

May 7, 2002

Power struggle

Aung San Suu Kyi's unconditional release after nearly 20 months of house arrest marks a significant, though still small, step forward in the attempt to create a more open and democratic form of government in Myanmar.

Her release is significant because it is unconditional. The country's military rulers have pledged that she will be free to undertake political activities and travel throughout the country. But it is still a small step considering the great gulf that still exists between Ms Suu Kyi and the Government. A crucial question that needs to be answered before real progress can be made, is how serious the military is about relinquishing power, and what sort of time frame they are thinking of. The Government has committed itself to "allowing all of our citizens to participate freely in the life of our political process", but it qualifies this by stating that it will give priority "to national unity, peace and stability of the country as well as the region". The references to unity, peace and stability do not bode well for a speedy transition to civilian government. Military governments habitually justify their presence with references to peace and stability, which they contrast to the anarchy of civilian government.

Myanmar's rulers do not seem to be in a hurry to give up power. The UN envoy Razali Ismail, whose patient diplomacy made Ms Suu Kyi's release possible, has predicted it will take a couple of years for a transition to a civilian government.

A couple of years could stretch on indefinitely unless there is a concerted effort by Asean and the United Nations to encourage a continuing dialogue between Ms Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and the Government.

A major concern is the state of the country's economy. As Ms Suu Kyi pointed out, "the economy is in need of very very speedy change". As a first step towards rebuilding their country, the Government and the NLD could consider agreeing on measures to revive the economy.