protege of the retired dictator, Than Shwe.

Suu Kyi's mere presence in parliament breathes legitimacy into a political system built by the junta that jailed her. Her party has reversed many long-cherished positions to get here.

The NLD boycotted both the constitution-drafting process and the 2010 election. That vote was rigged in favour of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, now the ruling party and the NLD's main electoral rival. Suu Kyi's camp also demanded that the military recognize the results of a 1990 election, which the NLD won easily but the junta nullified.

Her party abandoned these stances to take part in April's by-elections. It now holds less than a tenth of the lower house seats, but Suu Kyi ensures the NLD punches above its weight.

She led opposition to a higher education bill that she deemed substandard; it was scrapped in July and will now be redrafted by legislators. She also helped kill a clause in a foreign-investment law that would have protected Myanmar's cronies businessmen.

In August she was named chair of a 15-member parliamentary committee on "rule of law and tranquility," which could further amplify her influence.

Her star power has limits, however. Reforming the constitution to dial back the

military's influence remains an NLD priority. That requires three-quarters support in parliament, including from some military delegates - a daunting task even for Suu Kyi.

"She is very persuasive," said Ohn Kyaing, NLD party spokesman and member of parliament. But "without the military's help, we can't change our constitution. We have no chance."

DEMOCRACY'S SPOILS

While the NLD's by-election landslide suggests it will win the next general election in 2015, the party hardly seems like a government-in-waiting.

The NLD was formed in September 1988 after a military crackdown that killed or injured thousands of pro-democracy protesters. The junta arrested Suu Kyi before the NLD was a year old, and hounded, jailed and tortured its members. In 2003, government thugs attacked Suu Kyi's convoy, killing dozens of her supporters. She was lucky to escape alive. Most NLD offices were shut down.

When Suu Kyi was freed from house arrest in 2010, her party was a moribund force with a geriatric leadership. She set about rejuvenating it, personally opening dozens of offices. Two of the party's aging co-founders, Win Tin and Tin Oo, both in their eighties, have been nudged into "patron" roles.

The party is booming - it now has a million members, spokesman Ohn Kyaing said. But success is bringing a new set of problems. The NLD plans to hold its first national party conference in late 2012 or early 2013, and protests have erupted in several constituencies, including Suu Kyi's Kawhmu, over who gets to attend.

The dispute highlights the friction between old NLD members, who survived two decades of persecution, and new members who joined in reform-era Myanmar. "The old ones don't want to give up their posts because they struggled," said Ohn Kyaing.

It also reveals a struggle between the party headquarters and far-flung branches,

with local officials accusing their leaders of being bossy or unresponsive. At least five members were suspended for disobeying or protesting against the party leadership.

Suu Kyi heads a seven-member Central Executive Committee which, past and present NLD members say, effectively rubber-stamps her decisions. These included the NLD's refusal in April to swear a parliamentary oath to "uphold and abide by" the constitution. Imposing her will might not be democratic, said Aung Kyi Nyunt, an NLD upper house legislator. "But it's not authoritarian, because she never orders (us) to follow her decisions. We already agree."

After a two-week stand-off and criticism from supporters, the "Iron Aunty" backed down and her MPs took their seats.

The NLD also has a troubled relationship with Myanmar's reinvigorated media. One newspaper said in May that Suu Kyi's bodyguards had assaulted one of its reporters, which the NLD denies.

Some Burmese-language websites are dedicated to smearing Suu Kyi. Their unsubstantiated gossip - one falsely claimed that she has a teenage daughter by a Burmese lover - strikingly resembles junta-era propaganda. (The websites, whose owners protect their identities by registering through proxies, couldn't be reached for comment.)

The NLD's parliamentary debut has also highlighted a lack of concrete policies and experts to formulate them, a critical weakness when Myanmar's reformist government is drafting new legislation at a breakneck pace.

Pressed by Reuters in Kawhmu to explain the NLD's policy on the Rohingya, for example, Suu Kyi seemed to say the party didn't have one. "It's not a policy that has to be formulated by the NLD," she said. "It's something that the whole country must be involved in. It's not just a party concern."

Suu Kyi's popularity in Myanmar is not as universal as many Western admirers assume. She is adored in the lowlands, where fellow ethnic Burmans predominate and her image adorns homes, shops, cars and

Chronology: Aung San Suu Kyi's recent political career

- 2010**
 - **Nov 13** - Released from house arrest. Suu Kyi resumes her role as NLD leader.
 - **Aug 19** - Meets President Thein Sein for the first time, pronounces him "sincere" about reform.
- 2011**
 - **Nov 18** - NLD says it will register to run in 2012 by-elections.
 - **Nov 30** - Hillary Clinton arrives in Myanmar, the first visit by a US Secretary of State in over 50 years.
 - **Apr 1** - NLD wins 43 of 44 seats it contests in by-elections. Suu Kyi becomes MP for Kawhmu.
 - **Apr 22** - NLD confirms its new MPs will not make parliamentary debut due to dispute over oath.
 - **Apr 23** - European Union agrees to suspend most Myanmar sanctions for a year. New parliamentary session begins without the NLD.
 - **Apr 30** - NLD ends boycott, the oath unchanged.
 - **May 2** - Suu Kyi and NLD MPs are sworn into parliament.
- 2012**
 - **May 17** - Clinton announces the suspension of U.S. sanctions barring investment in Myanmar.
 - **Jun 9** - Sectarian violence erupts in Rohingya-dominated northern Rakhine State. At least 80 people killed and thousands of homes burnt down.
 - **Jun 15** - Suu Kyi arrives in Norway on five-nation tour of Europe.
 - **Jun 16** - Accepts the Nobel Peace Prize she was awarded in 1991 while under house arrest.
 - **Jul 25** - Uses her maiden speech in Naypyitaw parliament to demand more legal protection for ethnic minorities.
 - **Sep 16** - Leaves for the U.S., her first visit to the country in over 20 years.



MILITARY RULE: Suu Kyi, nicknamed “Iron Aunty,” has vowed to change provisions in the constitution that guarantee the military a quarter of the seats in parliament. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**

T-shirts. Burmans, or Bamar, make up two-thirds of Myanmar’s 60 million population.

That reverence fades in rugged border regions, occupied by ethnic minorities who have fought decades-long wars against Myanmar’s Burman-dominated military. In rural Shan State, named after the largest minority, images of Suu Kyi are hard to find.

Suu Kyi used her maiden speech in parliament in July to call for greater legal protection of minorities. But this has not inoculated her against criticism from ethnic leaders.

Among them is Khun Htun Oo, a leading Shan politician who was jailed for almost seven years by the former junta. Suu Kyi has been “neutralized” by participating in parliament, he told reporters in Washington last month, a day before the two of them picked up awards from a human-rights group. “The trust in her has gone down.”

In an interview with CNN during her

U.S. trip, Suu Kyi stoked the anger with a gaffe. She admitted that she had a “soft spot” for Myanmar’s military, which was founded by her father, the independence hero General Aung San. That expression of filial piety ignited a storm of negative comments on Facebook, Myanmar’s main forum for popular political discussion.

For years, the NLD backed calls for a United Nations Commission of Inquiry into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Myanmar. This push has been quietly dropped since Suu Kyi’s release. “What we believe in is not retributive justice but restorative justice,” she said in March. Restorative justice, she added, did not mean putting junta members on trial.

Western governments take their cue from Suu Kyi on human rights. And they use such equivocations “to justify doing nothing” about issues of justice and ac-

countability, said Mark Farmaner of London-based advocacy group Burma Campaign UK. He noted it took more than two months for British Foreign Secretary William Hague to comment on the violence against the Rohingya minority.

Suu Kyi will speak up on the Rohingya issue “when the time comes,” said NLD spokesman Ohn Kyaing. “Politics is timing.”

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