

OP-ED

A charade the U.S. can't play

Jared Genser

SUNDAY WAS AN important anniversary for Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. But there were no celebrations. There was little to commemorate. Not her husband's funeral, her children's weddings or the birth of her grandchildren; she has missed all of these. As of Sunday, Suu Kyi has spent 15 of the last 21 years under house arrest. Burma's military junta, which renamed the country Myanmar, has kept the Nobel Peace Prize laureate imprisoned and isolated in her decaying, whitewashed house for the last seven years, and sporadically for eight years before that.

But even if Suu Kyi — the elected leader of the country since 1990 — were allowed outside her house, she would see that she is not the only one who has been isolated for much of the last two decades. The 50 million Burmese people in the crumbling country are also living in poverty, cut off from much of the world and under the thumb of the military dictatorship.

The junta's latest ploy to cement its power is the general "elections" scheduled for Nov. 7, the first since 1990, when Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and its allies won more than 80% of the seats in parliament. The junta refused to ratify those results.

There is no reason to believe the junta will be any more inclined to relinquish power next month than it was 20 years ago. The so-called elections will be neither free nor fair.

These elections are based on a new constitution that provides the military, which is immune from prosecution, with the right to overturn any decision of the other branches of government. The leader of the military has the power to appoint one-quarter of both houses of parliament — all that is needed to veto any constitutional amendment. Perhaps most chilling is the constitution's establishment of a National Defense and Security Council, a vague institution that appears to be merely a new moniker for the State Peace and Development Council, otherwise known as the Burmese junta.

The elections themselves also will be deeply flawed. Suu Kyi and her more than 2,000 fellow political prisoners are prohibited from being candidates for office. And the cost to register as a candidate exceeds the country's annual per capita GDP, and most attempting to register are turned down. The last time Burmese went to the polls, just days after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 to vote on the constitution, military agents stood watch over ballot boxes — when they were not stuffing them — and threatened citizens with fines and prison sentences if they didn't vote the way the regime demanded.

As a kind of olive branch to the world, intended to quiet condemnation of the elections, the junta claims it will free Suu Kyi on Nov. 13, the date she should be released under her sentence.

Ultimately, however, her release is a necessary but far from sufficient condition to achieve progress.

Regardless of Suu Kyi's release, the United States must not recognize these elections as anything but a charade. Anything less than a full-throated condemnation of the elections will buy the junta another reprieve from having the spotlight on its practices. President Obama must fully implement the sanctions adopted by Congress and investigate, expose and sanction the junta's bankers in Singapore and Dubai for laundering the funds the regime has pillaged from its people. He must appoint a special coordinator on Burma policy, a position that has been empty since he took office. And U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice should take the lead in the United Nations in pressing for a commission of inquiry into the junta's atrocities.

At the same time, the United States should also press U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to restart direct talks with the regime. It is only through a facilitated process of tripartite dialogue among the junta, Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy and the country's disparate ethnic groups that any real reconciliation and progress toward democracy will be made.

All of these efforts must have specific benchmarks, time frames and consequences for a lack of progress.

There is another imposing whitewashed building that sits just half a mile west of Suu Kyi's home, on the very same street. Here too the Burmese junta keeps a close eye on who goes in and out. It is the U.S. Embassy. The United States is, all too literally, sitting on the sidelines. It is time to get in the game.

JARED GENSER is president of Freedom Now and serves as international counsel to Aung San Suu Kyi. The views expressed here are his own.

Gregory Rodriguez
has the day off.