

How and why Myanmar's Suu Kyi plans to be 'above president'

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Yangon (Myanmar): Coming from a politician who has spent her career fighting military rule, the statements seem rather authoritarian: "I'll be above the president," who "will be told exactly what he can do."

Though officially barred from the presidency, Aung San Suu Kyi says she will effectively lead Myanmar if her party wins elections that it has so far dominated. Some observers are dismayed by her willingness to place herself above not just the president but the law. Others say she's obeying the will of the people and subverting a military-dictated constitutional clause intended to lock her out of power.

Votes from Sunday's general election have not been fully tallied, but by Thursday evening, Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy had nearly clinched the combined parliamentary majority needed to take over the government early next year.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate and longtime political prisoner fought for decades to end dictatorship, and remains her party's unquestioned leader. However, the military added a provision to the country's 2008 constitution designed to bar her from the country's highest office, preventing anyone with foreign family members from being president. Suu Kyi's two sons are British, as was her late husband.

No problem, Suu Kyi said at a news conference shortly before the election. She wanted to assure supporters that she would hold power if her party won – that she would be "above the president," in her words.

She did not explain what she meant at the time, and may have been reacting to speculation that an estranged reformist leader of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party, House Speaker Shwe Mann, might cut a deal to serve as president in an NLD government. Such a prospect would have been dismaying to many of her followers, since Shwe Mann was a senior figure in the previous military government that Suu Kyi fought so hard against.

Two days after the election, as early returns pointed to a sweeping NLD victory, Suu Kyi responded to a question about being "above the president" in an interview with the BBC.

"Well, I'll make all the decisions, it's as simple as all that," she said, deeming the constitutional requirements a technicality "that won't stop me from making all the decisions as the leader of the winning party."

Pushed further in an interview that same day with Singapore's Channel NewsAsia, she seemed even more dismissive of political etiquette, saying that the president picked by her party would "have to understand this perfectly well, that he will have no authority. That he will act in accordance with the positions of the party."

When asked whether that might make the government run less smoothly, she said, "Why should it affect the functions of the government?"

"Because there will be a government, it will be run properly, the president will be told exactly what he can do."

It all sounded high-handed at best, especially to her many admirers outside Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Was she now unwilling to respect the law and the norms of democracy, and act instead in a way that reeked of backroom politicking?

Observers agree that Suu Kyi is mousetrapped by the constitution, but some worry about the implications of her effort to work around it.

"All the time that she's been involved with politics, she has campaigned on the basis of the need for the rule of law that Burma has not had," said David Steinberg, professor of Asian studies at Georgetown University. "Then all of a sudden she's essentially saying, 'I am above the law,' which is rather bizarre. After all, the constitution is the ultimate law in any country. Whether you like it or not is another matter."

Her comments, he speculated, must also have unnecessarily antagonized the still-powerful military, which could bode ill for the prospect of future cooperation.

More sympathetic is Kelley Currie, senior fellow at the Project 2049 Institute, a Washington-based democracy promotion organization. She said Suu Kyi's comments may sound awkward to Westerners, but they were bearing out what she made clear on the campaign trail — that when people vote for the NLD, they are getting her leadership.

"The fact that she's trying to subvert a deeply undemocratic constitution does not mean she's not committed to democracy," said Currie. "She's actually trying to find a way to make democracy work around the constitution. The people throughout the country couldn't have been more clear that they want the NLD to govern and for her to be in charge."

The concept of a proxy leader is not really that rare in Asia.

In India, often described as the world's largest democracy, Indian National Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi was widely regarded as pulling the strings behind Manmohan Singh, the uncharismatic economist who served as prime minister from 2004 to 2014.

Thailand's Yingluck Shinawatra, whose government was ousted by a military coup last year, was widely seen as fronting for her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, who was forced from power in 2006 and lives in exile to avoid a prison term on a corruption conviction. Her Pheu Thai Party campaigned with the slogan, "Thaksin thinks, Pheu Thai acts," and at one point Thaksin reportedly phoned in from his home in Dubai to take part in Cabinet meetings.

And though Indonesian President Joko Widodo has a considerable personal following of his own, he is ultimately beholden to Megawati Sukarnoputri, leader of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, a former president and daughter of the country's founding father, Sukarno.

Mark Farmaner of Burma Campaign UK, a group that lobbies for democracy in Myanmar, admits that Suu Kyi's comments "appear arrogant on the face of it, but the truth is she has an overwhelming mandate from the people of Burma to lead the country."

"Most people will think that her finding a way to work around an unfair constitutional clause designed by the military to prevent her being president is reasonable and sensible.

Â If Aung San Suu Kyi did take a backseat role, the public would be outraged and feel betrayed," he said in an email interview.

Michael Buehler, a lecturer in Southeast Asian politics at the University of London, speculates that there is a bit of bluster in Suu Kyi's statements, bearing in mind that the military remains the ultimate power broker in the country. The constitution that blocks Suu Kyi from the presidency also enshrines much of the military's authority.

"She is either very naive, or deliberately downplays her relative weakness in the post-election political ecology of Myanmar. No political decision will be made without the military, and frankly, no policy will actually be successful without the help of the military," he said.

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