

A Turn for the Worse

Government and opposition grow farther apart

By Bertil Lintner in Bangkok

Aung San Suu Kyi doesn't like taking no for an answer, but she may have to get used to it. Since her release in July from six years of house arrest, Burma's most prominent opposition leader has sought some sort of dialogue with the military government that imprisoned her. The government has steadfastly refused, even while tolerating Suu Kyi's renewed high profile.

Alas, the generals seem to have tired of this delicate minuet, and appear to be reverting to unbridled hostility. The clearest sign of their change in mood came on October 19 and 20, when the *New Light of Myanmar*, a government mouthpiece, published two harsh attacks on Suu Kyi and the movement she is trying to revive after years of repression.

One of the two pieces—both published under the pseudonymous by-line U Phyo—lashed out at Rangoon groups who “are cracking cheap jokes at will to satisfy the average level of people, thereby engaging in destructive acts . . . If I, U Phyo, were a police officer . . . I would certainly have taken action against these people for obstructing traffic.”

So much for reconciliation? Many are starting to question seriously whether there can be any accommodation between Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and the ruling junta, officially known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or Slorc. What's more, some think, if the opposition doesn't soon produce something more tangible than mere words, Suu Kyi, despite all the talk about her being “Asia's Mandela,” could find herself discredited and marginalized.

Whether government and opposition are indeed moving farther apart should become clearer on November 16, when Burma celebrates its national day. The two camps are already planning separate ceremonies, so the event may mark a parting of ways after the awkward truce of the last four months.

Even Suu Kyi herself won't say whether a dialogue is becoming more or less likely.

Speaking by telephone, she told the REVIEW: “I don't want to be evasive, but you have to wait for an official statement from the NLD.”

One problem is that it remains unclear what a dialogue would be about. So far, the two sides seems to be talking past each other. While Suu Kyi and the NLD call for “national reconciliation”—implying talks leading to some compromise—the junta advocates “national reconsolidation,” suggesting a reinforcement of military rule.

“The problem is that they aren't even speaking the same language,” says a Bangkok-based Burma watcher.

Since her release, Suu Kyi has deliv-

convention, which opponents dismiss as a sham affair meant to legitimize Slorc's grip on power. They suspect the military hopes simply to string Suu Kyi along until the public, with its high expectations of her, inevitably becomes disenchanted.

“By making vague promises of talks sometime in the future, but doing nothing to facilitate such talks, the junta is playing a clever waiting game which can only hurt Suu Kyi's chances of achieving her political aims,” says a Western businessman with years of experience in Burma.

“To bring about a change, Suu Kyi would have to up the ante,” says a worker for a non-government organization in Thailand who follows events in Burma. “She just can't continue calling for national reconciliation and a dialogue which doesn't seem to materialize.”

Raising the ante, however, requires confronting not only the military rulers but also a powerful new lobby of foreign businessmen who have poured millions of dollars into Burma and have no interest in rocking the boat.

Indeed, money may be the only reason Suu Kyi is walking free: By releasing her the military has opened the door to foreign aid hitherto withheld. In October, Japan resumed grants-in-aid to Burma with a first allotment of ¥1.6 billion (\$16 million). Tokyo says it's willing to deliver more aid to Burma on “a case-by-case basis.” As the Burma-watcher in Bangkok notes, “even the IMF and the ADB have said that they are prepared to wait for a political settlement, but not indefinitely.”

Edgardo Boeninger, a member of America's National Democratic Institute who went to Burma in early November, argues that unless Suu Kyi “can prove that she is good for business and the present government is not, there will be no incentive to change the regime.”

And if there isn't, Suu Kyi risks irrelevance. “A year from now, she could even be forgotten,” says a Burmese source. “In a way, she was more dangerous when she was under house arrest than she is today, as a ‘free’ person who has to obey the same severe restrictions as all other citizens, which makes any overt political activity virtually impossible.”

Most probably Slorc will continue ignoring appeals for a dialogue until all parties, domestic and foreign, accept the government on its own terms. That, after all, has been the regime's goal since it seized power seven years ago. ■



Aung San Suu Kyi free may be less a threat than when she was detained.

ered weekend speeches from the gate of her compound on Rangoon's University Avenue, attracting hundreds of people. But she's in no position to do much else. Some fear the longer she and the NLD go without some substantive accomplishment, the more their credibility fades.

Even Suu Kyi herself states publicly that “I've been released, that's all . . . the situation hasn't changed.”

Optimists in Rangoon believe negotiations are likely on November 28, when the National Convention reconvenes to consider a constitution that has been under discussion for almost three years. “They will talk,” says a Rangoon-based diplomat. “It's in the interest of both parties to sort out their differences.”

Others aren't so sure. The military has picked most of the 700 delegates to the