

Reading Between the Lines of Burma's Latest Prison Release - TIME



Tin Oo, vice chairman of the National League for Democracy, speaking to journalists after his release from nearly seven year house arrest at his house, in Rangoon, Burma, on Feb. 13 2010

NYEIN CHAN NAING / EPA

The release from detention of a close aide to Burmese democracy advocate Aung San Suu Kyi on Saturday could presage the same for the Nobel Peace Prize winner from her latest period of house arrest. It's happened before, when both were released within weeks of each other in 1995. But it does not signal any move on the part of Burma's ruling generals to reconcile with their democratic opponents before elections slated for later this year, analysts and party members said.

The freeing of 82-year-old Tin Oo, vice chairman of the National League for Democracy, from seven years of prison and then house arrest "does not in any way signal a shift in attitude on the part of the government," said Benjamin Zawacki, a Thailand-based researcher with Amnesty International. "Like all prisoners of conscience in Myanmar [Burma], he never should have been arrested in the first place."

Zawacki pointed out that more than 2,100 political prisoners remain incarcerated in Burma. Three days before Tin Oo's release the regime sentenced Burmese-born American citizen and political activist Kyaw Zaw Lwin to three years imprisonment at a time it is supposedly seeking better ties with the U.S., and on Tuesday, a Burmese court sentenced four women who held prayer services for Suu Kyi's release to prison terms with hard labor. "One step forward, one step back is the opposite of a shift," Zawacki said. A report released Tuesday by Amnesty International concurs, documenting stepped-up repression against Burma's ethnic minority groups. "Ethnic minorities play an important but seldom acknowledged role in Burma's political opposition," Zawacki said. Several ethnic minorities have formed their own political parties, or are members of the NLD. Some ethnic groups, such as the Karen, remain in armed rebellion against the government. ([Read more about Burma's ethnic minorities.](#))

The political fates of Tin Oo and Suu Kyi have been closely intertwined. The co-founders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were arrested in 2003 after their motorcade in northern Burma was attacked by a pro-government mob and dozens of their supporters were killed. Tin Oo had also been arrested the same day as Suu Kyi in 1989, and he was released two months before her in 1995. Not long before Tin Oo's release this week, a regime official suggested at a provincial town meeting that Suu Kyi, too, would be released in November of this year.

Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, is in her third period of house arrest, totaling nearly 14 of the past 20 years. The military, which has ruled Burma for nearly half a century, has promised elections this year, though no date has been set. The NLD has yet to decide whether it will participate in the elections, which are already being criticized in some quarters as a sham because Suu Kyi has been barred from taking part and her party's activities have been severely restricted. In Burma's last election in 1990, the NLD won in a landslide, only to have the military ignore the result and refuse to transfer power. ([See pictures of Burma's slowly shifting landscape.](#))

NLD members reacted to Tin Oo's release by voicing hope that Suu Kyi's second-in-command could help reinvigorate the beleaguered political party. "Tin Oo is politically experienced, a seasoned politician, which is very much important and significant for us," Win Tin, an NLD leader who was imprisoned for 18 years, told the Mizzima news agency. He said the government had done all it could to cut off contact between the NLD and the Burmese people, and that Tin Oo, who is widely respected, could help re-establish that connection.

As a former Defense Minister and Commander in Chief of the armed forces, Tin Oo has at once drawn the extreme ire of the regime for opposing military rule and supporting democracy and gaining the admiration of others. "When he was first arrested he had a wide network of friends in the military and beyond," said Josef Silverstein, a retired academic and Burma expert from Rutgers University. "He was well respected and listened to."

Zawacki cautioned, however, that Tin Oo's release could be a ploy on the part of the government. "His release may have been a kind of false incentive to the NLD. NLD participation in an election that it loses would greatly assist the government's inevitable claims that the election was legitimate," he said.

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