

Aung San Suu Kyi

A Leader Born, a Leader Made

By Paige Tan

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi is today feted around the world. Why is she so celebrated? Before 2010, she spent fifteen of the previous twenty-one years under house arrest, jailed by the country's military rulers. In 1989, she faced down the guns of the regime's soldiers. In 1990, her party triumphed in elections rigged against it, only to be deprived of the chance to take power when the election results were ignored. In 1991, Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, something she says she heard about only on the radio in her lonely lakeside detention in the capital, Yangon.

A follower of Mahatma Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi praises democracy, human rights, rule of law, and nonviolent struggle. She indigenizes these concepts with a particularly Buddhist slant (Burmese are 89 percent Buddhist). Though Buddhism views suffering as unavoidable, she hopes to "alleviate it as far as possible in practical, earthly ways."¹ In a 1989 writing, "In Quest for Democracy," she analyzes a traditional set of aphorisms on the duties of kings and shows how many of them were supportive of democracy, which she links to "accountability, respect for public opinion, and supremacy of just laws."²

Aung San Suu Kyi inspires many. During Myanmar's long years of military rule, she asked those outside Myanmar to use their political freedoms to deprive the country's military leaders of the foreign exchange that helped keep their regime afloat. "Please use your liberty to promote ours," she opined. She calls on the Burmese people to persevere: "Free men are the oppressed who go on trying and who in the process make themselves fit to bear the responsibilities and to uphold the disciplines which will maintain a free society."³

When she was finally able to deliver her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 2012, more than twenty years late, Suu Kyi talked about the subject of kindness:

Of the sweets of adversity, and let me say that these are not numerous, I have found the sweetest, the most precious of all, is the lesson I learnt on the value of kindness. Every kindness I received, small or big, convinced me that there could never be enough of it in our world. To be kind is to respond with sensitivity and human warmth to the hopes and needs of others. Even the briefest touch of kindness can lighten a heavy heart. Kindness can change the lives of people.

It is not often that political leaders deliver discourses on the importance of kindness.

Amazingly, after everything she has been through over the last twenty-plus years, Aung San Suu Kyi claims to have nothing to forgive of the military leaders, who deprived her of the ability to watch her children grow into men and from being with her husband at the end of his life (he died of prostate cancer in 1999). She says she holds no grudges against the generals who jailed and tortured her political allies and many other Burmese, and who have to this point deprived her of the ability to rule a country that chose her party convincingly in general elections. According to Suu Kyi, the country's authoritarian rulers are not all-powerful but rather all-fearful, fearful of losing power and thus willing to do anything to maintain themselves in office.⁴

Photo Montage, Top image: Aung San Suu Kyi on stage during the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize celebration. Copyright © Nobel Peace Center/Nobel Media AB 2012. Photo: Sara Johannessen.

Source: [Nobelprize.org](http://nobelprize.org) at <http://tinyurl.com/omw5gwn>.

Bottom photo: Shwe Dagon Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar. Source: [Wikipedia](http://wikipedia.org) at <http://tinyurl.com/m2ln4pp>.

Aung San Suu Kyi's Life and Myanmar's Evolution

Many prominent women in Asia achieve their position because of their fathers or husbands. Suu Kyi is no exception. She is the daughter of Aung San, Myanmar's independence hero and the founder of the Burma Independence Army (Myanmar was known as Burma until 1989). Aung San functioned as late colonial Burma's prime minister, maneuvering the country toward



1947 photo of Aung San Suu Kyi (baby in the foreground) with her mother, Khin Kyi, father, Aung San, and brothers, Aung San Oo and Aung San Lin. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/lq4uhr>.



Wedding photo of Aung San Suu Kyi and Michael Aris, January 1, 1972. Source: Professor Thayer Watkins' *Political and Economic History of Myanmar (Burma)* page at <http://tinyurl.com/mt9sc3j>.

independence from Britain in the late 1940s. He did not survive to see a free Burma, however. When his daughter Suu Kyi was just two years old in 1947, Aung San, along with other members of his cabinet, was assassinated when he was only thirty-two.

After Aung San's murder, his widow, Khin Kyi, a forceful former chief nurse at Rangoon General Hospital, was appointed First Minister of Social Welfare and then Burmese ambassador to India. Because of this, Suu Kyi spent many of her formative years in India, perhaps there imbibing Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Suu Kyi remained abroad after India, earning a BA in philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford. In 1971, she married Michael Aris, a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, and gave birth to two sons, Alexander and Kim. Because of her position as the daughter of Aung San, though, Suu Kyi knew that someday

her country might call, and she would have to answer. "Sometimes I am beset by fears that circumstances and national considerations might tear us apart just when we are so happy in each other that separation would be a torment," she wrote to her husband before their wedding.⁵

While Suu Kyi was abroad, the military ousted Burma's democratic government in 1962 and effectively sealed the country off from the rest of the world. When neighboring countries like Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia were experiencing the "Asian miracle" of rapid economic growth and dramatically improving living standards, Burma was closed off from the global economy, suffering what the military regime referred to gloriously as the "Burmese Way to

Socialism." Much of the world forgot about Burma. Some who remembered it lamented the poverty of the people living there when juxtaposed against the country's potentially rich resources. Wars were fought almost constantly on the nation's peripheries against restless minority groups.

Abroad, Suu Kyi sought to complete a PhD in Burmese literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in the 1980s. But the call from home finally came, and she was ripped from her studies. Back in Burma, Suu Kyi's mother had suffered a stroke, and Suu Kyi flew home to tend to her. It was then that Suu Kyi landed in the middle of the biggest democracy protests Burma had seen in generations. Speaking at the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's most sacred Buddhist site and a prominent protest center in 1988, Suu Kyi declared: "I could not as my father's daughter remain indifferent to all that was going on. This national crisis could in fact be called the second struggle for national independence." She continued: "If we are to examine what it is that we all desire . . . the answer is multiparty democracy."⁶

Looking back, we know that the 1988 protests did not lead to regime change in Myanmar. But it was less clear at the time that this outcome was foreordained. In 1986, massive protests had dislodged longtime dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines through "people power." This, at the time, offered the Burmese protesters hope. Also promising was that the protests started among university students in the capital but spread to other social groups, including Burma's influential monks, and many parts of the country. Ne Win, in charge of Myanmar since the military coup in 1962, formally stepped down as head of the ruling Burma Socialist Program Party in July 1988, potentially ushering in a process of change. In response to protests, too, the regime said it was moving toward multiparty elections. Suu Kyi offered the opposition to military rule something it previously lacked, a single figure behind whom to unify. But in opposition to these trends was a powerful and decisive counter-trend. The military was willing to use massive violence to maintain control. Perhaps 3,000 protesters were slaughtered in 1988; thousands more were arrested. In September 1988, younger military leaders formed a new military leadership group, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

Despite the massive violence and arrests, the regime continued along the path to multiparty elections. In September 1988, Suu Kyi and allies formed the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military recognized Suu Kyi's very real threat, and in 1989, she was subjected to house arrest for the first time. The NLD faced a daunting series of obstacles in the 1990 elections—gerrymandered districts stocked with military voters, Suu Kyi's inability to stand as a



Aung San Suu Kyi speaking at a rally in Yangon in 1988. Source: *BBC News Asia-Pacific* website at <http://tinyurl.com/o3gmsfe>.

candidate or continue her campaign, and a prohibition on criticism of the military in stump speeches. Despite these handicaps, the NLD still took 59 percent of the vote and 81 percent of the seats in the 1990 elections. Audaciously, after this humiliating defeat, the military merely pretended the vote had never taken place.

In the twenty years following the 1990 elections, Suu Kyi sat in detention, periodically released but unable to leave Myanmar out of fear the regime would not let her return. International NGOs, the UN, the US, and European governments sought her freedom and pressured the regime to begin a process of democratization. US sanctions included restrictions on new investment in Myanmar and a ban on imports. While the West followed a strategy largely of isolating Myanmar, the country's neighbors followed a strategy of "constructive engagement." China and Singapore became top investors. In 1997, Myanmar joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In 2008, the military published a new Constitution, and in 2010, elections were conducted under its provisions. The NLD considered participating if the regime changed a rule preventing Suu Kyi from contesting and allowed international election monitors to observe the poll. The military was unwilling to cooperate, so the NLD sat out the elections for fear of legitimizing the military's rigged game. Unsurprisingly, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which took the place of the old Burma Socialist Program Party, scored a resounding victory, with 59 percent of the seats in the new parliament, in addition to the 25 percent of the parliamentary seats reserved specifically for the armed forces, according to the 2008 Constitution. Cynically, a week after the elections, deeming that she could no longer harm the military's project, the junta released Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest.

The regime contended that the 2010 elections ushered in a transition from military to civilian rule, but many democracy activists were dubious. The Constitution's Article 436 virtually

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Aung San Suu Kyi's sons Alexander and Kim Aris accepting the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize medal and diploma on behalf of their mother. Source: Screen capture from the video at the Nobel Prize site at <http://tinyurl.com/oufg4ej>.



Photo of Aung San Suu Kyi standing in front of a photo of her father, General Aung San, while under house arrest. Source: Screen capture from the documentary film *Aung San Suu Kyi—Lady of No Fear*. A film by Anne Gyrthe Bonne. Produced by Kamoli Films, Denmark, 2010. On YouTube at <http://tinyurl.com/mjj4vl6>.

guaranteed the military a veto over Constitutional change with the approval of 75 percent of the parliament required for any Constitutional amendment—and the military automatically granted 25 percent of the seats in parliament. Still, surprising to observers inside and outside Myanmar, real changes began occurring in 2011. In March, Thein Sein, a former general, became president and initiated a top-down reform process that included opening the media, release of political prisoners, peace deals with ethnic rebels on the country's periphery, and 2012 by-elections in which the NLD could compete. The NLD subsequently won forty-three of the forty-five open seats, including a seat from Kawhmu Township, southwest of Yangon, for Suu Kyi.

Western countries repaid the regime for the positive changes by lifting significant sanctions and visits to Myanmar by high-profile politicians such as President Barack Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron. Both met Thein Sein in his grand palace at Naypidaw, the regime's newly constructed capital, as well as Suu Kyi at her Yangon lakeside home. Upon meeting Suu Kyi, Obama remarked: "Here, through so many difficult years, is where [Suu Kyi] has displayed such unbreakable courage and determination. It is here where she showed that human freedom and human dignity cannot be denied."⁷

The political opening could have happened in 1988. Why is it that only since 2010 genuine reform has begun in Myanmar? Western economic sanctions were a long-term thorn in the regime's side, which had left it with few international options, but they were in place for decades. Some believe that China's outsized role in Myanmar's economy was giving the ruling generals concerns about the country's extreme isolation. China, with its mines, dams, and quasi-bases, had simply become too powerful, with Myanmar potentially reduced to a helpless satellite of the larger power. It is likely, too, that the generals believed that the 2010 Constitution guaranteed protection of their interests, including control over wealthy companies in steel, banking, mining, hydropower, and other sectors.

Leadership Choices for Aung San Suu Kyi

By all accounts, Aung San Suu Kyi appears to be beloved in Myanmar. She is widely referred to as "*Daw*" Aung San Suu Kyi, *Daw* being a term of respect meaning "aunt." On visits to villages and refugee camps, she is sometimes hailed as *Amy* Suu, or "Mother Suu." Still, even beloved leaders face choices, sometimes very difficult ones.

In the past, Suu Kyi faced the dilemma of whether to engage the regime or isolate it. Should she favor economic sanctions against her own country and hurt the regime but deprive ordinary Burmese of better lives? Up until 2010, she favored sanctions and limiting tourism on the grounds that both legitimized the regime and provided it with hard currency. After 2011 reforms began, Suu Kyi was slow to embrace the lifting of sanctions, fearful that momentum for change would stop if the military were rewarded prematurely.

Also, Suu Kyi and other democracy activists debated whether to talk with the regime in an attempt to negotiate an end to the country's political standoff or to shun the generals for their shameful brutality. Generally, Suu Kyi has chosen a strategy of dialogue. In her August 1988 Shwedagon speech, she hinted of problems between the people and the military, but pointed out that her father, who created the Burmese military, wanted it to have good relations with the people. In 2013, she appeared at the Armed Forces Day military parade, which suggested a willingness to work with the military as the system evolved. Still, sometimes, Suu Kyi speaks truth to power: "I'd like to ask the military, are you really happy that the Constitution has given you privileges that other people do not have? You should think seriously about this. I hate to say it, but your guns are the source of your military strength . . . But does this make you more dignified—or less?"⁸

Suu Kyi has shown unbelievable courage in the face of brutality and long odds. Standing for democracy, human rights, rule of law, kindness, and nonviolence is not a difficult position to adopt. However, sometimes practical politics offers problems without neat solutions. The Rohingyas of Rakhine state in Myanmar's west are Muslims. It is generally popular among Burmese to accuse the Rohingya of being recent illegal immigrants to Myanmar from Bangladesh, though there have been Rohingya in the area for several hundred years. Despite this, many Burmese deny the Rohingyas' status as a genuine ethnic group and their citizenship rights. Since 2012, Buddhist-Muslim violence has flared in Rakhine and in other parts of Myanmar, leading to hundreds of deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced. A small group of Buddhist monks, traditionally respected in Burmese society, has spearheaded attacks on the Rohingyas and Muslims. Many Rohingyas have been herded into displaced persons camps, where they are forbidden to leave, which means limited access to jobs and medical care.

Suu Kyi has been criticized by many Burmese and Western activists for her silence on the Rohingya issue. The conventional wisdom is that she's a politician and doesn't want to offend the majority population by standing up for the rights of the reviled Rohingya. Indeed, she had some early missteps on the issue. When violence first emerged, Suu Kyi tried to duck the issue by saying that her party, the NLD, was not the party of power and thus not in charge. Later,

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President Barack Obama meets with Burmese Opposition Leader Aung San Suu Kyi in the Oval Office, September 19, 2012. Official White House Photo by Pete Souza. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/96jwqct>.



Aung San Suu Kyi gives a speech to supporters during the 2012 by-election campaign at her constituency Kawhmu Township, Myanmar on March 22, 2012. Photo: Htoo Tay Zar, Source: Creative Commons. Share Alike 3.0 at <http://tinyurl.com/mtq6wu9>.

she modified her position, saying that it was not just the Rohingya who were afraid but the Buddhists as well. Over time, Suu Kyi adopted a more subtle line: “The way is to make them feel secure enough to be able to look at each others’ problems objectively and to recognize that everybody has his own fears and hatreds, and we’ve got to try to get rid of those.”

In addition to the thorny issue of the Rohingyas, Suu Kyi faces a challenge of leadership over the question of economic development in Myanmar. Dams, mines, and special economic zones often benefit some people and have high costs for others. With whom should she stand? Recently, protesters of the Latpadaung Copper Mine heckled Suu Kyi. Protesters charge that the mine, jointly owned by a Chinese and military-backed company, inadequately compensates villagers, relocates them to poor land, despoils the environment, and provides too few jobs to locals. Villagers and monks protesting treatment by the mine were violently suppressed by the police, leaving several in the hospital. Suu Kyi tried to mediate the dispute through talks with protesters, the company, and police. However, as an aspiring leader of Myanmar, Suu Kyi knows that she must maintain foreign investor confidence regarding the nation’s stability for doing business and informed the people at Latpadaung that the mine should go forward. Her demand that the police apologize for injuring monks during the protests could be seen as a small bone thrown to the protesters. The issue of the mine is typical of many Suu Kyi will face as she potentially moves from opposition to governing. It is easy to stand for democracy, human rights, and rule of law; but leaders have to get their hands dirty, and solutions are not always self-evident or popular with everyone.

Looking to the future, will the military stand aside and let the NLD form a government? Will Suu Kyi be given a chance at the presidency in elections scheduled for 2015, despite Article 59 (f) of the Constitution, which would prevent those with foreign children from serving as president? A future President Aung San Suu Kyi will face exceedingly complex questions about the military. Should the military be forced to shed its wealthy companies? What about individual military men who’ve grown fabulously rich in the last twenty years? Should they be allowed to keep the wealth they have acquired? Should military men be called to stand trial for shooting peaceful protesters, compelling forced labor, using child soldiers, and sanctioning the use of

rape as a weapon of war? Perhaps Suu Kyi's choice to forgive the military is pragmatic politics to protect the democratic transition. Fearing expropriation of assets and jail, military leaders may fight harder to hang onto power. This is a classic dilemma faced by reformers in situations of transition from authoritarian rule.

Also, a future President Aung San Suu Kyi would need to convert her skills honed as a Nobel Peace Prize-winning oppositionist into the skills of a workaday politician and administrator. Bertil Lintner, a long-time writer on Myanmar, claims that, unfortunately, Suu Kyi is surrounded by "sycophants who don't dare to tell her when they think she is wrong."¹⁰ Her party lacks institutionalization. Like many parties in Asia with charismatic or powerful leaders, the NLD is built around Suu Kyi's personality. She, rather than an institutional process, is responsible for most of the decisions. The top leadership is dominated by older males, dubbed "the uncles." Suu Kyi will have to work hard to build institutions and internal democracy in her party. She will need to make room for qualified young technocrats who will be vital for Myanmar's future.

Many in Myanmar and the West see Aung San Suu Kyi as a saint and place their hopes in her for a future free and democratic Myanmar. But Suu Kyi would be the first to say she is no saint, just a politician.¹¹ She is a leader who was born to a significant role in her country as the daughter of independence hero Aung San. But she is also a leader who was made in the crucible of the last twenty years of Myanmar's politics. Since 1988, Suu Kyi has faced unimaginable personal trials, but should she win power, this would represent not the end of the struggle but a new beginning. ■

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SUGGESTED RESOURCES

To learn more about Aung San Suu Kyi, students can watch the film *The Lady*, starring Michelle Yeoh. A recent biography of Suu Kyi is Peter Popham's *The Lady and the Peacock* (Experiment, 2013). For more information on Myanmar, read David Steinberg's *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, 2013). *The Irrawaddy* (<http://www.irrawaddy.org>) is a source of independent news covering Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

NOTES

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3. Aung San Suu Kyi, "Freedom from Fear," *Freedom from Fear*, (London: Penguin, 1991), 183.
4. *Ibid.*, 180.
5. Michael Aris, introduction to Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, (London: Penguin, 1991), xix.
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7. Obama Lauds Aung San Suu Kyi, Gives a Nod to Myanmar," *CNN.com*, last modified November 19, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/kbl4hwh>.
8. Anthony Kuhn, "Clock Is Ticking for Aung San Suu Kyi's Presidential Bid," *NPR*, last modified June 27, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/k8ztl8z>.
9. Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), "Suu Kyi: The Army Must Be the Foundation of the Country," *DVB.no*, last modified October 28, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/kd6sfeq>.
10. Hanna Hindstrom, "Is It Foolish to Criticize Aung San Suu Kyi?" *DVB.no*, last modified September 24, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/pucet93>.
11. DVB, "I'm a Politician, Not a Saint, Says Suu Kyi," *DVB.no*, last modified November 28, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/obfpp9d>.

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