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LETTER FROM BURMA

A FREE WOMAN

Can Aung San Suu Kyi unite a badly weakened opposition?

BY JOSHUA HAMMER

On a warm December afternoon in Rangoon, the largest city in Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and the country's most popular politician, sat in the headquarters of the National League for Democracy. It is a crumbling two-story cinder-block building, with peeling green paint, exposed electrical wires, and tattered posters of Che Guevara, Aung San Suu Kyi, and her father, Aung San, a Burmese freedom fighter who helped negotiate the country's independence from Great Britain. The N.L.D. is the main opposition party to the current military regime, and Aung San Suu Kyi, who is sixty-five, has been its nominal head since 1988. In November, the regime staged an election, and managed to extend its hold on power for five more years. A week after the vote, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from her family's lakefront villa in northern Rangoon, where she had served seven years of house arrest.

Aung San Suu Kyi now spends much of her time at N.L.D. headquarters, meeting with party members, ethnic leaders, and senior aides. The regime dissolved the party after the N.L.D.'s decision, in March, not to participate in the election because of "unjust" electoral laws. These included the banning of candidates with religious affiliations as well as those with criminal records, which eliminated all monks and hundreds of party members who have been political prisoners. Lawyers are preparing a court case to reconstitute the party. In the meantime, large crowds still gather at Aung San Suu Kyi's public appearances, and the dictatorship closely tracks her movements, watching anyone who comes into contact with her. Half a dozen agents of the dictatorship's intelligence division, wearing earphones and carrying digital cameras, lingered in a tea stall across the street while I interviewed her.

Aung San Suu Kyi sat rigidly upright on a wooden settee inside a second-floor

meeting room, both hands resting in her lap. Fine lines were etched into her delicate features, and she looked gaunt, even though, according to her physician, Tin Myo Win, during her years in confinement her weight never fluctuated from a hundred and five pounds. "My doctor told me that I can't keep going at this pace," she said. Her diction retains something of Oxford, where she studied and lived before she returned to Myanmar, in 1988. Tin Myo Win told me that he had been monitoring her blood pressure since her release, and that he had so far given her "eight or nine" injections of "a cocktail drip"—a blend of vitamins, proteins, and glucose—to keep her from collapsing from exhaustion.

Her biggest frustration, she said, was that she had not found time to meditate, an integral part of her daily routine since she was placed under house arrest for the first time, in 1989. In captivity, she had practiced vipsavanna meditation, an ancient technique attributed to the Gautama Buddha. At first, she said, "I found it very difficult to do, because my mind was wandering, instead of being fixed on one particular place—your breathing, the rising and falling of your abdomen. I got frustrated, thinking, My goodness, can't I do even this little mind exercise? But, with persistence, you get there."

She lived without a telephone or a computer, and her only companionship came from two female assistants, Khin Khin Win and Win Ma Ma, and a radio. The monotony was broken by occasional visits from her doctor and her attorney. Meditation proved invaluable in dealing with the "intense irritation and impatience" that she felt toward her captors. "I would think, Why can't we just get on and do what needs to be done, rather than indulge in all this shilly-shallying?" she said. "Because I listened to the radio many hours every day, I knew what was going on in Burma, the economic problems, the poverty... and I'd get impatient

and say, 'Why are we wasting our time in this way?' " The impatience, she said, "didn't last, because I had the benefits of meditation. Even when I was very annoyed, I would know that within twenty-four hours this would have subsided."

Now Aung San Suu Kyi is eager to rebuild the democracy movement, whose unity eroded in her absence. But, with the

experience that was the inspiration for his 1934 novel "Burmeese Days." During the Second World War, Burma was a battleground between the Japanese Army and the Allies; the Burma Road, linking the country to China, was a vital supply route for Chiang Kai-shek, and in 1944 it was partly secured by the Allies. Burma gained its independence from Great Britain in

and the streets were cast in near-total darkness, except for the glow of battery-powered lamps illuminating the second-hand booksellers and betel-nut venders. Like all foreigners, I kept to a carefully prescribed one-week itinerary, in part because of the Communist insurgency and the ethnic rebellions then raging in parts of the countryside. I travelled by crowded



Aung San Suu Kyi, in front of a portrait of her father, at the National League for Democracy's headquarters, in Rangoon.

next elections five years away and people afraid to march in the streets, the opposition is arguably weaker than ever. No small part of that weakness, in the eyes of some, is Aung San Suu Kyi herself.

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, emerged about three hundred years ago out of a series of small, isolated Buddhist kingdoms, some centered on the Irrawaddy River, which originates near the mountains along the Chinese border and empties into the Andaman Sea. In the late nineteenth century, after three Anglo-Burmese wars, Burma fell entirely under the control of the British Empire, which ruled the colony as part of the Raj. George Orwell served in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma for five years, an

1948. Fourteen years later, a group of military officers led by General Ne Win toppled the democratically elected civilian government and imposed a socialist military dictatorship. Under Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party, Burma drifted into economic decrepitude and isolation.

In 1980, when I passed through as a backpacker, it was possible to exchange a fifth of Johnnie Walker Red and two cartons of Marlboros on the black market for enough kyats, the local currency, to travel in Burma for a week. Vintage nineteen-forties automobiles rumbled down the potholed streets of Rangoon, a riverside slum of mildewed British-colonial buildings with filigreed balconies draped in laundry. Most nights, the electricity failed,

trains to Mandalay, the second city, and Pagan, an ancient imperial capital strewn with the ghostly remnants of pagodas. Any signs of dissent were—to a backpacker's eyes—deeply buried.

In early August, 1988, peaceful demonstrations broke out in Rangoon against the regime's disastrous economic policies, and quickly spread to other cities. Students, monks, lawyers, laborers, and others marched in the streets. Ne Win reportedly gave an order that guns were "not to shoot upwards," and soldiers opened fire, killing nearly six thousand people. General Saw Maung seized power, formed a junta called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and imposed martial law. "So many of us were expelled and blacklisted

afterward," my translator told me. He was a student leader in the philosophy department at Mandalay University that year.

In 1990, the military regime allowed elections, which the National League for Democracy overwhelmingly won. SLORC, after initially saying it would abide by the result, declared itself Burma's ruling authority and annulled the election results; many opposition politicians fled into exile. Seventeen years later, thousands of young monks marched in red robes through the streets of Rangoon demanding democracy, in the dramatic, weeks-long Saffron Revolution, and were joined by thousands of civilians. The junta, now led by General Than Shwe and renamed the State Peace and Development Council, opened fire on demonstrators and jailed thousands. The United Nations reported that between thirty and forty monks and between fifty and seventy civilians were killed. Since then, the regime has maintained tough censorship laws and imposed long prison terms for dissent. There are an estimated twenty-one hundred political prisoners in Myanmar's jails.

Beginning in the nineties, the United States imposed broad economic sanctions against the country, freezing the assets of top officials and banning almost all investment there. The European Union followed suit in 2006. This has not stopped the regime from spending what is reported to be billions of dollars on its showpiece capital, Naypyidaw, which was carved out of the jungle five hours north of Rangoon, along the nation's only eight-lane expressway. It is a sprawling, low-density metropolis with wide, empty boulevards, grandiose state architecture, and golf courses where regime insiders cut deals in the tropical heat. One Western diplomat who visits there frequently told me, "You can't imagine what a diversion of resources it represents, and it's still growing." At the same time, the regime has ignored the needs of its most vulnerable citizens. Thousands of people have died of AIDS because of the near-absence of retroviral drug treatment outside Rangoon and Mandalay. In 2008, the government failed to provide aid to millions of people affected by a devastating cyclone in the

Irrawaddy River Delta. The U.N. has ranked Myanmar as one of the twenty poorest countries in the world, with an estimated annual per-capita income of five hundred dollars.

In May, 2008, as one step on its long-promised "road map" to democracy, the dictatorship ratified a new constitution, which led to the country's first elections in twenty years. The constitution created a civilian-dominated government, with a two-house Parliament that would meet at least once a year, and an elected head of state. Power remains vested in the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and his military council. Twenty-five per cent of parliamentary seats are set aside for military officers, and a seventy-five-per-cent-plus vote in Parliament is required to amend the constitution, meaning that the military can always veto proposed changes. Human rights are enumerated, but the constitution holds that, if circumstances require, the military can retake authority and those rights can be abrogated.

The regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party handily won the November 7th elections through the manipulation of "advance votes"—ballots that had been distributed early to the sick and to those whose travel and work schedules prevented them from going to the polls on Election Day. The U.S.D.P. gained control of nearly eighty per cent of the seats in the new Parliament. Its victory secure, the government set Aung San Suu Kyi free on her scheduled release date. "Either the regime considered it safe to let her go or they felt they could not further extend her sentence," I was told by another Western diplomat. (Diplomats in Myanmar are highly guarded, and rarely speak on the record.) The dictatorship may have considered Aung San Suu Kyi a spent force, "but based on what the regime has seen since—the outpourings of affection wherever she goes—they may have to think again." The diplomat concluded, "She's a player."

One afternoon, I walked past the Shwedagon Pagoda, an ancient gilded temple that rises three hundred and twenty-six feet above Rangoon, and is said to contain eight hairs of the Gau-

tama Buddha. I followed a narrow road that climbed steeply past the German Embassy and a Buddhist monastery, passing monks and noodle venders, until I arrived at a turreted two-story villa surrounded by a green fence. A sign on the locked front gate identified the house as the Bogyoke (General) Aung San Museum, the former home of post-colonial Burma's founding father and his family, including his then infant daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi. A charismatic student leader in the nineteen-thirties, Aung San agitated against British rule and was trained as a soldier in Japan by the Japanese Army. He and twenty-nine other Burmese nationalists formed the Burma Independence Army in Thailand, then marched into Burma in 1942, with Japanese support, and set up a government in Rangoon parallel with the Japanese administration. Near the end of the war, wary of the intentions of the Japanese, and sensing their imminent defeat, he switched sides, and eventually helped negotiate Burma's independence.

Aung San is revered by most Burmese, but, because of his famous offspring, the junta has tried to obliterate his memory. A caretaker in a tin shack on the overgrown grounds indicated that the museum was closed and that I should leave. "I'm forty-five years old, and I have never entered—never," a food-stall keeper beside the front gate said, explaining that the museum has been shut for as long as she could remember. The museum now opens its doors for only three hours every July 19th, the anniversary of Aung San's assassination, in 1947, by gunmen loyal to a rival politician.

Aung San Suu Kyi has no memory of her father. Her mother, Khin Kyi, was a prominent figure in Burma's first civilian government, and became the Ambassador to India and Nepal in 1960. Aung San Suu Kyi attended college in New Delhi before graduating from Oxford with a degree in philosophy, politics, and economics. She was fascinated by her father's life; when she was a student she travelled to Tokyo and tracked down his military instructors. "I asked one of the officers who trained him, 'What did you think was different about my father compared to the others you trained?'" she told me. "He mentioned two things: One, my father read as much as he could, while the others were so tired by the end



of the day they just went to sleep." The other, she said, was that when the trainer was giving classes on military matters "my father would always come to his own conclusions, whereas the others would learn everything by rote."

In 1972, Aung San Suu Kyi married Michael Aris, a British scholar of Tibetan Buddhism whom she had met at Oxford, and they had two sons, Alexander and Kim, the latter named after the eponymous character in Rudyard Kipling's novel. "Michael was a gentle man, a stoic—very old-school English," I was told by his close friend Thant Myint-U, a Burmese historian and the grandson of U Thant, the former U.N. Secretary-General. Thant Myint-U first met Aung San Suu Kyi during a short visit to Oxford in 1986, and he said that she struck him as "a self-assured, charismatic person, even though we were just having tea and talking about the movies." She conversed in an informed way about Burma, but gave no indication that she would return there. "Perhaps in hindsight you could say she was waiting for the right moment, but I wouldn't have said that then. She was a housewife, doing historical research, looking for a fellowship." Still, early in her marriage she had told Aris that she might eventually be drawn back to Burma. She insisted to me years later that this sense of obligation came not from being her father's daughter but from the realization that her countrymen were suffering under the military dictatorship, and "if they required the help of people outside Burma we would have to go back."

In the summer of 1988, when Aung San Suu Kyi was forty-three, she returned to Rangoon to care for her ailing mother, who had suffered a stroke. Shortly after her arrival, the 8888 Uprising broke out. It was named for the date of the Burma-wide general strike—August 8, 1988—a date that was chosen by student leaders for the auspicious alignment of the digits. In late August, half a million protesters gathered in front of the west gate of the Shwedagon Pagoda, a historic rallying point against colonial rule, to hear Aung San Suu Kyi give her first public speech, a vigorous denunciation of the regime and a call for democracy. It instantly thrust her to the forefront of the political opposition.

Weeks later, she joined two disaf-

fected Burmese generals to form the National League for Democracy, and, as the party's general secretary, she began to travel around the country, holding rallies and calling for elections. "I learned about her ability only when we travelled together up-country," I was told by Win Htein, a former Burmese Army captain who became her personal assistant. Win Htein took nine journeys with Aung San Suu Kyi to remote areas such as Shan State, a hilly plateau bordering China, Laos, and Thailand, where the regime has been battling ethnic insurgencies for decades. "Wherever she went, people came to her like bees coming to a flower," he said. "At first, everybody was interested in her because she was the daughter of General Aung San, but when they approached her and asked questions, and she answered them patiently and correctly, you could see that she had a real ability to connect with people." Khin Maung Swe, a founding member of the N.L.D., who first encountered Aung San Suu Kyi that year, told me, "At the very instant I saw her, I knew 'She is my leader.' We admired General Aung San so much, so it was no problem for us to follow her. But she herself proved to be a very courageous, very strong-willed person."

As a leader of the protests, Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest for the first time. The regime released her in 1995, but it has re-arrested and imprisoned her several times since then on various pretexts, including posing a threat to state security, and claimed to be taking her into "protective custody" after deadly attacks on her own supporters. She has been in isolation for fifteen of the past twenty-one years.

During her imprisonment, Aung San Suu Kyi developed an unvarying schedule. Waking before dawn, she would meditate, then spend the rest of the morning doing household chores while listening to the BBC and other stations on shortwave radio. "I was listening five to six hours a day. I was more in touch with the news than were many people outside," she said. After lunch, she devoted the afternoon to reading books that her doctor had procured for her, mostly through contacts at foreign embassies. "I had always intended to read 'Les Misérables' in French, and I man-

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aged that," she said. "Of course, I lost touch with friends and family. That was not possible to continue."

Aung San Suu Kyi spent Christmas of 1995 with her husband in Rangoon, during a period of freedom between imprisonments. Two years later, in England, Michael Aris was given a diagnosis of prostate cancer, which was later judged to be terminal. The government would not grant him another visa to come to Myanmar, and Aung San Suu Kyi would not leave the country to visit Aris, knowing that she would be refused reentry. He died in 1999. Both of her sons were repeatedly denied visas to Myanmar during her long captivity. Her elder son, Alexander Aris, who is thirty-seven, has been described in the press as troubled by his mother's choosing politics over family. (He and his brother declined to be interviewed for this article.) Kim, who is thirty-three, visited his mother ten days after her release. She describes the reunion as "very easy, as though we had never been apart."

Aung San Suu Kyi's brother, Aung San Oo, a U.S. citizen, is close to the junta and has been estranged from her for decades. In 2000, he sued her in Rangoon High Court, demanding a half share in the family's villa, but, in a surprising decision, the court ruled against him. Tin Myo Win, Aung San Suu Kyi's doctor, says that her Buddhist beliefs

have helped her to cope with family ruptures. "I strongly believe that she has no bitterness," he told me. "She has never shown anger or short-temperedness. It is a quality of indifference that I have only come across in senior Buddhist monks." He added, "Inside the heart you may have some feeling, but your mind is above the heart. . . . She loved her sons very much, but you may say that her Buddhism transcended it."

On May 3, 2009, four weeks before Aung San Suu Kyi's scheduled release from detention, John Yettaw, an American Vietnam veteran, swam across Inya Lake to her villa. He later claimed that he had been motivated by a vision of her impending assassination and needed to warn her. Yettaw had made the same swim a few months earlier, but had been turned away by her assistants. "I didn't see him at all the first time," Aung San Suu Kyi told me. When he appeared dripping wet at her door in May, "he said he was not in a condition to swim back, and obviously I didn't want to send him back out into the lake to be drowned." She was aware that she had just given the regime an excuse to keep her in detention, but "I felt I could not hand over anybody to be arrested by the authorities when so many of our people had been arrested and not been given a fair hearing," she said. "It was a matter of principle."

The regime charged her and her two assistants with receiving an unauthorized visitor and incarcerated them, and Yettaw, at Insein Prison, in Rangoon. After a two-and-a-half-month show trial, the women were sentenced to three years of hard labor. General Than Shwe commuted the sentences to eighteen months of house arrest. (Yettaw was sentenced to seven years in prison, but was released days later to United States Senator Jim Webb.) As the scheduled date of her freedom approached, Aung San Suu Kyi said, "I prepared for two eventualities—release and continued detention. I stick to that old formula that you hope for the best and you are prepared for the worst."

A few days after she was freed, Aung San Suu Kyi visited a shelter on the outskirts of Rangoon for H.I.V.-AIDS patients, run by the N.L.D. The shelter, which currently houses eighty-two men, women, and children, provides antiretroviral drugs, donated by N.G.O.s, and in-patient care to mostly up-country people who can't find treatment in their towns and villages. The shelter has provoked the ire of the regime, which sees it as a means for the opposition to bolster its support by offering an alternative to government services. "The patients say they are treated like human beings, that they are given compassion there," Aung San Suu Kyi told me. She spent two hours at the shelter, handing out flowers and talking with patients. The next day, neighborhood officials refused to extend the residential permits that the patients are required to reapply for, and made plans to close the facility. "Perhaps they thought they should show how strong they were and deal with this in a very stern way," she said. The N.L.D. alerted the international press; a week later, officials withdrew the order. Aung San Suu Kyi said she still wasn't sure whether the threats against the shelter came from the military dictatorship or originated at the local level. She called the outcome "a happy solution."

Thant Myint-U told me that the democracy movement under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership had made miscalculations in its dealings with the dictatorship during the past two decades. In the mid-nineteen-nineties, after releasing Aung San Suu Kyi for the first time, the



"I'll go on a cruise, but not if I'm forced to learn things."

regime indicated a willingness to negotiate, but Thant Myint-U believes that the N.L.D.'s insistence on the full implementation of the annulled 1990 election results doomed any hope of progress. "It was entirely unrealistic," he said. After that, the regime became less and less willing to compromise. The opposition's biggest mistake, he said, was its belief that "help from the West—through a mix of sanctions and diplomacy—would somehow force the regime to bargain." In fact, Thant Myint-U said, sanctions may have entrenched the regime and slowed the pace of reform. The dictatorship has been able to attract significant investment from China and, increasingly, from India, Korea, and other Asian nations. Chinese businessmen have formed lucrative real-estate and other partnerships with regime insiders; they now own concessions for teak, jade, and crude oil. "The West essentially dealt itself out of the game," Thant Myint-U said, and as a result Myanmar has been pushed deeper into the arms of the Chinese. Sanctions may also have undermined the Burmese middle class, "probably the people on whom any democratic transition would depend."

Aung San Suu Kyi's critics fear that she and the rest of the N.L.D.'s Old Guard remain wedded to traditional forms of protest—hunger strikes, demonstrations, election boycotts, calls for more sanctions—that are ineffective in a world where China is happy to do business with countries that manifest little or no concern for human rights. "There is a huge overreliance and overestimation of how much the outside world can help," Thant Myint-U said. "I wouldn't say the regime is afraid of her." They would be scared of "any movement that would consolidate a grassroots following," he said. "But the N.L.D. is not that anymore."

Aung San Suu Kyi's decision to boycott the 2010 election splintered the party; a breakaway group, the National Democratic Front, participated in the vote. "We haven't been in a comfortable political space for twenty years, so, though the space is narrow, we must try to set a foot in this space," Khin Maung Swe, now a leader of the N.D.F., told me. The election campaign left deep bitterness. "Her people attacked us vehemently," Khin Maung Swe said. "They branded us

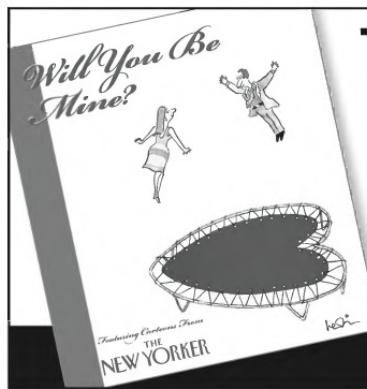


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as 'traitors,' and were more aggressive than the U.S.D.P. itself. This is one of the reasons that we feel so bitter."

Aung San Suu Kyi turned petulant when I asked her about the bad feelings between the groups. She said of the N.D.F., "They expelled one member of their party, and I understand that this member has been accusing them of having received illegal funds. I think they should really see to that rather than talk about the bitterness on the part of members of the N.L.D."

She rolled her eyes when I asked her about N.D.F. leaders' call to the West to lift broad-based economic sanctions because, according to them, the sanctions haven't hurt the regime. "How do they know that the sanctions have not been effective, have not prevented certain things from taking place?" she said with exasperation. "It's not a transparent regime, so that we do not know what is really going on.... But the effect has to be studied," she conceded. "We keep an open mind." She also became annoyed when I asked her about a dispatch from the United States Embassy in Rangoon, published by WikiLeaks, that criticized the "sclerotic leadership" of the N.L.D. and the failure of the party to galvanize the young. "I think the party is stronger now than it's been in a long time," she insisted. An Agence France-Presse article had distorted her comments on the matter, she said. "They just gave prominence to my saying we're not going to get rid of the older leaders," and ignored her saying that "the younger ones are taking over the practical part of the work."

Aung San Suu Kyi told me that she was ready to sit down with the leaders of the dictatorship and "exchange points of view." But there is widespread doubt, even among her closest aides, that talks are likely to get anywhere. General Than Shwe, who is seventy-seven, is a hard-liner who has shown no desire to compromise. "In 1994, there was a meeting with him and Aung San Suu Kyi," Win Htein, her former personal assistant, told me. He came to know Than Shwe when they served together in the Burmese Army, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. "She asked me what was my opinion of her meeting him. And I told her, 'That is nonsense. Nothing will come of it. I know them.' I said, 'I know their mentality.' " Than Shwe may be grooming a

successor within the State Peace and Development Council, but at the moment, a Western diplomat told me, he remains "all-powerful."

I asked Aung San Suu Kyi whether the country had changed during her last period of house arrest. The first thing she noticed after getting out, she said, was "the hand phones and the cameras" of the supporters who gathered in front of her villa and in front of N.L.D. headquarters. Internet cafés and satellite dishes—purchased on the black market and tolerated by the regime—were everywhere. "I'm the only one without a satellite dish, precisely because they're illegal," she told me, with a laugh. The dictatorship understands that keeping its citizens in the dark is no longer possible, she believes, and this gives her hope. "Journals and magazines have come up in the last seven years that carry articles on politics, economics, history, the struggle for independence. Some of these articles are censored, and prevented from appearing, but even the fact that they submit these articles for publication means there's been a change. The self-censorship is decreasing."

Even so, two decades after her return from Oxford to lead the opposition, the country shows few signs of progress. The military dictatorship is entrenched, and pro-democracy forces have been weakened. Some of the monks who led the Saffron Revolution remain in Myanmar's prisons, and the regime has taken over many of the monasteries, carefully vetting all applicants for their political loyalties. As the economies of China, Thailand, India, and other Asian neighbors grow rapidly, Myanmar's remains stagnant. The education and health-care systems are in tatters; many young Burmese dream of escaping overseas. Aung San Suu Kyi told me that people needed to be patient. "We have a saying in Burmese: 'People cannot wait until the end,'" she said. "They are always ready to criticize before we get where we want to be, especially if we don't get there fast enough."

I asked her whether she felt excited to be out in public after living in a vacuum for so long. She smiled. "After years of meditation, I think you remain very much on an even keel. There is not too much difference to you mentally whether you've been released or not," she said. "But physically it is very tiring." ♦

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