

Why is the British government welcoming Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest?

May 2026

Between 1989 and 2010 Aung San Suu Kyi spent 15 years under house arrest. It was a politically motivated detention, illegal under Burmese and international law, and the British government rightly led the world in condemning her detention and demanding the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners.

On 5 May 2026, the British government welcomed Aung San Suu Kyi being placed under house arrest.

Seema Malhotra MP, Minister for the Indo-Pacific at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) posted the following on X:

“The announcement of Aung San Suu Kyi's move to house arrest is a welcome first step, but must be a step on a path to her unconditional release. We remain concerned and await urgent confirmation of her health and well-being, and call for all those unjustly detained to be released.”

The statement stood in stark contrast to western allies, who carefully avoided welcoming Aung San Suu Kyi being placed under house arrest. It is also notable for avoiding using the language political prisoners to describe political prisoners. This is not accidental. It is also a calculated decision that this statement came directly from a Minister, not a spokesperson or the Embassy in Burma (Myanmar). (Statements from the EU and US came from spokespeople, Australia's came from the Embassy).

Combined, these three things have a real significance. They represent an unannounced shift in policy. A further softening in the British government's approach to the Burmese military. It comes on top of a general lack of action to support the people of Burma in their struggle for human rights and democracy, including no new sanctions against the Burmese military since 2024.

The FCDO might think they are playing a smart political move, welcoming a small positive in the hope of encouraging further positive steps, but they are the ones being played.

The Burmese military moved Aung San Suu Kyi to house arrest in a calculating manipulative move to try to reduce international and domestic pressure. It came after the staged and staggered release of other political prisoners, in order to maximise public relations benefits.

This is all happening in the context of sham elections held at the end of 2025 and start of 2026, which only the likes of Russia, China and Belarus considered free and fair.

It resulted in a rebranded Burmese military regime in which the President and two Vice Presidents are from the Burmese military or Burmese military proxy political party and 86% of ministers running ministries are from the Burmese military or the Burmese military proxy political party. 86% of MPs in the Parliament are from the military or Burmese military proxy party. It's a military regime, pretending to be a new civilian government.

The Burmese military want to repeat the success they had after sham elections in 2010 when they persuaded the international community to lift sanctions and back their fake reform process, during which they committed genocide against the Rohingya, before launching their latest coup in 2021.

Burmese politicians and activists have been warning for more than a year that the Burmese military are going to replay the tactics that worked for them after the 2010 elections, and that the international community must not fall for it again.

Burma Campaign UK has also warned of this, publishing a briefing paper: The Burmese Military's 'Elections': New Date, New Danger, Same Sham. https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/the-burmese-militarys-elections-new-date-new-danger-same-sham/

The briefing paper detailed tactics the Burmese military would use, and called on governments not to repeat past mistakes that enabled genocide and the latest coup.

It is a long-used tactic by the Burmese military to take two steps back and then one step forward to try to garner praise for the one step forward, even though things are still worse than before. They wanted to do this with the relocation of Aung San Suu Kyi's detention. Unlike the FCDO, others were careful not to fall for this.

On 2 May, European Union Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Anitta Hipper posted on X: "The EU notes reports that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been transferred to house arrest. We call for full respect of her physical and mental wellbeing, regular access to family and legal counsel, and reiterate our demand for her full release and of all remaining political prisoners."

On 1 May, a US State Department Spokesperson was quoted as saying: "We continue to call for her immediate and unconditional release. We urge the regime to ensure Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has proper access to medical care given continued reports of her poor health."

On 1 May, Farhan Haq, Deputy Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General stated: "The Secretary-General has taken note of the transfer of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to a designated residence. The Secretary-General appeals for the swift and unconditional release of all those arbitrarily detained as a fundamental step towards conditions conducive to a credible political process."

On 6 May, the Australian Embassy in Myanmar published a statement stating: "We note reports of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's move to house arrest, where we expect she be permitted contact with her family, and access to her lawyers and appropriate medical care. We continue to call for her unconditional release and the release of all those unjustly detained. We reiterate our call for the cessation of violence, safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and inclusive dialogue among stakeholders."

None of these statements welcomed the move to house arrest as the UK has, with Australia, the EU and UN carefully using language noting the release.

The Minister's use of "unjustly detained" instead of political prisoners is also a deliberate downgrade in tone, reaching out to the Burmese military. It's another way of telling them if you make positive steps, we will respond in kind.

Having a positive statement welcoming the continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi come from the Minister rather than a spokesperson or the embassy is another carefully calibrated decision. It's designed to send a positive message to the Burmese military; we are ready to engage in return for further positive steps.

It's exactly what the Burmese military are hoping for. Not because they want encouragement to reform. They can release all political prisoners and step back from politics any time they want. They want engagement and legitimacy. They want an end to sanctions.

The Burmese military are calculating that western countries, which are being impacted by multiple crises around the world as well as economic problems, and which have already downgraded Burma on their agenda, are getting tired of the current crisis.

They are hoping that western countries will decide something is better than nothing and be happy to use any sham reform process as an excuse to normalise relations and focus elsewhere. We can expect the humanitarian crisis deliberately created by the Burmese military to be part of the next manipulation by the military.

The new (old) tactics by the Burmese military represent a challenge for western governments. On the face of it, if the Burmese military do something positive why shouldn't it be welcomed or even rewarded. What is the incentive for the Burmese military to take further positive steps if there is no acknowledgment when they do?

Assessing the intention that underpins seemingly positive steps is what must guide decision making.

Having just taken elaborate steps to consolidate political power while at the same time waging war across the country, does this look like a military regime that has had an epiphany and now yearns for international assistance to reform and democratise?

Praise will not incentivise the Burmese military to make further reforms. They have already planned and calculated the minimum concessions they think they need to make to persuade the international community to relax pressure and reengage. They have obviously calculated that they need to make far fewer concessions now than they did after the 2010 elections.

Diplomats have argued during past fake reform processes that engaging in those fake processes is worthwhile because they can create space that can lead to snowball effects beyond what the Burmese military expect. This has never happened to anything close to the degree hoped for, and in the extremely unlikely event it will, the Burmese military will simply launch another coup.

The Burmese military have directly ruled Burma for 59 years since 1962. They have not survived that long by chance. They are master manipulators playing divide and rule domestically whilst at the same time dangling the promise of reform internationally.

Everything the Burmese military are doing now is designed to preserve military rule. They have built a road where they have chosen every turn, every marking, and the destination. There are no side roads leading to another destination.

If the British government and others follow them down that road, it will make it even harder for the people of Burma to win their freedom. Any small, short-term gains will be outweighed by long term conflict, repression, economic mismanagement and corruption.

In areas freed from Burmese military occupation new local administrations are being created. In many of these, people are being consulted and participating in decisions about local constitutions, how public services are run and how natural resources are used.

This didn't happen under kings, colonialism or military rule. It's a first. It is a bottom-up democratisation being built despite the Burmese military airstrikes and aid embargoes. This genuine bottom-up democratisation is what the British government should be supporting, not starting down the road of another fake Burmese military process.

The British government should resume targeted sanctions to reduce the capacity of the Burmese military to bomb and burn schools, hospitals and civilian homes.

If the British government's objective, right or wrong, is that it wants to encourage dialogue as a solution to the crisis, why won't it impose sanctions that will help push the military into dialogue, and put it in a weaker position in that dialogue, forced to make greater concessions? Why isn't it providing more leverage for pro-democracy forces? What do they think has more influence over the Burmese military, soft X posts or sanctions cutting off their money and arms?

There is overwhelming consensus from political parties, ethnic revolutionary organisations and independent civil society in and from Burma that the current efforts by the Burmese military to rebrand and gain legitimacy must be rejected by the international community. The British government does not know better than them or have the right to decide what is best for the people of Burma.

Following the genocidal Burmese military attacks against the Rohingya in 2017 and the 2021 coup, Burma Campaign UK asked the FCDO to conduct independent reviews so that they could learn from mistakes made responding to the fake reform process which began after the 2010 elections. They refused. We were assured there were internal reviews and lessons had been learned.

The Minister's X post welcoming Aung San Suu Kyi being placed under house arrest has echoes of the approach taken after 2010. It appears there is a danger of the same mistakes being made all over again.

Further Reading

Burmese Military Play Aung San Suu Kyi Card in Latest PR Move

<https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burmese-military-play-aung-san-suu-kyi-card-in-latest-pr-move/>

Burma's Rebranded Military Regime

https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/burmas-rebranded-military-regime/

Burmese Military Rebrands, But Never Reforms

https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/burmese-military-rebrands-but-never-reforms/

Beyond the 'ballot': The crisis in Burma and what the British Government should do about it

https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/beyond-the-ballot-the-crisis-in-burma-and-what-the-british-government-should-do-about-it/

The Burmese Military's 'Elections': New Date, New Danger, Same Sham

https://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma_briefing/the-burmese-militarys-elections-new-date-new-danger-same-sham/



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