

The future of democracy in Myanmar

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The world attention has remained glued to Myanmar for the last several weeks over the military junta's allegation against Aung San Suu Kyi's violating the house arrest terms and condition. Really the trial of the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Aung San Suu Kyi, has once again catapulted events in Myanmar onto the front pages of newspapers around the globe. The leader of Burma's struggle for human rights and democracy has been charged with violating the terms of her house arrest after an American citizen swam across a lake and broke into her home last month. Heads of state from Asia and the West, celebrities and U.N. leaders such as human rights chief Navi Pillay have responded strongly, demanding not only an end to the trial in Burma's kangaroo courts but the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi who has been under house arrest for 13 of the past 19 years.

For while the imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi without trial has long been denounced, a less-publicized travesty has been underway in Myanmar for much of the past 15 years. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First and Amnesty International have reported on the crimes against humanity and war crimes committed under the rule of Myanmar's military regime, including the recruitment of tens of thousands child soldiers and attacks on ethnic minority civilians.

Aung San Suu Kyi was born in 19 June 1945 in Rangoon. Her father, Aung San, founded the modern Burmese army and negotiated Burma's independence from the United Kingdom in 1947, he was assassinated by his rivals in the same year. She grew up with her mother, Khin Kyi, and two brothers, Aung San Lin and Aung San Oo in Rangoon.

Her favourite brother Aung San Lin drowned in a pool accident when Suu Kyi was eight. Her elder brother migrated to San Diego, California, becoming a United States citizen. Suu Kyi educated in English Catholic schools for much of her childhood in Burma. Daw Khin Gained prominence as a political figure in the newly-formed Burmese government. She was appointed Burmese ambassador to India and Nepal in 1960 and Aung San Suu Kyi followed her there, graduating from Lady Shri Ram College with a degree in Politics in New Delhi in 1964. She continued her education at St. Hugh's College, Oxford, obtaining a B.A. degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics in 1969 and Ph.D at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 1985. she was elected an Honorary Fellow in 1990. In 1972 she married Dr. Michael Aris, a scholar of Tibetan culture, living abroad in Bhutan.

The following year she gave birth to their first son, Alexander Aris, in London, their second son, Kim was born in 1977. In 1988 Suu Kyi returned to Burma at first to tend for her ailing mother but later to lead the pro-democracy movement. Michael's visit in Christmas 1995 turned out to be the last time that Suu and Michael met as Suu Kyi remained in Burma and the Burmese dictatorship denied him any further entry visas. Michael was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1997 which was later found to be terminal. Despite appeals from prominent figures and organizations including the United States, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Pope John Paul II, the Burmese government would not grant Michael a visa, saying that they did not have the facilities to care for him and instead urged Aung San to leave the country to visit him. Michael died on his 53rd birthday on March 27, 1999. Since 1989 when his wife was placed under house arrest, he had seen her only five times, the last of which was for Christmas in 1995. She also remains separated from their children who live in the United Kingdom.

Suu Kyi returned to Burma in 1988 to take care of her ailing mother. By coincidence, in the same year, the long-time leader of the Socialist ruling party, General Ne Win stepped down, leading to mass demonstrations for democracy on August 8, 1988- which were violently suppressed.

On August 26, 1988 she addressed half a million people at a mass rally in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda in the capital, calling for a democratic government.

However, in September a new military junta took power. Later the same month, the National League for Democracy was formed with Suu Kyi as general secretary. Influenced by both Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and by more specifically Buddhist concepts Suu Kyi entered politics to work for democratization, helped found the National League for Democracy on 27 September 1988 and was under house arrest on 20 July, 1989. She was offered freedom if she left the country but she refused.

In 1990 the military junta called a general election, which the National League for Democracy won decisively. Being NLD's candidate she was assumed to be the prime minister. But the results were nullified and the military refused to hand over power.

This resulted in international outcry. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest. She has been under house arrest on numerous occasions since she began her political career, totaling 13 of the past 19 years. During these periods she had been prevented from meeting her. Media have also been prevented from visiting. In 1988 journalist Maurizio Giuliano, after photographing her, was stopped by customs officials and all his films, tapes on some notes were confiscated.

Myanmar authorities have summoned members of Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-democracy party to rebuke them for provoking 'unrest' over a statement critical of her trial, state media reported.

Four senior members of the National League for Democracy met officials for 30 minutes on June 5 after comments by the party's youth wing were leaked to the website of a prominent logger, the New Light of Myanmar said. "Though NLD has rights for freedom of speech, the announcement has harmed peace and stability and prevalence of law and order in the country and disturbed the trial proceedings of a court. The paper reported. That can mislead the people into misunderstanding the government, incite activities that may harm the public respect for the government and cause unrest.

US president Barack Obama has described the court proceedings of military junta as a 'show trial' while Myanmar's usually reticent Asian neighbours have expressed strong concerns. Japan's deputy minister for foreign affairs Kenichiro Sasae, urged Myanmar's junta to listen to the concerns of the world community and also said that Tokyo hopes Myanmar will go ahead with establishing a democracy in line with international expectations.

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