

# A TESTIMONY TO THE POWER OF NONVIOLENCE: *Aung San Suu Kyi's Continued Struggle for Democracy*

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**O**n a hot April day in 1989 at the Irrawaddy Delta in Burma, during a popular protest for democracy by the Burmese people, a radical nonviolent leader named Daw Suu Kyi, popularly known as Aung San Suu Kyi after her father, refused to turn back at the orders of the oppressive military regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Embodying nonviolence in her physical presence, she marched through a military squad with orders to fire at anyone who approached and safely arrived at the speaker's platform to give her resounding speech for a better, brighter, free Burma.

The story of Aung San Suu Kyi is a moving example of the power of nonviolence. Even though she was not able to entirely secure an effective umbrella organization to coordinate the resistance, nor implement what Gandhi calls "constructive program", she successfully led the Burmese people in a campaign for a democratic government. In the 1990 election, the National League for Democracy, won 82% of the votes cast.<sup>1</sup>

Since that stark contrast of a beautiful, peaceful, yet firm woman marching into a squad of armed soldiers, SLORC's military regime in Burma has been delegitimized globally. Aung San Suu Kyi has managed to bring international awareness to one of the most horrifying military regimes in the world, and won various peace prizes including the Nobel Peace prize. What is the story behind this incredible woman?

## Setting the Stage for Nonviolent Resistance

The Burmese have been plagued by two major political problems in recent decades: military rule and ethnic conflict. In the 1980s and 1990s, violent and nonviolent struggles have coexisted in Burma to oppose the military dictatorship.

For many years, the basis for resistance was a Maoist strategy which emphasized guerrilla struggle and underground civilian resistance. With the exception of student and worker opposition to British rule, Burma never had a history of large scale nonviolent resistance. But similar to the nonviolent movements in China, Serbia, Thailand, the Philippines and elsewhere, mass popular movement began with the actions of university students. In March of 1988 when a student at the Rangoon Institute of



Aung San Suu Kyi

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Technology was killed and his assailant was not punished due to connections with the military regime, students took to the streets.<sup>2</sup> This was one of several "trigger events" which helped fuel a growing popular movement against the SLORC.

Despite its lack of overall coordination, the movement in Burma implemented surprisingly diverse actions across the range of methods of nonviolent action, including protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and disruptive and creative nonviolent action such as strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience.<sup>3</sup> Many sectors of the Burmese society participated in these actions, including students, Buddhist monks, and men and women of all ages and ethnic groups.

The people of Burma were unified in their hatred for the military dictatorship but they could not agree on what or who they were "for." Effective political resistance cannot be built upon the sandy foundation of a common foe. Aung San Suu Kyi represents a unifying force. Her non-adversarial approach toward all Burmese, including the military, generates widespread support for her both domestically and internationally. Her unusual immunity (as daughter

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## THE BURMESE RESISTANCE (CONTINUED)

of the best known leader of the historical independence struggle) in combination with a willingness to speak out publicly has provided coherent leadership for the Burmese people.

### Aung San Suu Kyi Enters Politics

Aung San Suu Kyi began her career as a politician with two huge advantages. Although she returned to Burma only to take care of her sickly mother after living most of her life abroad, and only vaguely aware of Burmese politics, she was the daughter of arguably the greatest national hero, General Aung San, who had freed the Burmese people from Japanese foreign rule in August of 1945. While at college at Oxford, Aung San Suu Kyi also studied Gandhi and later would draw upon his theory and praxis of nonviolent action. She received her B.A. in the study of Politics, Philosophy, and the Economy in 1967. With these two trump cards in her pocket, Aung San Suu Kyi was easily able to propel herself into national politics.

Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as the movement's leader in July of 1988 and attempted to enforce, along with Buddhist monks and students, an ethic of nonviolent discipline. She began with an open letter to the government demanding a democratic society, and soon found herself to be the driving force behind a new organization, the National League for Democracy (NLD). She became the leading voice of the pro-democracy opposition, calling for a multiparty democracy, national unity, nonviolent action, and nonviolent discipline.

The 1988 uprising forced the military regime to uphold its own rhetoric and carry out parliamentary elections. From November 1988 through July 1989, Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD leaders traveled across Burma to mobilize support for the "Revolution of the Spirit", a campaign of nonviolent action in support of democracy.<sup>4</sup> Wherever Aung San Suu Kyi spoke, thousands of citizens gathered, openly defying restrictions on assembly and risking imprisonment or death.

In 1990, the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections.<sup>5</sup> However, the SLORC refused to honor the election results and arrested and intimidated much of the opposition. Most of the NLD leadership, including Suu Kyi, have suffered long prison terms or house arrest.

### "The Lady" as the Unifying Force of the Resistance Movement

The history of the Burmese resistance movement involves the formation of seemingly countless organiza-



**Aung San Suu Kyi's non-adversarial approach generates widespread support.**

picture from: <http://www.pbbase.com/dassk/dassk>

tions and coalitions. Most prominently, large numbers of students (who viewed the popular uprising as a failure because the military remained in power) formed an armed group called the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF). Similarly, the ethnic minority groups led by their coalition, the National Democratic Front (NDF) viewed the 1988 uprising as a failure and continued to emphasize violent resistance tactics such as guerilla warfare with renewed enthusiasm.

By 1989 however, the guerilla struggle was suffering from major military defeats, lack of resources, and lack of an effective strategy for achieving its political goals.<sup>6</sup> During this time, Aung San Suu Kyi was beginning to popularize a modern liberalism and a commitment to Buddhist approaches to resolving conflict.

Her presence in the history of Burma's struggle is significant because by 1990, the Burmese who had hoped for the United Nations or the armed resistance to liberate Burma turned their hopes to the 1990 election. As Michael A. Beers states, "the landslide results electrified the people and Aung San Suu Kyi's gentle approach came to dominate the Burman heartland."

With the faith of the majority of the Burmese population behind Suu Kyi, the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), a broad-based resistance coalition, was formed in August of 1992. The NCUB conceived of a unified strategy to improve the effectiveness of all resistance forces and to reduce contaminants to the primary nonviolent struggle.<sup>7</sup> A geographic separation of armed struggle and nonviolent resistance was formed: defensive armed struggle would be carried out in the ethnic states, and nonviolent resistance was to limit itself to the heartland and the cities.

### Where Aung San Still Needs to Go

Burma as a case-study in parallel armed and nonviolent struggle provides uncertain results. People power has yet to defeat the dictatorship in Rangoon. Despite the best efforts of the Burmese opposition leadership, the people of Burma have been unable or unwilling to replicate the mass mobilizations of 1988.

While the challengers in Burma implemented a diverse range of methods of nonviolent action, factors contributing to the movement's demise included the lack of a national umbrella organization to aggregate and coordinate the resistance and the inability of the challengers to organize a parallel government or create a situation for multiple sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> The leverage that the resistance in Burma could generate against the regime was limited by its emphasis on institutional methods to challenge the regime (a focus on elections), the lack of organized support from autonomous institutions (such as Buddhist organizations), the lack of support from abroad, and the lack of effective pressure against the regime by international actors.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the power of nonviolence is that Aung San Suu Kyi still managed to internationally imprint the illegitimacy of SLORC's rule in Burma, even without preparing and organizing her nation for the task of establishing an alternative government. The most dramatic change for Burma as a result of this struggle has been an end to the country's 26 years of near-total isolation from the world.



Aung San Suu Kyi gives a speech to a crowd of her Burmese followers.

picture from: <http://www.pbase.com/dassk/dassk>

Through her commitment to nonviolence Aung San Suu Kyi continues to exert a force upon SLORC. Since that initial episode in the Irrawaddy Delta, she has continued to plant the seeds of nonviolence which will inevitably grow into a free Burma.

### Resources

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi pages:

<http://www.dassk.com/>

Wikipedia page:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung\\_San\\_Suu\\_Kyi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung_San_Suu_Kyi)

"Learn to Question" Project:

<http://www.learntoquestion.com/seevak/groups/2001/sites/aungsan/index2.html>

### References:

- 1 Victor, Barbara. *The Lady: Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Laureate and Burma's Prisoner*. Penguin Books, 1998.
- 2 Schock, Kurt. *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- 3 Ibid 4 Ibid
- 5 Beer, Michael A. "Violent and Nonviolent Struggle in Burma: Is a Unified Strategy Workable?" from *Nonviolent Social Movements: a Geographical Perspective*. Edited by Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher. Blackwell Publishing, 1999.
- 6 Ibid 7 Ibid 8 Schock, Kurt. 9 Ibid