

INTERNATIONAL
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Thai PM says Myanmar's Suu Kyi detention is "OK"

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BANGKOK: Thailand has no problem with the prolonged house arrest in Myanmar of opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej said on Wednesday.

After a meeting in Bangkok with his counterpart from military-ruled Myanmar, Lieutenant-General Thein Sein, Samak said the former Burma's ruling generals had no plans to release 62-year-old Suu Kyi either before or after next month's constitutional referendum.

"They are not releasing her, but they will not interfere with her. They will put her on the shelf and not bother with her, which is unacceptable to foreigners," Samak, a vitriolic 72-year-old right-winger, told reporters.

"We think it's OK if she is put on the shelf. But others admire her because of it," he said.

Samak's comments are at odds with Bangkok's standard line that Suu Kyi's release would be welcome as part of moves towards democracy and political reconciliation in its pariah neighbour -- a major supplier of energy to Thailand.

Oxford-educated Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero Aung San and as such the icon of the democracy movement, has been under house arrest or in prison for more than 12 of the last 18 years. Her last period of detention stretches back to May 2003.

Her National League for Democracy (NLD) party won a crushing election victory in 1990, with more than 80 percent of the seats, only to see the junta ignore the result and refuse to cede any power.

The current junta is billing the May 10 referendum as a key stage in a seven-step "roadmap to democracy" that should culminate in multi-party elections in 2010, as a replacement to the absolute power wielded by the army since a 1962 coup.

The NLD and Western governments dismiss the roadmap and the army-drafted constitution as a blueprint for the generals cementing their grip on power.

The NLD is leading a "no" campaign against the charter, which gives the army a quarter of the seats in parliament, control of key ministries and the right to suspend the constitution at will.

Thai Foreign Minister Noppadol Pattama said Bangkok did not want to see cheating or intimidation in the plebiscite after reports of opposition campaigners being arrested or beaten.

"The referendum must be credible and be participated in by all sides with a standard that the world community likes to see, and most importantly it must be a free and fair exercise," he told reporters.

Earlier this month, the United States had circulated a draft statement to the United Nations Security Council which said if the May referendum and elections planned for 2010 were to be "inclusive and credible", the junta had to "allow full participation of all political actors," including Suu Kyi, and called on the military to move quickly to a genuine dialogue with her.

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