

FROM SUU KYI'S SCHOOL FRIEND TO PROXY PRESIDENT

NAYPYIDAW: Myanmar's next president may be little known outside his homeland but for Aung San Suu Kyi, who plucked her schoolfriend and longtime aide from the political sidelines to be her proxy, it is Htin Kyaw's loyalty that is paramount. The 69-year-old was comfortably elected Myanmar's first civilian president since 1962 yesterday, a position he will hold in place of the Nobel laureate who is banned from top office by the army-drafted constitution.

The son of a revered poet who has helped run Suu Kyi's charitable foundation in recent years, Htin Kyaw is billed as someone with a high level of education, personal standing and absolute trustworthiness to "The Lady". Yet he remains an unknown and untested quantity with many asking how much influence he will wield over a government he will only nominally lead and in a complex political system where the military still wields considerable influence.

Suu Kyi has pledged to pull the strings of power from "above" her appointee, though in this delicate and secretive transition, she has not revealed how the arrangement will work. But Htin Kyaw's appointment suggests she thinks he has sufficient pedigree in the country's long struggle against junta rule to be embraced by the millions of voters who swept to the polls in November to validate her star power and simple message of change. He is believed to have joined the party last year-although the NLD has not confirmed exactly when.

Nonetheless the soft-spoken economics graduate's life has been entwined with Myanmar's democracy struggle and Suu Kyi's movement. His father Min Thu Wun, was a national poet and early NLD member while his wife Su Su Lwin is a sitting party MP whose late father was once party spokesman.

"He's not just anybody, he comes from a very political family," Bertil Lintner, a veteran Myanmar commentator said.

Right hand man

His inner circle closeness to Suu Kyi was illustrated in 2010 when the Nobel Laureate was finally released from years of house arrest. As she greeted jubilant crowds from behind the gate of her crumbling Yangon mansion, Htin Kyaw stood to her right. During those heady but often unsure times when Suu Kyi remained under intense military scrutiny, he could sometimes be seen at the wheel of her car, shuttling her between high-level meetings.

For the last four years he has been a senior executive in Suu Kyi's charity, which provides development aid and skills training to her Kawhmu constituency and other areas of the impoverished country. In an interview with AFP about the charity's work in July 2015, Htin Kyaw spoke of the steep climb Myanmar faced to claw its way out of poverty. "You see that we are doing a lot, which means we need a lot. We are just doing only a very small portion of what is required for the nation," he said.

Born in 1946, Htin Kyaw earned a masters degree in 1968 from the Yangon Economics University and went on to complete further courses abroad, including in the UK, the US and Japan. According to an official biography released by the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation, he studied at the University of London's Institute of Computer Science from 1971 to 72. In a varied career he worked as a university teacher and also held positions in the finance and national planning and foreign affairs ministries in the late 1970s and 80s before retiring from government service as the military tightened its grip.—AFP

HISTORIC VOTE GIVES MYANMAR FIRST CIVILIAN PRESIDENT IN DECADES

NAYPYIDAW: Myanmar got its first civilian president in decades yesterday after lawmakers elected a close aide of Aung San Suu Kyi, who is expected to hold the real reins of power in the formerly junta-run nation.

Htin Kyaw, 69, hailed his elevation to the top post as "Suu Kyi's victory," a clear nod to her plan that he serve as a proxy for the Nobel laureate who is constitutionally barred from becoming president. MPs erupted into applause after the result was announced following a lengthy ballot count by hand in the capital Naypyidaw, in which Htin Kyaw took 360 of 652 votes cast.

Myanmar is undergoing a dramatic transformation from an isolated and repressed pariah state to a rapidly opening aspiring democracy. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won a thumping victory at elections in November, allowing her party to dominate Myanmar's two legislative houses. But the military remains a powerful force and has refused to change a clause in the junta-era constitution which bars her from the presidency.

The veteran activist has instead vowed to rule "above" the next leader. Her choice of Htin Kyaw is seen as a testament to her absolute faith in his loyalty. "This is sister Aung San Suu Kyi's victory," the newly elected president told reporters after the vote. Htin Kyaw will be sworn in on March 30, replacing incumbent Thein Sein. It will be the first time Myanmar has had a civilian president since 1962, when the military seized power.

Thein Sein, a former general, led a quasi-civilian reformist government for the last five years that has been praised for moving the nation out of the shadow of outright military rule.

For many MPs from Suu Kyi's party Yesterday's vote was a vindication of their long years of struggle for democracy under the repressive former junta, which locked up hundreds of dissidents as it tried to stifle criticism.

The NLD is still haunted by its 1990 election victory, which was snatched away by the generals. Zin Mar Aung, an NLD MP who was involved in 1988 protests and is herself a former political prisoner, termed the vote "very historic". She said the election of Htin Kyaw, who was also detained by the former junta, made her think of their long struggle and "the way we have marched to here since more than 20 years ago".

But others expressed disappointment their leader would not be taking the top post.

"We all want to see Aung San Suu Kyi be the president," NLD MP Myo Zaw Aung told AFP. "But so far, it is not reality." Yesterday's election also confirmed the two other candidates as vice presidents-retired general Myint Swe, who is seen as a hardliner ally of the former strongman Than Shwe and is on Washington's sanctions list, and



NAYPYIDAW: Htin Kyaw, newly elected president of Myanmar and member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, leaves after a parliament session yesterday.—AFP

ethnic Chin MP Henry Van Thio.

Chosen one

Suu Kyi, 70, enjoys unrivaled popularity both as the daughter of the country's independence hero and as a central figure in the decades-long democracy struggle. It is not yet clear what role she plans to take or how she will manage her relationship with the new president. She is barred from top political office because she married and had children with a foreigner. Months of negotiations with army chief Min Aung Hlaing failed to remove the charter clause that blocks her. In central Yangon people crowded into teashops to watch the vote live on television. "He was chosen by Mother Suu. Now he is our president. He will be a good president because he has been working with Mother Suu for many years," said Daw Mya, 60, a vegetable vendor.

While little known outside Myanmar, Htin Kyaw commands considerable respect inside the

country, partly because his father was a legendary writer and early member of the NLD.

Though he has never previously stood for political office, he is married to sitting NLD MP Su Su Lwin, whose late father was the party's respected spokesman, and he helps run Suu Kyi's charitable foundation.

A new cabinet, set to be announced at the end of the month, is expected to include figures from across the political spectrum as Suu Kyi tries to promote national reconciliation. It will face many challenges, including poverty, civil war in ethnic minority borderlands and decrepit infrastructure.

Senior party figures say one of the government's first tasks will be to whittle down myriad ministries by combining overlapping portfolios.

But one of the most crucial tasks will be to manage the relationship with the military, which retains significant power including control of the vital home, defense and border ministries.—AFP

MALAYSIA DEPORTS AUSTRALIAN REPORTERS; PAIR WON'T BE CHARGED

CANBERRA, Australia: Malaysian authorities will not charge two journalists from Australia's state-owned broadcaster who attempted to interview Malaysia's prime minister over corruption allegations, deciding to deport them instead, police said yesterday.

The decision came after Australia's government intervened and suggested the detention was part of a Malaysian crackdown on press freedom. Following the deportation orders, Australian Broadcasting Corp. television reporter Linton Besser and camera operator Louie Eroglu left Malaysia on a flight yesterday, ABC confirmed in an email to staff. The pair had previously been told to appear in a Sarawak state court on yesterday morning charged with obstructing a public servant from discharging his duties when they questioned Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak as he entered a mosque in the state capital of Kuching on Saturday.

ABC reported that two hours after a press release was issued Monday confirming the charge, the lawyer for the two was told they would not be charged. The broadcaster said no explanation was given for the change.

Sarawak police said in a statement that they were told by prosecutors yesterday that no charges would be filed. The pair was to be deported, the statement said, without giving further details.

Shortly before boarding his flight at Malaysia's Kuching International Airport, Besser said he was relieved the ordeal was

behind him. "There have been a lot of changing events. It has been a roller coaster, but it's almost over," he said.

ABC's news director, Gaven Morris, said the journalists would continue to investigate the corruption story. "They did nothing wrong in Kuching. They were doing journalism," he said in a statement. "This incident has demonstrated again why it is vital to defend media freedom, including the right to question authority."

On Monday, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said the case would be raised at the "highest levels within the Malaysian government." She said there were concerns about "a crackdown on freedom of speech." Sarawak police said the pair were detained after they "crossed the security line and aggressively tried to approach" Prime Minister Najib, accusations that ABC denied.

Najib is engulfed in a scandal over \$681 million deposited into his bank accounts in early 2013. Critics accuse him of corruption and say the money came from an indebted state investment fund that he founded in 2009. In January, Malaysian Attorney General Mohamed Apandi Ali decided not to prosecute the prime minister, saying the money was a "personal donation" from the Saudi royal family. Besser and Eroglu, on assignment for an investigative current affairs program, had asked Najib as he entered a mosque why the money had been deposited into his accounts, ABC reported. Najib did not respond and his security detail surrounded the two.—AP



HANOI, Vietnam: Vietnamese residents hold banners during a gathering yesterday.—AP

VIETNAMESE HONOR SOLDIERS KILLED BY CHINESE 28 YEARS AGO

HANOI, Vietnam: About 200 Vietnamese gathered in central Hanoi on Monday to remember 64 Vietnamese soldiers who were killed by the Chinese navy in a clash 28 years ago in the disputed South China Sea.

They lit incense and laid flowers at the statue of King Ly Thai To, a Vietnamese hero, and then marched around the landmark Hoan Kiem Lake, chanting "down with Communist China's aggression" in the commemoration that lasted an hour.

There were no official commemorations by the government. "I think the government should organize official ceremonies to remember those soldiers who were killed defending Truong Sa and Hoang Sa islands," said 84-year-old retired civil servant Le Mai Dau, one of the participants. Truong Sa and Hoang Sa are Vietnamese terms for the Spratly and Paracel islands.

Police watched the ceremony but did not intervene. Unauthorized gatherings are normally stopped by the authorities.

The 64 were killed in skirmishes with the Chinese at Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Islands and nine Vietnamese engineering soldiers were taken prisoner. In the last two years China has reclaimed land around the Johnson South Reef to form artificial islands.

China claims almost all of the Spratlys, which are rich in natural resources. Vietnam along with the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also claim parts or all of the islands.—AP

MAJOR THAI TRAFFICKING TRIAL OPENS AMID FEARS FOR WITNESSES

BANGKOK: The trial of 92 suspected human traffickers, arrested after the discovery of shallow graves of migrants in Thai jungle, began in Bangkok yesterday and the attorney-general's office said it would be over within a year amid fears about the safety of witnesses.

Traffickers abandoned boatloads of migrants at sea last year after a crackdown by Thai authorities that led to a regional migrant crisis with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh refusing boats permission to land.

Rights groups had expressed fears that a drawn-out case, lasting anything up to two years, could put the hundreds of witnesses at risk because of inadequate police protection. "The court is accelerating the case to finish within a year," said Prayuth Porsuttayarak, deputy director-general of the human trafficking office at the Attorney-General's Office.

Thailand remains on the lowest tier on the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report for not meeting the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

Sunai Phasuk, senior researcher on Thailand at Human Rights Watch, welcomed a shorter trial but said the cases should not be rushed to impress the United States. "It will totally send the wrong message if the trial is being fast-tracked simply to impress the TIP report reviewers." The defendants,

wearing beige prison uniforms, were brought to the packed court for the start of formal hearings.

The investigation and arrests followed the discovery of 30 shallow graves at a trafficking camp near the Malaysian border. Many of the bodies were believed to be of Rohingya, a persecuted ethnic Muslim minority in majority Buddhist Myanmar.

Weeks later, police revealed 139 graves had been found over the border in Malaysia. That led to a crackdown on the multi-million dollar trade which had until then flourished in Thailand's southern provinces and in Malaysia.

The 92 suspected human traffickers include an army general, civilians and police. Rights groups have called on authorities to step up witness protection after some witnesses said they had been forced into hiding because of threats.

Prayuth said the justice ministry was "looking after the witnesses", but did not say how many of the more than 400 witnesses were receiving police protection. Around 50 suspects were still at large, said Prayuth. Some had fled to neighbouring Myanmar. The United Nations and rights group say the number of migrants leaving Myanmar and Bangladesh by boat in past months has plummeted because of the Thai and Bangladeshi crackdowns on human smugglers. The number of people trying to flee was expected to be significantly lower this year, they said.—Reuters



SARAWAK, Malaysia: Australian Broadcasting Corp. television reporter Linton Besser, right, and camera operator Louie Eroglu, left, prepare to leave at the Kuching International Airport in Sarawak yesterday.—AP