

Govt flips stance on Suu Kyi

Written by Sebastian Strangio
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Official says commuted verdict a sign of democratic Myanmar.

GOVERNMENT officials have hailed the outcome of the trial of Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, claiming the reduction of her sentence was a "good sign" the country was moving in a democratic direction.

On Tuesday, a court at Yangon's notorious Insein Prison found Suu Kyi guilty of breaching her house arrest and sentenced her to three years in prison and hard labour, a punishment the head of the ruling junta commuted to 18 months' house arrest.

Koy Kuong, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said the commuting of the sentence by Myanmar head of state Than Shwe showed the country's military government was keen to enact democratic reforms.

"It is a good signal for the situation that Aung San Suu Kyi only got a sentence of 18 months' house arrest," he said. "Myanmar has gone through many steps [and] is on the way to democratisation."

Koy Kuong did not wish to comment further on the trial on Tuesday, saying it was Myanmar's "internal affair" and had been handled in accordance with the country's laws.

Koy Kuong's comments mark a conspicuous U-turn in the government's position on the issue, which previously held that Suu Kyi was innocent of the charges against her and should be released.

The 64-year-old Nobel laureate was arrested May 3 after sheltering an American man who swam to her lakeside home in Yangon, an incident authorities called a breach of the terms of her house arrest.

"[We hope] Mrs Suu Kyi will be found innocent of these accusations, and that she will not receive any additional punishment, because she has been punished already," Koy Kuong told the Post on May 18.

Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said that the government reversal was likely due to its awareness that the Suu Kyi trial "ran parallel" to the current situation in Cambodia - in particular, the recent spate of defamation and disinformation lawsuits filed against government critics.

"It's very difficult for the Cambodian government to say anything about [Suu Kyi's trial] because the same could be said about the Cambodian government," he said.

"The Foreign Ministry must be careful not to have its arguments reflect back on Cambodia."

He added: "At the end of the day, it is beneficial for the people in power to see the status quo [upheld]."

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The government's response has also flown in the face of local opinion on the verdict.

Soe Thiha, the leader of a group of Myanmar activists living in Phnom Penh, condemned the verdict, saying it was a clear attempt to keep Suu Kyi out of sight during elections scheduled for 2010.

"I was optimistic [about] the outcome, but I think that the military are very afraid of her," he said. "They were desperate to keep her under control for next year."

Sam Rainsy Party spokesman Yim Sovann agreed, saying Suu Kyi had done "nothing wrong" and had been targeted out of fear. He called on the junta to bring its behaviour into line with the "democratic trends" sweeping the world.

International outrage

The verdict against Suu Kyi, who has spent 13 of the last 19 years in detention since the junta refused to recognise her National League for Democracy's landslide victory in elections in 1990, has also drawn a spate of criticism from the international community.

British Premier Gordon Brown said he was "saddened and angry" at the verdict in the "sham trial" and called for the UN Security Council to impose a worldwide embargo on the sale of arms to the junta.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said new sanctions had to hit the junta where it hurt, especially in the trade of wood and rubies. Australia also called for tougher sanctions, expressing dismay at the "spurious" conviction.

In a statement released Tuesday, the EU presidency vowed to impose additional sanctions on the military regime.

"The EU will respond with additional targeted measures against those responsible for the verdict," the presidency said in a statement on behalf of the 27-nation bloc.

"The EU will further reinforce its restrictive measures targeting the regime of Burma/Myanmar, including its economic interests."

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AFP