

International

Suu Kyi's fate and Myanmar's, in the balance after army coup

Nobel Laureate defended army's conduct, rebutted genocide charges

YANGON, Myanmar: After a lifetime struggling against Myanmar's military, 75-year-old Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is back under detention with a junta in power—although her international image no longer shines. She swept national elections last November and was preparing to begin another five-year term as the country's de facto leader. But an early morning army raid and her detention in the capital Naypyidaw has brought her time at the helm to an apparent halt.

Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero General Aung San, spent nearly two decades enduring long stretches of house arrest under the former military regime. Her legacy abroad has been deeply tarnished since the landslide election victory in 2015 that vaulted her National League for Democracy (NLD) to power. There was global revulsion at a military crackdown two years later that saw around 750,000 members of the stateless Rohingya minority flee burning villages to neighboring Bangladesh.

Suu Kyi defended the army's conduct and even travelled to The Hague to rebut charges of genocide at the UN's top court. But she remains immensely popular in Myanmar and is referred to affectionately as "Mother Suu" by supporters, who see her as the best hope for shaking off the country's turbulent past.

Daughter of independence hero

Suu Kyi was born on June 19, 1945 in Japanese-occupied Yangon during the final weeks of World War II. Her father Aung San fought for and against both the British and the Japanese colonizers as he jostled to give his country the best shot at independence. That goal was achieved in 1948 but Aung San was not around to see it—he and most of his cabinet had been assassinated just months before.

Suu Kyi spent most of her early years outside of Myanmar, first in India, where her mother was an



YANGON: In this file photo taken on February 25, 1999, Myanmar opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi (right) gestures while addressing an impromptu press conference in Yangon. — AFP

ambassador, and later at Oxford University, where she met her British husband. After General Ne Win seized full power in 1962, he forced his own brand of socialism on Myanmar, turning it from Asia's rice bowl into one of the world's poorest and most isolated countries.

Thrust into spotlight

Suu Kyi's elevation into a democracy champion happened almost by accident when she returned home in 1988 to nurse her dying mother. Soon afterwards, at least 3,000 people were killed when the military crushed protests against its authoritarian rule. The

bloodshed was the catalyst for Suu Kyi. A charismatic orator, she found herself in a leading role in the burgeoning pro-democracy movement, delivering speeches to huge crowds as she led the NLD to a 1990 election victory. The generals were not prepared to give up power, ignoring the result and confining to her home in Yangon, where she would live for 16 of the next 20 years.

She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while detained in 1991, for her "non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights." The junta offered to end her imprisonment at any time if she left the coun-

Naypyidaw, where armored vehicles blocked off major roads leading to parliament.

Dangerous times

Suu Kyi's party won over 80 percent of parliamentary seats available—a seemingly unacceptable number to a military that still held key government posts, retained power over all defense and security decisions, and had 25 percent of seats ring-fenced for them. Yangon filmmaker Lamin Oo said he was "shocked" but unsurprised after a week of coup rumblings. "I take my chance to vote very seriously because this can happen in this country," the 35-year-old told AFP, adding that his neighborhood in Yankin Township was trying to stay calm. "I think we need to be prepared for the worst."

Truckloads of pro-military supporters were spotted driving through Yangon's main roads, waving the country's flag while blaring the national anthem in an apparent resounding approval for the putsch. A small group gathered near the Martyrs' Mausoleum in downtown Yangon dancing to music booming from loudspeakers blaring the lyrics "We have bravely shown Myanmar's blood". Another pro-military protest near Sule pagoda saw local and foreign reporters beaten up, according to videos posted on Facebook. "This is too much... and an act of injustice," an MP for Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy told AFP, requesting anonymity and explaining she was restricted in her official compound in Naypyidaw with scores of other lawmakers. For weeks the military has raised allegations of voter irregularities, demanding the election committee release the voters' list while army head Min Aung Hlaing made menacing statements about repealing the country's constitution. By yesterday, the military announced a year-long state of emergency, promising to hold new "free and fair multiparty general elections" and hand over power at the end. But the country—where pro-democracy protest movements have been crushed with army violence in the past—is on "a knife's edge", said independent analyst David Mathieson. For the millions who voted for Suu Kyi's party, they will be "enraged and fearful at a power grab that threatens to squander the gains of the past ten years." — AFP

Anger, confusion in Myanmar as coup sweeps away hope

MYANMAR: There was panic-buying of food, military roadblocks in the capital Naypyidaw and a triumphant pro-army rally in Yangon in the hours after a coup in Myanmar. But there was also quiet anger simmering among those whose hopes for the country's democratic future have been stolen. "It's extremely upsetting—I don't want the coup," said a 64-year-old Burmese man in Hlaing township, standing with a crowd outside a grocery stall. "I have seen many transitions in this country and I was looking forward to a better future," he added, declining to provide a name for fear of repercussions.

A putsch had been expected for days, yet when it came it left Myanmar stunned—with roads to its main international airport blocked and communications cut—a country once more isolated from a world it only rejoined a decade ago. The military detained de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi early yesterday—hours before a newly elected parliament dominated by her NLD party was expected to take its seats for the first time since November polls.

By 8:30 am (0200 GMT), a state of emergency was announced and former general Myint Swe appointed acting president—sinking the country back into direct military rule after barely a decade-long experiment with democracy. Fear spread as internet and mobile services were pulled by authorities across the country. In Yangon, Myanmar's commercial capital, people rushed to their neighborhood grocery stores to stock up on rice, oil and instant noodles as banks were temporarily closed by the communications freeze.

But aside from police, uniformed men were few and far between in the city, and no blood was shed. The guns, tanks and helicopters were further north around



YANGON: Military supporters take part in a rally in Yangon yesterday, as Myanmar's military detained the country's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the country's president in a coup. — AFP

Sunday: "This week the Foreign Office warned us of threats to Nazanin and her family if we continued to publicize Nazanin's release date." He retorted that the family believes "transparency is the best form of protection from abuse." Unless Iran finds new grounds to extend her detention, Nazanin's official release date is March 7, according to Ratcliffe. Zaghari-Ratcliffe worked for the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the media organization's philanthropic arm.

'Mafia tactics'

She denied charges of sedition but was convicted and jailed for five years. She has spent more than four years in jail or under house arrest. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said last month that the March 7 date was "based on the existing sentence," stressing that Iran had repeatedly dashed hopes for Zaghari-

Ratcliffe's release after postponing another trial in November. Britain is "pushing as hard as we can to get the immediate release, not in seven weeks, but as soon as possible, of Nazanin and all of our other dual nationals", Raab said on January 17.

Ratcliffe said Sunday that the British government's role is to remind Iran that Nazanin "has the UK's protection." Britain should not "act as a messenger for IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) mafia tactics and suppression," he added. "If anything happens to Nazanin or her family, or if she is not released to the UK on 7 March - there should be consequences. We will be discussing with the Foreign Secretary his backup plan."

The Guardian yesterday reported that Ratcliffe sent the Foreign Office a note accusing it of a "remarkable lack of judgment." The Foreign Office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. — AFP



YANGON: In this file photo Myanmar's Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the Myanmar armed forces, during a ceremony to mark the 71th anniversary of Martyrs' Day in Yangon. — AFP

Min Aung Hlaing: Myanmar's powerful, ambitious army chief

YANGON, Myanmar: After taking credit for restoring Myanmar's democracy but then watching the military get smashed in elections, the country's top general has seized power just months away from official retirement. General Min Aung Hlaing is an international pariah who has been condemned for presiding over a brutal crackdown on the country's stateless Rohingya population in 2017. He has been banned from Facebook for stoking hate speech against the persecuted minority, and UN investigators have called on him and other top army leaders to be prosecuted for genocide.

But for years he has steadfastly denied nearly all allegations of human rights abuses and says the military operations, which drove around 750,000 Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, were justified to root out insurgents. The 64-year-old was tapped to head the country's armed forces in 2011, just as a previous generation of military leaders were transitioning the country to a parliamentary system after decades of junta rule.

He has embarked on an ambitious and expensive program to outfit the army with modern equipment, sourcing new weapons and hardware from China, Russia, Israel and other big arms sellers. But he has also hinted at his own political ambitions after he turns 65 later this year—the age he would have been subject to mandatory retirement. "He had flirted with the idea of running for election himself as a civilian," said Myanmar analyst Herve Lemahieu from Australia's Lowy Institute. Lemahieu said the general had probably hoped for a path to higher office with the help of a military-backed political party, which was routed in an election last November. "He's probably calculated now that... there is no electoral means by which he could stay in power," Lemahieu said. The November poll was won in a landslide by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) but the military has disputed the results of the vote. Before the vote, Min Aung Hlaing had pledged to honor the outcome of the election. — AFP

UK warns Ratcliffe family not to reveal release plan

LONDON: The husband of detained British-Iranian woman Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has said the UK government warned her family that public comments could jeopardize her possible release date in Iran early next month. Zaghari-Ratcliffe's family has been campaigning for her release since she was held in Iran in April 2016 on sedition charges. She is currently under house arrest.

Her husband Richard Ratcliffe wrote on Twitter on

try for good but Suu Kyi refused. That decision meant not seeing her husband before his death from cancer in 1999, and missing her two sons growing up. The military eventually granted her freedom in 2010, just days after elections that her party boycotted, but which brought a nominally civilian government to power. She swept the next poll five years later, prompting jubilant celebrations by massive crowds across the country, and increased her party's majority in 2020.

Hamstrung in power

Suu Kyi's administration has been beset with trouble and marked by an uneasy relationship with the military, which maintains a powerful and outsized political role. But both the government and the military appeared in lockstep after the 2017 Rohingya crackdown. Her office denied claims that fleeing refugees had suffered rape, extrajudicial killings and arson attacks on their homes by Myanmar troops.

Some critics have accused her of behaving in an authoritarian manner and political prisoner advocates say her government has prosecuted and jailed dozens of rights activists. "Myanmar people will remain supportive" of Suu Kyi in the wake of yesterday's coup, said Yangon-based political analyst Min Zaw Oo. But he added that her future and that of the country's fitful transition to democracy was "uncertain". "This is the reality we are living in," he told AFP. "For us, we have to survive and we have to try again." — AFP

News in brief

Kyrgyz coalition backs new PM

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary majority backed a career civil servant to become the Central Asian country's next prime minister yesterday in a move viewed as coming from new leader Sadyr Japarov. Japarov, 52, has faced little political resistance since taking the helm in October, when a political crisis over a disputed vote saw him released from jail by supporters and climb to power. Lawmakers in the ruling coalition voted unanimously in favor of Ulukbek Maripov, who served in the administrations of two presidents either side of a bloody popular uprising in 2010. — AFP

Bribery accused freed in Kenya

KENYA: A Kenyan lawyer accused of bribing witnesses in the failed International Criminal Court case against Deputy President William Ruto was released yesterday under strict conditions, the ICC said. Paul Gicheru handed himself over to Dutch authorities in early November and was transferred to the Hague-based court where he appeared for the first time just a few days later. He was freed in Kenya "with specific conditions restricting liberty during the confirmation of charges proceedings against him," the ICC said. Prosecutors say Gicheru "corruptly influenced" their witnesses to recant testimony by allegedly paying bribes of up to one million Kenyan shillings (\$9,000 / 7,500 euros) and offering up to five million more. — AFP

Israel extends national lockdown

JERUSALEM: Israel's nationwide lockdown was extended yesterday to contain the coronavirus which has continued to spread rapidly as the country presses ahead with an aggressive vaccination campaign. The current lockdown, declared on December 27, is the third in the Jewish state since pandemic began last year. The cabinet prolonged the closure until Friday morning, but scheduled a fresh meeting for Wednesday to assess whether a further extension was required, a statement from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the health ministry said. — AFP

Prince Harry settles libel claim

LONDON: Prince Harry yesterday formally settled a libel claim against the publisher of The Mail On Sunday and MailOnline website over reports he snubbed soldiers after stepping down as a senior royal. Harry sued Associated Newspapers over reports published in October that he had "not been in touch" with soldiers since his last appearance as an honorary Marine in March. But the Mail On Sunday printed an apology in December and made a donation to the prince's charity after accepting Harry had in fact contacted the Royal Marines. — AFP

UK sanctions 4 Zimbabwe leaders

LONDON: Britain yesterday slapped sanctions on four Zimbabwean officials following the deaths of at least 23 people protesting against the regime of President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Applying a new sanctions regime following its exit from the European Union, Britain said the travel bans and asset freezes showed it was determined to protect human rights in its former African colony. "These sanctions send a clear message that we will hold to account those responsible for the most egregious human rights violations, including the deaths of innocent Zimbabweans," Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said in a statement. — AFP