

Unnamed official sources in Burma have recently said that Aung San Suu Kyi will be released from house arrest on Nov. 13, when her current period of detention is due to expire. But is the Burmese regime really planning to free the detained Nobel Peace Prize winner? The answer to this question very much depends on one person: Snr-Gen Than Shwe.

If Suu Kyi is released in November, it will not be before next month's election. Pro-regime parties are expected to engineer a victory in the polls, which raises further questions about how Suu Kyi will respond to this situation if she is allowed to leave her home.

For the regime's paramount leader, this is the crucial issue. He regards Suu Kyi as a potential threat to national security, and if he believes that she will continue to challenge his rule after she is freed, he will almost certainly find some pretext to extend her detention indefinitely.

The people of Burma would rejoice at news of Suu Kyi's release, but they also know better than to allow it to raise their hopes or expectations. Their response would most likely be one of cautious optimism.

The most important thing people will be watching for is whether Suu Kyi will be allowed to travel. When she was released in 1995, she and her fellow National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders were not allowed to travel outside of Rangoon. Every time they tried to, they were followed and harassed by intelligence agents. In May 2003, junta leaders including Than Shwe were allegedly involved in giving a green light to an attack on her convoy that left many of her supporters dead.

People will also be very interested to know what Suu Kyi's strategy and future role will be. She will face a new political scene on the ground. Some of her closest allies and colleagues will not be around. Many have resigned from politics or passed away, while many others remain in Burma's gulag. Some—notably Dr Than Nyein and Khin Maung Swe—have deserted her disbanded party and formed a new party to contest in the election.

So what will her next move be? It is unlikely that she will resume her famous weekly “democracy speeches” at her compound gate at 54 University Avenue.

Some sources close to her suggested that she and her colleagues could become more involved in social and humanitarian work, particularly in the fields of education and poverty eradication. If she moves in that direction, the regime leaders who see her as direct political threat will be less intimidated and threatened.

But even here, she may find herself coming under attack from figures close to the regime who in recent years have moved to occupy the potentially lucrative “humanitarian space” being created by international aid groups eager to expand their presence in Burma. Indeed, some of these groups may be the first to pounce on her if they find her position on Western sanctions endangers their prospects for greater cooperation with the Burmese authorities.

Critics of Suu Kyi also say that her repeated calls for dialogue with the regime have fallen on deaf ears because she has no stick with which to force her adversaries to come to the

negotiating table.

Some dissidents say that Suu Kyi does not possess the qualities that made her father, independence hero Gen Aung San, so effective in his struggle against the British. Many feel that she is not decisive enough and that she lacks the political astuteness that is needed to defeat the generals. After 22 years of non-violent struggle under Suu Kyi's leadership, Burmese are increasingly inclined to believe that the transition to genuine democracy will be a bloody one.

It remains to be seen how the NLD's decision not to contest this year's election will affect Suu Kyi's ability to reach out to the generals. Although her party has been disbanded as a consequence of this decision, she herself remains enormously popular, both at home and abroad. This could give her some leverage, although past experience suggests it will be limited.

In November 2007, shortly after the regime brutally crushed the monk-led Saffron Revolution, Suu Kyi attempted to make a fresh start by issuing a statement through then UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari.

In her message, she stressed that she was seeking the path of dialogue and not the "devastation" and confrontation that Than Shwe accused her of.

However, her words had little impact on the stubborn general.

The only sign of any softening of Than Shwe's position came after Suu Kyi was sentenced to three years imprisonment last year following a bizarre episode involving an American man who swam to her home. Soon after her sentence was announced, Home Minister Maung Oo entered the courtroom to read a special order from Than Shwe stating that, as Suu Kyi is the daughter of national hero Gen Aung San, her sentence should be reduced to 18 months.

That was 17 months ago. Now that she is due to be released, it is still unclear if Than Shwe has decided yet whether she was worthy of his mercy. If he does allow her to go free, however, it will most likely be based on a careful political calculation, rather than any feelings of magnanimity toward his nemesis.

Many will be watching to see how both sides deal with this situation. If Suu Kyi is released, expect to hear the West, the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations all claim their share of the credit. But don't expect any real progress.

If the international community wants to do something truly useful, it should demand not only Suu Kyi's release, but also that of the more than 2,000 other political prisoners, including more than 200 monks and nuns, still behind bars. Anything short of that will be meaningless in terms of moving Burma as a whole toward genuine freedom.