



## Suu Kyi backs Burma reforms but says sanctions should stay

**RANGOON:** Dissident Aung San Suu Kyi said a series of reforms under way in Burma represent the biggest opening in the repressive Southeast Asian country since the 1980s, but she wanted to see more changes before she could support easing Western economic sanctions against the military-backed government.

The former political prisoner and Nobel laureate offered her strongest endorsement yet of steps by Burma's government in recent months to ease media restrictions, reform its state-dominated economy and pursue talks with the opposition.

Ms Suu Kyi's comments, in an interview at her party's headquarters in Rangoon, come as policy makers around the globe look to her for guidance on how to interpret the latest changes in the resource-rich, strategically important Southeast Asian nation.

Ms Suu Kyi compared her latest talks with the government — which included an August meeting with President Thein Sein — to “where South Africa was in 1990” as it negotiated an end to apartheid. She had warm words for Mr Thein Sein, whom she called “an honest, open kind of person” with a “sincere” desire to overhaul the country.

“I know we are not there yet, but we can see the way clear ahead more than we have ever been able to,” said Ms Suu Kyi, who added that her recent talks with government officials “felt real to me”, unlike previous meetings.

She suggested the government was close to meeting her condi-

tions to officially register her political organisation, a significant move that would signal her trust in the unfolding system and give Burma's leaders a level of legitimacy they crave. She did not rule out the possibility of running for office in a national vote expected in 2015.

However, Ms Suu Kyi said it was still too early to give up on sanctions. Authorities continue to hold an undetermined number of political prisoners, she said, and had yet to fully restore relations with Burma's ethnic minority groups, some of which remain locked in violent armed conflicts with the government.

“Obviously now is not the time” to lift sanctions, she said, though she said she expected the government to release more political prisoners soon. It released about 200 people this month, in a move criticised by human-rights organisations as too limited.

Ms Suu Kyi is walking an uncertain road toward reconciliation with leaders in Burma, whose strategic significance has increased as China, India and other nations compete for access to its minerals and trade.

Some dissidents and Western investors want Ms Suu Kyi to end her support for sanctions. The rules have been imposed in stages since the late 90s, largely at her behest, to punish a regime accused of human-rights violations.

Western officials have offered cautious support for the changes, which include plans to allow peaceful protests and the organisation of labor unions, as well as

steps to unblock websites such as the BBC and YouTube.

Signs of a thaw continued this week, as US special envoy to Burma Derek Mitchell arrived to meet government leaders for the second time in two months.

Ms Suu Kyi is facing resistance from dissidents who doubt the sincerity of the government's reform agenda, and fear easing sanctions now could rob the opposition of leverage. It is clear Ms Suu Kyi will play a crucial role in determining when, and whether, sanctions are removed.

After her release in November last year from her latest stint under house arrest, many experts expected Ms Suu Kyi to take a tough line against the new government, which came to power after an election late last year that many Western leaders said was riddled with fraud and which is dominated by allies of the military regime that had controlled Burma since 1962. Instead, she has been conciliatory towards the government, which is eager to win her backing to get sanctions removed.

“She's put herself in a position she hasn't been in in a long time, of being the arbiter,” said Sean Turnell, a Burma expert at Macquarie University in Sydney. He said he doubted the US would lift sanctions without a clear sign from Ms Suu Kyi.

She has not endorsed Burma's bid to serve as chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2014, a move that has split diplomats across Southeast Asia.

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