

Case Study Activist Movement in a Non-Free Country

Aung San Suu Kyi

Vision and Motivation

Burma was under British control from 1824-1948, when General Aung San, the founder of Burma's modern military, successfully negotiated Burma's independence from the United Kingdom. Less than a year after Aung San's political victory, he was assassinated by rivals within the military, who consolidated its power in 1962 when General Ne Win and his Socialist Program Party overthrew the government and established rule by military junta. The 48 years since the junta's rise have been marred by a regime that brought fear and poverty to Burma.



Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San, was born in 1945, three years prior to Burma's independence and the subsequent assassination of her father. After leaving the country in the early 1960's for schooling and a position at the United Nations, Suu Kyi finally returned to Burma in 1988 to be with her ailing mother. Shortly after her return on August 8, 1988, General Ne Win, the head of the military junta, resigned from his position, sparking nationwide protests about Burma's governance; the military cracked down on these demonstrations, killing thousands of protestors.¹ Three weeks later on August 26, Suu Kyi, already in a role of great political influence as the daughter of General Aun San, addressed half a million people at a rally in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, calling for a democratic government. After a new military junta, led by General Saw Maung, was born into existence on September 8, Suu Kyi

helped establish the National League for Democracy (NLD) and has remained the party's Secretary General since its founding on September 27, 1988. Just a year later, once the government realized that a sizable political movement was forming behind Aung San Suu Kyi's ideals, she was placed under house arrest on July 21, 1989.²

Goals and Objectives

Aung San Suu Kyi has devoted her life to the idea of a free and open Burma, one in which the military junta is replaced by a democratically elected government. The best way to achieve that goal in 1988, according to Suu Kyi, was to establish a political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and defeat the military junta in national elections. In the party's first election in 1990, the NLD won 83% of the parliamentary seats and Suu Kyi was slated to become Prime Minister; however, the military junta prevented a transition to democracy by rejecting the election results and continued to rule the country. International political organizations, news outlets and political leaders all recognized the fairness of the 1990 election. When the junta refused to relinquish power it was clear to both international and local observers that significant violations of civil and political liberties were taking place.³

In the face of this direct obstacle Suu Kyi's goals shifted, and she began to use her house arrest as a platform to discuss the issue of Burmese human rights violations with the international community. Despite a general lack of access to the international political arena and media, Suu Kyi, using the \$1.3 million award from her 1991 Nobel Prize, chose to invest in the faith of the Burmese people and established a national health and education trust.⁴ Throughout the 1990's Suu Kyi, while still under house arrest, continued to communicate with NLD cohorts and the international community through her husband and two sons living in the U.K.

After she was released from house arrest on May 6th, 2002, Suu Kyi immediately began an aggressive national campaign for the NLD, which was tragically shortened after she was sentenced to house arrest again on May 30th, 2003. In the time since her second incarceration, she has continued to garner domestic and international support from countries like the United States and Great Britain alongside the European Union, who have all aggressively pressed the Burmese government for her release.

Leadership

Aung San Suu Kyi's exceptional leadership cannot be attributed solely to her status as the daughter of a political hero. She was deeply influenced by nonviolent civic leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. As a political leader, she has managed to find a comfortable balance between defiance and nonviolence. Despite a government ban on political gatherings of more than four people that began in September 1988, Suu Kyi began a public speaking tour around the country in order to garner support for the NLD; it would not be the first time she would defy government orders, nor the last.

Once while walking back from a speech she had given at a rally in a small town, Suu Kyi and her supporters were suddenly surrounded by soldiers who commanded them to get out of the road. Suu Kyi calmly responded that they would "walk down the side of the road" instead. She explains, "My thought was, one doesn't turn back in a situation like this." Having walked straight up to the soldiers she stood waiting for them to allow her to pass until a Major suddenly appeared and ordered them to lower their guns.⁵ "There is a vast difference in the attitude of a man with a gun in his hand and that of one without a gun in his hand," avows Suu Kyi. "When someone doesn't have a gun in his hand, he or she tries harder to use his or her mind, sense of compassion and intelligence to work out a solution."⁶ For all of her efforts to bring democracy to Burma, Suu Kyi has received a number of the world's highest accolades which include the Sakharov Prize, the Nobel Peace Prize and the Congressional Gold Medal.

Civic Environment

The government of Burma is widely believed to be one of the most repressive in the world. Burma is not an electoral democracy by any means; the military junta controls all executive, legislative, and judicial powers, suppresses nearly all basic rights, and commits human rights abuses with impunity. Since rejecting the results of the 1990 elections and preventing the People's Assembly from convening, the junta has all but paralyzed political parties in Burma. Authorities have jailed many opposition leaders, pressured thousands of members to resign, closed party offices, harassed members' families, and periodically detained supporters to block planned meetings. According to Freedom House's 2009 *Freedom in the World* report, the

Burmese government intimidated the population into voting for a constitutional referendum in 2008 that legitimized continued military rule, an election so erroneous that international observers refused to ratify the results.⁷

Lacking transparency and accountability, government corruption is rampant at both the national and local levels. The military government sharply restricts press freedom, and has also stepped up surveillance at internet cafes and sharply raised the fees for satellite dish licenses. Freedoms of association and assembly are restricted; unauthorized outdoor gatherings of more than five people are banned, and authorities regularly use force to break up or prevent demonstrations and meetings.⁸

Message and Audience

Suu Kyi's core message is an encouraging call to action focused on nonviolent action in the relentless pursuit of democracy. The influence of Buddhism in Aung San Suu Kyi's politics has been a topic of scholarly analysis for years, and she points out that the idea of mutual forgiveness in Buddhism is central to the function of democratic transition.⁹ In an interview Suu Kyi explained that she and Gandhi share an "inevitable sameness about the challenges of authoritarian rule".¹⁰

Between the Buddhist theoretical elements and Aung San Suu Kyi's familial link to the revolutionary history of the Burmese people, her message was perfectly tailored to resonate with the freedom seeking population of Burma. It is clear the military junta in power had more than enough physical resources at its disposal to crush any form of resistance by force, and had no problem doing so even if it meant high numbers of civilians lost their lives. Aung San Suu Kyi recognized this, and crafted her ideology so that the Burmese population could take action against the government effectively without risking a violent confrontation with the junta's military forces.

In her famous "Freedom from Fear" speech following the 1990 election, Suu Kyi told supporters "it is not power that corrupts, but fear."¹¹ While under house arrest it was impossible for her to publicly march with her compatriots, her ideologies and powerful words were something that no

physical restriction could attenuate. "Saints, it has been said, are the sinners that go on trying."¹² Through a series of large, open rallies and carefully worded letters to the members of the junta from both Suu Kyi personally and the leaders of the NLD during her imprisonment, she managed to galvanize the population towards the pursuit of democracy safely and effectively.

Outreach Activities

Since the late 1980s Burmese activists and their allies have succeeded in creating a vast network of supporters; without a diverse umbrella of domestic and international support, the Burmese Democratic Movement would not stand tall in the face of oppression. Organized support has developed worldwide as is evident in the Burma Global Action Network's yearly event for political change that had 10,000 participants in the United Kingdom last year.¹³ This sparked a group of world powers to call for the release of Burmese political prisoners, including Suu Kyi, affirming that the struggle of the Burmese activists had not been in vain.¹⁴

Though much has been done to combat the junta, the Burmese people continue to live under a ruthless military regime, and Suu Kyi remains the only imprisoned Nobel Prize laureate.¹⁵ Suu Kyi's continued commitment to nonviolence combined with the unwavering love and support of the Burmese people has earned the Burmese Democratic Movement much solidarity and respect from the free world.

¹ Ibid.

² [Steven Erlanger "Opposition Leader Is Confined by Burmese Rulers." *The New York Times* 21 July 1989. Accessed 18 May 2010.](#)

³ ["Home Page." Burmese Democratic Movement Association, UK. 20 May 2010.](#)

⁴ Miller, J. E. (2001). *Who's who in contemporary women's writing*. Routledge. p 21.

⁵ Ling, Bettina. *Aung San Suu Kyi: Standing Up for Democracy in Burma* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1999) p. 14

⁶ ["Aung San Suu Kyi on Non-Violence" Youtube. 20 May 2010.](#)

⁷ ["Burma \(Myanmar\) \(2009\)" Freedom House *Freedom in the World* Report. Accessed 21 May 2010.](#)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gustaaf Houtman. *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*. Tokyo. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. 1999. Print. 216.

¹⁰ Ibid, 297.

¹¹ Aung San Suu Kyi. *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings*. Penguin Press. 2009. Print. 160.

¹² Ibid, 183.

¹³ ["About BAGAN". Burma Global Action Network. Accessed 24 May 2010.](#)

¹⁴ ["Burma \(Myanmar\) \(2009\)" Freedom House *Freedom in the World* Report. 21 May 2010.](#)

¹⁵ [Michael Haack and Gina Nespoli. "Building Solidarity with Burma's Nonviolent Resistance". *War Resister's League*. Fall 2008. Accessed 24 May 2010.](#)