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OPINION

Aung San Suu Kyi: Critic or bridge builder?

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Myanmar's national elections on Nov. 7, 2010 saw a boycott by the influential National League for Democracy (NLD) in response to the restrictive nature of the polls and continued detention of political prisoners, including its leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, there were several democratic parties and independents that contested the elections, with limited success, and amid accusations of electoral fraud. While the controversy raged on, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a "pardon" for Suu Kyi for "displaying good conduct". The next day, Suu Kyi headed to the NLD headquarters and gave her first public speech and a press conference, which provided some answers to many questions people have raised about her position on particular issues.

While avoiding specifics, Suu Kyi made clear that the role of the NLD is unequivocally a political organization. She called on the Myanmar people to rise to the challenge and push for democratic reforms. But she also recognized the need to interact with people across Myanmar and listen to their concerns.

The decision of the military regime to disenfranchise some ethnic nationalities areas and the subsequent fighting that broke out in the election aftermath clearly underlines the need for national reconciliation. In her speech, Suu Kyi outlined her vision and the need for a second Panglong Conference to facilitate national reconciliation — to forge an agreement over the role and place of the ethnic nationalities areas.

The first Panglong Conference in 1947 led to an agreement between the Burmese independence leader, Aung San, and the leaders of the Shan, Chin and Kachin to unite for independence from Britain. It accepted full autonomy on internal affairs for these ethnic nationalities.

National reconciliation is undoubtedly the thornier of the two major issues — the other being tackling extreme poverty — given that the initial military takeover in 1962 was to ensure the territorial integrity of post-independence Burma. What is clear from the fighting in these areas is that these issues remain as relevant today as they were in 1962.

The military regime's "four cuts" strategy from the 1960s — to cut off the ethnic nationalities from four crucial links — food, money, information and recruits — caused disunity but did ensure that extreme poverty prevailed. The subsequent flaky peace agreements currently in place are meant to allow for trade rather than to address the root causes of the conflict. Without addressing these causes extreme poverty is likely to remain.

There are big political questions that need to be addressed in Myanmar. With her release, there is renewed hope for change in the country. However, as noted by Suu Kyi in her public address, the struggle for democracy cannot be a one-person show — it is a responsibility for everyone.

Suu Kyi also made it clear that all advocates for democracy need to work together, without drawing a distinction between the parties that stood and those which did not stand for election. It is necessary for all parties to work together to achieve national reconciliation. Once this occurs then the underlying issues surrounding extreme poverty can be addressed effectively.

It is clear from the reception Aung San Suu Kyi received on her release that she is as relevant today as ever. Her place as the symbolic leader of the democratic opposition in the politics of Myanmar remains. However the engagement of all people in Myanmar in pushing for democratic reforms, national reconciliation and addressing extreme poverty is necessary for change to occur.

Suu Kyi's constructive engagement offers a way to address these issues. Her release has re-energized her supporters, and provides another opportunity to engage in addressing these challenges. A concerted effort is needed by all parties to address these challenges. The question remains whether all involved are up to this task.

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