

International

Myanmar junta court jails Suu Kyi for 5 years for corruption

‘The days of Aung San Suu Kyi as a free woman are effectively over’

YANGON, Myanmar: A Myanmar junta court on Wednesday sentenced Aung San Suu Kyi to five years in jail for corruption, part of a barrage of criminal cases that could see the deposed civilian leader jailed for decades. Suu Kyi has been in military custody since a coup ousted her government in February last year and plunged Myanmar into turmoil.

In the latest case, the Nobel laureate was accused of accepting a bribe of \$600,000 in cash and gold bars. After two days of delays, the special court in the military-built capital Naypyidaw handed down its verdict and sentence at 9:30 am (0300 GMT) on Wednesday. “Regarding taking gold and dollars from U Phyo Min Thein, the court sentenced her to five years’ imprisonment,” junta spokesperson Zaw Min Tun told AFP.

“She will be under house arrest. I do not know whether she asked for appeal. They are working according to the legal way. As far as I know, she’s in good health.” Local media, citing unnamed sources close to the court, later reported she plans to appeal Wednesday’s conviction for corruption. Suu Kyi still faces a raft of other criminal charges, including violating the official secrets act, corruption and electoral fraud, and could be jailed for more than 100 years if convicted on all counts.

The 76-year-old had already been sentenced to six years in jail for incitement against the military, breaching COVID-19 rules and breaking a telecommunications law—although she will remain under house arrest while she fights other charges. She has not appealed any of those convictions.

Journalists have been barred from attending the court hearings and Suu Kyi’s lawyers have been

banned from speaking to the media. Under a previous junta regime, Suu Kyi spent long spells under house arrest in her family mansion in Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city. Today, she is confined to an undisclosed location in the capital, with her link to the outside world limited to brief pre-trial meetings with her lawyers.

“The days of Aung San Suu Kyi as a free woman are effectively over,” Phil Robertson Deputy Asia Director, Human Rights Watch told AFP. “Destroying popular democracy in Myanmar also means getting rid of Aung San Suu Kyi, and the junta is leaving nothing to chance.”

Turmoil, investor flight

The coup sparked widespread protests and unrest which the military sought to crush by force. According to a local monitoring group, the crackdown has left more than 1,700 civilians dead and seen some 13,000 arrested. Suu Kyi has been the face of Myanmar’s democratic hopes for more than 30 years, but her earlier six-year sentence already meant she is likely

to miss elections the junta has said it plans to hold by next year.

Independent Myanmar analyst David Mathieson said the junta was using the criminal cases to make Suu Kyi “politically irrelevant”. “This is just another squalid step in solidifying the coup,” he told AFP. “This is politically motivated pure and simple.”

Many of her political allies have also been arrested since the coup, with one chief minister sentenced to 75 years in jail, while many others have been forced into hiding. A tranche of ousted lawmakers from her National League for Democracy (NLD)

Pakistani driver were killed near the gate of the Confucius Institute at Karachi University, when the bomber detonated explosives next to their minibus.

A security official at the university told AFP he had previously raised concerns about the safety of 15 Chinese staff on the campus. “Reports emerged in February that an attack might be carried out on campus,” the source, who asked not be named, told AFP.

The bomber was named as 30-year-old Shaari Baloch, a married mother of an eight-year-old girl and four-year-old boy, the BLA said, adding that she was a science teacher studying for a master’s degree. Police confirmed the details.

Suicide attacks by women are very rare in Pakistan, reported only four times in recent years. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged Pakistan to ensure the safety of all Chinese citizens and interests in the country and to launch a full investigation. It also advised citizens to “take strict precautions, and do not go out unless necessary”.

China is upgrading energy links and infrastructure as part of a \$54 billion programme known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, with both nations wary of security threats to the projects. In April 2021 a suicide bomb attack at a luxury hotel hosting the Chinese ambassador in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan, killed four and wounded dozens.

spokesman but retired in 2015, several years before his presidency was prematurely curtailed by mounting scandal.

“The country is facing a moment where there is a conjunction of different crises that are all feeding into one major crisis,” Maharaj said, citing graft, poverty and unemployment. Maharaj believes that current President Cyril Ramaphosa is tackling corruption, albeit too slowly for some. “There is real sense that under Cyril Ramaphosa, he is not doing enough, fast enough,” Maharaj said.

“But what I think Cyril had done right is that in the face of these challenges of weeding out corruption, he has never overstepped the boundaries of law,” he said. “That has slowed the process.” “I hear people say they want a quicker prosecution, but we are dealing with corruption of an extremely complicated nature,” he said.

The judicial inquiry laid significant blame on the Gupta family from India, accused of widespread bribery, and on American consultancy Bain, which has been forced to recant some its work and refund its fees.

The international nature of the corruption makes prosecution difficult, Maharaj said. The inquiry also singled out senior ANC members, which has only deepened in-fighting within a party that voters are increasingly disillusioned with.

matic bag of issues that started well before he was born — including relations with arch-rival India.

Bhutto was sworn in two weeks after he helped lead an alliance that toppled Imran Khan and saw Shehbaz Sharif become prime minister.

His first foreign mission in the role will be accompanying Sharif Thursday to Saudi Arabia, a key trade partner and regular source of relief for Pakistan’s struggling economy.

Bhutto is the son of assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and ex-president Asif Ali Zardari, as well as the grandson of another former premier, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

His grandfather also served as foreign minister in the mid-1960s and was the founder of



NAYPYIDAW: File photo shows Myanmar’s State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (C) looks on as health workers receive a vaccine for the COVID-19 at a hospital in Naypyidaw. —AFP

formed a parallel “National Unity Government” (NUG) in a bid to undermine the junta’s legitimacy.

However, the NUG holds no territory and has not been recognised by any foreign government. Numerous “People’s Defence Force” (PDF) civilian militias have sprung up around the country to take the fight to the junta.

Analysts say Myanmar’s heavily armed, well-trained army has been surprised by the effectiveness of the PDFs and in some areas struggled to contain them. Last week junta supremo Min Aung

Hlaing called for peace talks with Myanmar’s long-established ethnic rebel groups—which control large areas of territory and have been battling the military for decades.

The turmoil that has engulfed Myanmar in the wake of the coup has spooked foreign investors who flocked to the country after the dawn of democracy around 2011. Energy giants TotalEnergies and Chevron, British American Tobacco and Japanese brewer Kirin have all announced plans to pull out. —AFP

Pakistan separatist group warns China of more deadly attacks

KARACHI: A Pakistan separatist group warned Wednesday of more deadly attacks on Chinese targets, a day after a woman suicide bomber killed four people—including three teachers posted from Beijing. The Baloch Liberation Army—one of several groups fighting for independence in Pakistan’s biggest province—claimed responsibility for Tuesday’s blast, saying it was the first time a woman had “self sacrificed” for the group.

Chinese nationals and interests have regularly been targeted by separatists in Balochistan, where Beijing is involved in lucrative mining and energy projects. “Hundreds of highly trained male and female members of the Baloch Liberation Army’s Majeed Brigade are ready to carry out deadly attacks in any part of Balochistan and Pakistan,” spokesman Jeeyand Baloch said in a statement published in English.

He threatened Beijing with “even harsher” attacks unless the neighbouring country halted its “exploitation projects” and “occupying of the Pakistani state”. Three Chinese teachers and a

Mandela ally reflects on crises as S Africa celebrates freedom

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa: As South Africa on Wednesday marks a key date in the fight against apartheid, one of the last surviving leaders of that struggle says the nation’s liberators have fallen out of touch with the people. In an interview with AFP, 87-year-old Mac Maharaj warned that corruption risked undermining the gains of the democracy that he fought and suffered for.

“Everything shows it has lost contact with the ground,” Maharaj said of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). He was one of the party’s leading figures, spending more than a decade imprisoned alongside Nelson Mandela. Maharaj famously smuggled Mandela’s autobiography “Long Walk to Freedom” out of prison and joined Mandela’s cabinet after he won the first free elections on April 27, 1994.

But a judicial inquiry this year laid out an extensive web of graft and cronyism under former president Jacob Zuma that left even basic government services gutted. Maharaj also served as Zuma’s

Young Bhutto scion appointed Pakistan foreign minister

ISLAMABAD: The scion of Pakistan’s most influential political dynasty was appointed foreign minister on Wednesday, the latest step up a ladder likely to take Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to the top of the country’s leadership.

Aged 33, Bhutto becomes one of the world’s youngest foreign ministers but inherits a diplo-



KARACHI: Police inspect a site around damaged vehicles following a suicide bombing near the Confucius Institute affiliated with the Karachi University, in Karachi. —AFP

The ambassador was unhurt in that attack, which was claimed by the Pakistan Taliban. In July last year, a bus carrying engineers to a construction site near a dam in northwestern Pakistan was hit by a bomb, killing 13 people including nine Chinese workers.

The attack, which went unclaimed, frayed relations between Islamabad and Beijing, and Pakistan later paid millions in compensation to the families of the Chinese workers killed. —AFP



MIDRAND, South Africa: Anti-apartheid activist Mac Maharaj, 87, poses for a portrait in his house in Midrand, on March 31, 2022. As South Africa marks nearly three decades of liberation from the yoke of apartheid. —AFP

“We have made many mistakes, and we have also moved the country forward in many respects,” he said, sitting opposite a bookshelf at an upmarket house he shares with his older sister and son, on the northern outskirts of Johannesburg. “We have accumulated vast experience, but we are not drawing lessons from those mistakes,” said Maharaj. —AFP

the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) that Bhutto now leads.

He became party leader aged just 19, while a student at Oxford University, following his mother’s assassination in 2007.

She, in turn, had taken over the party’s stewardship from her mother Nusrat, who became chairwoman following the execution of her husband Zulfikar in 1979 under military dictator Zia-ul-Haq. The new foreign minister is considered a progressive, in his mother’s image, and has frequently spoken out on the rights of women and minorities.

With more than half of Pakistan’s population aged 22 or below, Bhutto’s social media savvy is also a hit with the young, although he is frequently

News in brief

Denmark signs deal for prisoners

COPENHAGEN: Denmark on Wednesday signed an agreement with Pristina to send 300 prisoners to Kosovo to reduce overcrowding in the kingdom’s busy jails. The two countries initially agreed in December for the Scandinavian country to rent 300 jail cells for an annual fee of 15 million euros (\$16 million). “We have now signed a ground-breaking agreement that will ensure better capacity in our overcrowded prisons and will ease the pressure on our prison officers,” Justice Minister Nick Haekkerup said in a statement. The inmates will be sent to a prison in Gjiilan town—about 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the capital Pristina—starting from early 2023. The foreign prisoners will be deported after serving their sentence. “With this agreement, Denmark also sends a clear signal to foreigners from third-party countries who have been sentenced to deportation,” Haekkerup said. —AFP

Sudan releases key civilian figure

KHARTOUM: Sudanese authorities released a former member of the ruling Sovereign Council on Wednesday, a lawyer said, the second key civilian figure to be freed in two days. “Mohamed al-Fekki has been released,” defence lawyer Azhari al-Haj said, more than two months after the politician was detained on February 13. On Tuesday, authorities released Khaled Youssef, a former minister and prominent opponent of a military coup led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan on October 25 last year. The military’s power grab derailed a fragile transition to civilian rule that had been established in the wake of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir’s fall from power in 2019. Fekki’s spell in detention was his second since last year’s coup. —AFP

11 electrocuted in India

NEW DELHI: At least 11 people including three minors were killed Wednesday after a temple chariot procession came into contact with a high-voltage wire in India, police said. Initial indications suggested that the crowd used water to contain an initial fire after the top of the chariot touched the wire in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. At least 15 other people were hospitalised after the incident at around 3:00 am (2130 GMT) in the city of Thanjavur. “The top of the chariot was heavily decorated and that is the part that hit the wire,” senior police officer V Balakrishnan told AFP. The victims were part of the team that was pulling the chariot. At least three people died on the spot. Hundreds of devotees took part in the procession which has taken place annually for around 90 years. A senior police official told broadcaster NDTV that the power line along the temple route is usually turned off but this time it was kept on. —AFP

mocked for a poor command of Urdu, the national language.

Political commentators have mixed opinions on Bhutto’s abilities — or how long he can maintain good relations with premier Sharif, of the rival Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) party.

“I believe he is an un-tested missile,” analyst Hassan Askari Rizvi told AFP. “It is too early for a young MP like Bilawal Bhutto... and it will be difficult for him to handle issues Pakistan faces, with serious challenges on external fronts.”

Fellow analyst Farzana Bari disagreed. “I think Bilawal is intelligent enough to hold the fort,” she told AFP, adding he was “more progressive” than the leaders of other political parties. —AFP