

Implications from Aung San Suu Kyi's European Tour

Written by Thitinan Pongsudhirak

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THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK, JUN 15 2012

Less than two weeks after her spectacular visit to Bangkok and surrounding provinces under the aegis of the World Economic Forum, Aung San Suu Kyi has embarked on a long-awaited whirlwind tour of Western Europe. From Geneva to Oslo and Bergen, and from Dublin to London and Paris, she is deservedly expected to be feted like a rock star of international politics by European leaders who have been her longtime supporters through thick and thin while she spent years in the political wilderness.

The trip marks not only her personal triumph in overcoming more than two decades of repression and confinement under military dictatorship, but also Myanmar's emergence as a normalizing country under democratic guises. How Mrs Suu Kyi fares in Europe over the next two weeks will have far-reaching impact in her home country and its role in Asia's dynamic neighbourhood. She will have to qualitatively shift both at home and abroad from a democracy icon in the last two decades to a stateswoman in her twilight years.

At issue is her balancing act with diverse stakeholders near and far. Tilting too far either towards her entrenched supporters or her former captors will undermine her credibility and complicate Myanmar's fragile reconciliation process. A recently elected MP, Mrs Suu Kyi believes she has already compromised a lot. Yet her partners in parliament and her former adversaries in the military, particularly President Thein Sein, may think she has not compromised enough. Mr Thein Sein's cancellation of a visit to Thailand during the WEF and subsequent rescheduling indicates he is not pleased with her international role outside Myanmar so far. And the Suu Kyi-Thein Sein axis is integral to Myanmar's opening. Meanwhile, the various dissident groups at home, in the region and beyond may think she has compromised too much.

The recent tension and violence in Rakhine state in western Myanmar, underpinned by religious conflict between Buddhists and Muslims and ethnic and racial chauvinism between Burmese and minority Rohingyas, is a harbinger of an inherently arduous reconciliation process. Mrs Suu Kyi's simple call for Burmese and the different minority groups to "get along" will not be enough. The road ahead is all uphill.

To be sure, Mrs Suu Kyi is a formidable lady by any contrarian standard. She is resolute in her mission for her people. As a show of discipline, she is a vegetarian who refrains from alcoholic beverages. Her meditation over the years has sharpened her focus and concentration. Her eye contact is as powerful as sincere. Her voice has depth and a convincing firmness. Mrs Suu Kyi's thought processes are lucid, armed with an impeccable Oxbridge accent. Her mind succinctly articulates words without excess verbiage, like *I mean, you know, ah, um*, and so forth. Her steady temperament augments her charm and force of intellect. Yet she will need more than all that. Her political instincts will be key. As a politician, she will need flexibility and adaptability as much as principle and intellect in fluid and fluctuating situations and issues.

We will see how and what she does with her country's name. Mrs Suu Kyi calls Myanmar by its former name, Burma, with a heavy "B". It will partly set the trend and agenda of her European tour as all of her Western supporters, save a handful, have conceded to the new reference. If she never changes Burma to Myanmar, the reconciliation process will be bumpy in places it need not be.

While her first foreign foray in Thailand after years of repression was much welcomed and appreciated, it may not

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have gone far enough to placate ASEAN's concerns over her and Myanmar's role in this regional neighbourhood's closer cooperation. ASEAN did not stand by Aung San Suu Kyi. The regional grouping opted for the so-called constructive engagement first with SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and later the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council). It is doubtful that Mrs Suu Kyi views ASEAN's engagement as having done job of opening up Myanmar.

Yet burying hatchets here and there will be Mrs Suu Kyi's challenge. Whether she can transcend past grievances and move forward inclusively will have much to say of how Myanmar will progress in the coming months. It was good to visit Thailand, which shares a long border and where millions of migrant Myanmar workers toil for a living, as a first foreign destination, but it would have been better to stop in an ASEAN country on her way to Europe.

Her European tour also will highlight the crucial roles of small countries like Switzerland and Norway. Together with the delayed acceptance, at last, of her Nobel Peace Prize, Mrs Suu Kyi will visit Bergen where she received the Rafto Prize for human rights in 1990, presaging the Oslo-based award in 1991. It is these small countries with their quiet below-radar work on ground, rather than the big countries and their sanctions, that have tipped the balance towards the opening of Myanmar.

Clearly, Mrs Suu Kyi is vindicated in her resolve and commitment, her tenacity and sheer will. Her chief challenge overall may be to somehow avoid the temptation to turn vindication into vindictiveness. If she panders to her Western supporters at the expense of her partners at home, it would be a bad sign. But if she can mix the caution that abusive rule and authoritarian power are far from over and show gestures of conciliation and encouragement towards her former opponents, it would boost Myanmar's peace process and enable her to return home and hit the ground running alongside its reconciliation train.

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