

Our Forgotten Friend: Burma

“To live the full life...one must have the courage to bear the responsibility of the needs of others...one must want to bear this responsibility.”¹

-Aung San Suu Kyi-

Throughout our lives there are persons who inspire us. Since learning about the illegitimate reign of the current government in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, I have found it difficult to not share the inspiration I have found in the midst of adversity. Inside of Burma resides its primary advocate for democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi. She had not planned to become an advocate for change inside of Burma, but today she remains an example of peace, moral courage, and hope in a country controlled by the military junta.

In 1947, Kyi's father, the founder of modern Burma, was assassinated. Although she never truly knew her father she felt a deep connection with him, a bond which continues to influence her life to this day. A military coup assassinated her father and took control of Burma, which they renamed Myanmar. Under the reign of the military junta all opposition groups were oppressed and the people of Burma were coerced into silence. All people who do not recognize the legitimacy of the military junta still refer to the country as Burma.

Growing up, Kyi's mother was a diplomat in India, where Kyi was educated before attending college in England. In England, Kyi met her husband and remained in England with her two sons until 1988, when her mother became very ill. She returned to Burma, planning to care for her mother and start a chain of libraries in her father's name.

Once in Burma, Kyi saw that her country was demanding democracy after 26 years of political oppression and a declining economy. Kyi expresses her motivation to join the democracy movement as, “as my father's daughter, I felt I had a duty to get involved.”² In her struggle for Burma's independence, Aung San Suu Kyi founded The National League for Democracy, which traveled around the country calling for democratic reform and free elections. The League for Democracy used peaceful protests as a primary means of provoking change. Finally in 1990, the military junta allowed elections, which led to a monumental victory for the National League for Democracy. The military junta, however, refused to transfer power to the National League for Democracy. Instead, Kyi was placed under house arrest, a state in which she has spent 10 of the past 17 years.

Personally, Aung San Suu Kyi is a polite and determined individual, who continues to protest the military junta from her home. Her family is not allowed to enter Burma to visit her, and though she could go into exile, she refuses to, remembering the promise she made to the Burmese people, that she would struggle with them to bring democracy to Burma. Although she remains under house arrest, it is not a glamorous or a glorious lifestyle. Kyi has had to sell all of her valuables in order to eat. Sometimes when she did

¹ The Nobel Foundation “Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech”

² Vanity Fair Interview 1996

not have enough money to eat, she would become malnourished and lose her hair. Nevertheless, she continues to give speeches at her property and write letters to the military junta and the outside world calling for democracy.

In 1991, while under house arrest, the Nobel Foundation awarded Kyi the Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle against the military junta. Kyi was not present to accept her award so her husband and two sons accepted the award on her behalf. In response to winning the Nobel Peace Prize, Kyi said the award belonged to everyone who “continues to sacrifice their well-being, their freedom and their lives in pursuit of a democratic Burma.”³

"The struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma is a struggle for life and dignity. It is a struggle that encompasses our political, social and economic aspirations," states Kyi.⁴ Kyi defines the current struggle by the reluctance of the military junta to work with her as well as recognize the will of the Burmese people. She does not believe the military junta can over time sustain totalitarian tactics that intimidate the people and breed fear and hatred. The struggle of the Burmese is to have their basic rights recognized, which will allow them to make a decent living without fear. Through continual resistance and the vigilant search for a political solution, Kyi believes Burma will see democracy again.

Kyi has worked with and been supported by recommendations made by the international community. After studying the UN General Assembly's Resolutions on Burma, which call for the full restoration of democracy in Burma as established by the 1990 elections, the full political participation of all people, and the release of all political prisoners, Kyi asked for citizens to pressure their governments to uphold these resolutions. In addition, Kyi does not want anyone to visit Burma because she does not want the military junta to be financially supported through tourism. As enlightened individuals of the world community we have a duty to have our governments uphold the promises they have made through the United Nations.

Aung San Suu Kyi stands as a reminder to all of us, millions of miles away, that change can and will result from one person putting their foot forward and taking a stand.

"The quest for democracy in Burma is the struggle of a people to live whole, meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world community. It is part of the unceasing human endeavor to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his nature."⁵

For Further Information:

- Free Burma: www.freeburma.co.uk
- Webpage: www.dassk.org

³ The Boston Globe 1991

⁴ Vanity Fair 1996

⁵ The Nobel Foundation 2006

- Check out the Book: “The Iron Road: A Stand for Truth and Democracy in Burma” by James Mawdsley