

Locked up

Myanmar's opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, is detained again.



AFP

After many delays, a court in Myanmar at last handed down its verdict on Tuesday August 11th, concluding the trial of the country's main opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. The staunchest foe of the ruling junta has been consigned to another 18 months of house arrest, as punishment for a bizarre incident in May when an American eccentric swam to her lakeside villa, forcing her to break the terms of her previous house arrest. The verdict was expected: the government has, in effect, found an excuse to prolong her detention, which was about to expire, until after elections that are planned for some time next year. Her defence, that as a prisoner she was in no position to fend off uninvited visitors, was brushed aside by the court.

The sentence handed down on Tuesday was for three years' hard labour, but in a piece of careful choreography the interior minister promptly stood up to announce that the junta leader, General Than Shwe, had commuted it. By giving the gentlest sentence that was realistically available he may hope to minimise the international outrage. The hapless John Yettaw, the 54-year-old Mormon who testified he was motivated to make his swim by a vision in a dream, was told to serve four years' hard labour and three years in prison. Aung Naing Oo, a Burmese scholar at Chiang Mai university in Thailand, suggests that the regime will be keen to expel him much sooner than that.

The generals were never likely to allow Ms Suu Kyi, who is probably as loved as they are hated, to be at liberty during their tightly controlled electoral exercise next year. The pretext they have found for extending her detention gives the opposition some publicity and has provoked routine international condemnation and calls from activists and others for an arms embargo and further sanctions. Yet it is doubtful that much will change. Myanmar already faces Western sanctions, while enjoying trading links with Asian neighbours. The country can rely on Chinese and Russian support on the United Nations Security Council, so big new measures against the regime are unlikely.

Myanmar has been under a military dictatorship since 1962 and the generals' grip looks as strong as ever. Nonetheless, the planned general election raises the tantalising possibility that politics could change. Although the armed forces will remain supreme, the new administration will have a civilian face. It is most unlikely to be a free or fair election—it is not even clear how candidates will be selected for it—yet the establishment of a new system could amount to the greatest upheaval in domestic politics since the army seized power. If the most senior military men consider retirement, some space might open for younger and (perhaps) more liberal politicians to be involved in national politics.

Outsiders may have more to worry about than the lack of democracy inside Myanmar, however. One dramatic possibility, raised last month by Hillary Clinton, the American secretary of state, while in Thailand for a security conference, is that Myanmar may be receiving North Korean assistance in a nuclear-weapons programme. Defectors speaking to Australian researchers have alleged that an elaborate nuclear programme is being concealed in tunnels. If such suspicions persist, that issue may come to shape American thinking on Myanmar at least as much as the treatment of Ms Suu Kyi and other democrats.

The whole country, not just Ms Suu Kyi, is a prisoner of the regime. The manner in which Than Shwe directed her trial is a reminder, if one were necessary, of how completely the armed forces control Myanmar's institutions.

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