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# Burma – a country longing for freedom

Burma, for decades isolated from the rest of the world, appears to be on its way to democratic transformation. Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was at long last released from house arrest, and is now an elected Member of Parliament. Still, the army continues to exert control, albeit behind the scene. But the government wants Burma's dependence on China to end, and getting access to Western financial aid seems to be very much on the agenda. Burma expert Bertil Lintner has travelled to the country to report exclusively for *Du*, to find out which way things have changed. He met with old veterans and young activists, encountering both hope and skepticism.

TEXT Bertil Lintner

It is an impressive gathering of hundreds of people of all ages. And they have all come together here at an old high school in Rangoon to honour the memory of Thet Win Aung, the leader of a union of high school pupils who was arrested in 1998 and sentenced to 59 years in prison for organising protests against the country's military government. Whilst incarcerated in several prisons throughout the country, he was tortured and withheld medical treatment. As a result, he contracted malaria and went on a hunger strike. Thet Win Aung died in his cell in a prison in the city of Mandalay in upper Burma on October 16, 2006 — six years to the day before the meeting here in Rangoon.

A choir of teenagers in their characteristic green school uniforms sing an old student song with origins dating back to the struggle against the British colonial power. Drums, electric guitars and an electric violin accompany the young singers whose voices reverberate through the hall. Then, speeches are held. The first to come up on the stage is a man in his seventies. He was a student activist in 1962, when the military staged a coup and seized power from a democratically elected government. In 1962, the students protested against the takeover. The military responded with force: scores of students were killed when heavily armed soldiers opened fire on the crowds. The historic student's union building, where Burma's independence movement was born in the 1930s, was dynamited and reduced to rubble. Burma has been under various forms of military rule ever since, for half a century — but so has the resistance.

The next speaker is a veteran of the protests in the mid-1970s, when workers in the oil fields in the north went on strike — and were shot at — and students demonstrated against the shabby treatment

of U Thant, the Burmese secretary general of the United Nations who had died in New York and whose body was flown back to his home country for burial. The then military dictator, General Ne Win, was furious, and sent out his troops again. Scores were killed, hundreds ended up in prison, and some fled to the Thai border where they, in vain, tried to organise armed resistance against the country's military regime. Then another speaker, who had taken part in the biggest and most widespread of the uprisings against military rule, which took place in 1988, spoke to the crowd about his experiences. In 1988, the whole country exploded. Strikes and demonstrations were held in virtually every city, town and major village, with everyone demanding an end to military rule and a restoration of the democracy that the country had enjoyed prior to 1962. This time, when the uprising broke out in August, thousands of people were gunned down in Rangoon and elsewhere, and again on September 18, when the military mobilised its forces and struck back, not to seize power, which it already had, but to shore up a regime overwhelmed by popular protests.

The last speakers were younger activists, who had taken part in anti-government demonstrations in the 1990s, and then in 2007, when the country's Buddhist monks marched down the streets of Rangoon in their tens of thousands to call for democracy and national reconciliation. In between the speakers, the band played and the choir sang more pro-democracy and patriotic songs. At last, an activist in his thirties took off his green T-shirt with the name of the high school students' union on the front and a picture of Thet Win Aung on the back — and handed it over to a young girl in her teens. "For the next generation," he said. She was not even born at the time



of the massive 1988 uprising, which was to change Burma forever. "We are not afraid," a young participant in the meeting told me. "And if necessary, we'll fight again."

It was a remarkable event because it showed that the resistance against military domination had continued, generation after generation, since the 1962 coup d'état. But it was perhaps even more astonishing that such a gathering could be held in Burma today—without the army or the police trying to stop it. So is Burma really changing, and, if so, are the changes irreversible, as many people want to believe? In May 2008, a fraudulent "referendum" was held to approve a new constitution which, the military said, would ensure the creation of a "discipline-flourishing democracy." On May 15, 2008, the then ruling junta announced that the constitution had been approved by 92.4% of voters, claiming a 99% turnout in the regions where they had held the vote. However, in some constituencies, it was reported that more than 100% of the voters had approved of the new constitution—which had to be corrected to give the referendum at least a semblance of credibility.

After the referendum a general election followed in November 2010, which everyone agrees was blatantly rigged. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, USDP, "won" a landslide victory, capturing a solid majority in both the upper and the lower houses of the new parliament. In addition, a quarter of all seats in both chambers were reserved for the military, and thus not even elected. A new "civilian" government was formed—consisting mainly of military officers who had replaced their uniforms with civilian clothes. The new president, Thein Sein, is a former general and so are most of his ministers.

But then changes began to occur. Hundreds of political prisoners were set free, press censorship was relaxed—and Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who had been under house arrest, was released and allowed to re-register her party, the National League for Democracy, NLD. It took part in by-elections in April 2012—and won in 43 of the 44 seats they contested, out of a total of 46. Everywhere she went on the campaign trail, huge crowds came out to greet her, the heroine of the pro-democracy struggle who first came to the movement's fore during the 1988 uprising. She was placed under house arrest in 1989, and then, on three different occasions, spent a further 15 years in custody in her home in Rangoon. Her party may now control less than 7% of all seats in the bicameral parliament, but there is, for the first time since 1962, a real opposition in the country that is permitted to operate openly.

Thein Sein has been hailed by many in the Western media as a "Burmese Gorbachev", a reformer who has ended decades of repression and brought new hope to the country. Magazine editors and journalists I met in Rangoon said they had never before enjoyed so much freedom. And students and former students were allowed to commemorate their hero, Thet Win Aung, in a grand ceremony in Rangoon.

It was, in fact, my first legal visit to the country since March 1989. I was there six months after the 1988 massacres, and four months before the military cracked down again, placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and threw hundreds of others in prison. Many of these new prisoners were tortured and, like Thet Win Aung, ended their young lives in a dark cell somewhere in the country. I covered the 1988 uprising and subsequent events—for which I was blacklisted in the country for more than twenty years. Then, in August this year, Thein Sein's government announced that more than 1,000 people who had been on the blacklist would now be allowed to visit the country. I was among them.

On October 15, I flew to Rangoon from Thailand, where I live in the northern city of Chiang Mai. I was met by friends at the airport, and interviewed by several local magazines and journals. After all,

my books about Burma are fairly well-known in the country—banned for many years, but now some of them are for sale in Rangoon bookshops. Was it all really true? Had the military's "discipline-flourishing democracy" turned into something few had expected: a new, more open society? Could it even lead to prosperity after decades of military misrule, a misrule which had turned what was once one of Asia's wealthiest and most developed countries into an economic, political and social wreck?

Certain superficial observations could easily be discerned. There were traffic jams where, 23 years ago, I saw only bicycle rickshaws, a few old cars and buses made from converted World War Two trucks. New buildings, some high-rise, can be seen in different parts of the city. There are more shops selling all kinds of goods, and some of Rangoon's old teashops—always meeting places for young and old intellectuals and opponents of the regime—had been replaced by modern style cafés serving not only sweet, Burmese tea, but also latte and cappuccino.

But it is easy to be deceived by these signs of "progress". There are several high-end condominiums in the suburbs—outrageously expensive by any standards and reserved for the nouveau riche crowd, local entrepreneurs who have benefitted from military rule, and foreign investors who now are flocking to the country. But I saw no projects for public housing. Many years ago, thousands of poor people were forcibly removed to squalid satellite towns on the outskirts of Rangoon. They had taken an active part in the demonstrations of 1988, and they had to pay the price for their opposition to the military. And there, in the "new towns", they remain, with often long journeys in overcrowded mini trucks—some sitting on the roof—to their jobs in the city.

The economy remains firmly in the hands of the military through its two main holding companies, Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, UMEH, and MEC, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (Myanmar has been the official name of the country since 1989, a name change that is not recognised by many in the opposition). UMEH, by far Burma's largest indigenous corporate firm, is 40% owned by the Directorate of Defence Procurement—which finances the country's purchase of military equipment from abroad—while 60% of shares are owned by active and retired military officers, including many from the former ruling military junta, the State Peace and Development Council, SPDC, which was dissolved after Thein Sein's government took over in early 2011. UMEH, which is exempt from commercial and profit taxes, has a monopoly on the country's lucrative trade in gems and precious stones, and also has a significant portfolio in various industries including banking, tourism, real estate, transportation, and mining. It is also involved in joint ventures with some of the country's notorious drug lords—narcotics produced in the Burmese sector of the Golden Triangle remain a major, albeit officially illegal, export commodity.

MEC was founded in 1997 to manage the country's heavy industries, including those producing weapons for the military. MEC has its own bank, the Inwa Bank, and runs a Cybermec Information Technology Center, an important and lucrative IT venture. Along with UMEH, MEC generates most of the operating revenues for the military and, because they are seen as "non-state actors", are not accountable to the government or the parliament, which approved the national budget.

A local businessman I had dinner with in Rangoon told me that recent reforms are not meant to change the overall power structure in the country—with the military at its apex—but that the regime has simply reinvented itself to be able to remain in power. "They can afford to let the NLD operate openly, and they don't care what the media writes any longer—as long as the economy, and matters relating to national security such as insurgencies among the ethnic mi-



norities, remain in their hands." Besides UMEH and MEC, there are also a few civilian business tycoons — but all of them with close ties to the military and some directly connected with the families of the generals. "What we have here today is nepotism and cronyism, not a free economy," says the businessman who wants to remain anonymous. The country is far from free; there are eyes and ears everywhere, even if they, at least for now, are keeping a low profile and staying in the background.

So how is the democratic opposition handling this new situation? In Rangoon I went to the headquarters of the NLD, where there was brisk activity with people coming and going, signing up for membership and buying party literature. At a stall outside, young women dressed in traditional longyis, or Burmese sarongs, and Aung San Suu Kyi T-shirts, were selling caps and coffee mugs with Aung San Suu Kyi's portrait, calendars for 2013 with Aung San Suu Kyi's portrait, and wall posters also with Aung San Suu Kyi's portrait.

Until a little over a year ago many Western observers, including prominent European Union diplomats in Bangkok who cover Burma, asserted that Aung San Suu Kyi was a spent political force, that many young people didn't even know who she was because she had spent years under house arrest. Instead they felt that a new "Third Force" was emerging, one that challenged the supposed uncompromising stands of both Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, and the military-dominated government.

The present mass movement — which culminated during the by-election campaign in March leading up to the polls on April 1 — showed clearly how wrong they were; most outsiders failed to understand that Aung San Suu Kyi was not only a political figure but, in the minds of many ordinary Burmese citizens, a female *bodhisattva* who was going to deliver them from the evils of the country's military regime. At an election rally in Mandalay, two teenage girls carried between them a huge red banner declaring that Aung San Suu Kyi was "a second god". Aung San Suu Kyi herself would be opposed to her apotheosis but such representations promise to continue in the context of Burma's polarized political landscape.

The existence of a viable "Third Force" has turned out to be a myth invented by donor agencies of Western countries and a host of mainly European private foundations eager to expand their enterprises and see a solution to Burma's decades-long political crisis.

To get a better understanding of where the opposition stands today, I went to see Win Tin, an 83-year old journalist, politician — and former political prisoner — who was one of the original founders of the NLD in 1988. He was arrested for his political beliefs in July 1989, when Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest, and spent the next 19 years in jail. He was accused of, and sentenced for, "spreading anti-government propaganda." A famous writer, he now edits the NLD's official weekly paper, *D-Wave*, short for "Democracy Wave". Despite his advanced age, he is full of enthusiasm and shows his co-workers, many of whom could be his grandchildren, how to write news stories and more analytical columns. His weekly is less than a year old but already has a circulation of more than 100,000 copies, on par with the country's leading commercial publications.

He is also highly critical of the so-called "reform process". According to him: "It's a sham. People everywhere are suffering and the government isn't really open. There are workers' strikes over poor pay and peasants' struggles over land seizures. Many people have lost their land and in poor areas, nothing has changed." He also points at ceasefire talks between the central government and the country's ethnic insurgents, which he says are not at all transparent. There may be no more pre-publication censorship of the media, but, Win Tin points out, a lot of self-censorship: "Many journalists don't dare write what they know." What repercussions critical reporting would have is difficult to say, but some newspapers have already

been sued for libel — which follows a pattern from countries such as Malaysia and, even more so, Singapore, where the government frequently takes critics to court and, in that way, forces others who do not want to be sued into silence.

Win Tin is also one of the very few individuals in Burma who dares to criticize Aung San Suu Kyi. The military is manipulating her, he says: "They want to use her, and there is no discussion about it with other NLD leaders."

Even other dissidents are beginning to ask, albeit in hushed tones, the hitherto unthinkable: is Aung San Suu Kyi actually a pawn in the efforts of Thein Sein's military-backed, civilianised government to break the country's long isolation from the West? To have sanctions lifted and to attract foreign investment, which would benefit mainly the military's own enterprises, UMEH and MEC? If that is the case, it has certainly worked. The EU has suspended sanctions for a year, and the US has lifted some of its sanctions and is considering doing away with others.

In early 2011, shortly after her release from house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi was known to have said to visiting foreign diplomats that she was apprehensive about talking to the new government that assumed office after the blatantly rigged November 2010 election. At the time, she reportedly said that the main problem was the new constitution, which was adopted after the equally fraudulent referendum in May 2008 and guarantees the military 25% of the seats in parliament.

For instance, the charter's Chapter 12 lays out the complicated rules for constitutional amendments, which effectively give the military veto power over any proposed changes. The upper house currently consists of 168 elected representatives with another quarter, or 56 delegates, directly representing the defense services; the lower house is made up of 330 elected MPs and 110 appointed to represent the military. And these 110 are in addition to the elected seats held by the military-backed USDP.

Minor constitutional changes may be considered by the bicameral parliament if 20% of MPs submit a bill. However, a tangle of 104 clauses mean that major charter changes cannot be made without the prior approval of more than 75% of all MPs, after which a nationwide referendum must be held where more than half of all eligible voters cast ballots.

This complicated procedure, coupled with Burma's record of holding bogus referendums — the first in 1973 for the 1974 constitution was as lacking in credibility as the one held in 2008 — make it virtually impossible to change those clauses, which in various ways and means legally safeguard the military's now indirect hold on power.

For instance, one of the first sections of the constitution guarantees the military's "national political leadership role of the State" and, in case of an "emergency", the "Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services has the right to take over and exercise State sovereign power" after consulting the president. "No legal action" can be taken against the military for what it does while exercising such emergency powers, according to the constitution.

Another clause bars anyone whose parents, spouse or children "owe allegiance to a foreign power" from becoming president. Aung San Suu Kyi's late husband, Michael Aris, was a British citizen, as are their two sons. And the military's power extends beyond the national parliament; it has the right to appoint one-third of all seats in local assemblies in the seven states and seven regions which make up "the Union of Myanmar".

And just in case the NLD, or any other opposition party secures a majority of seats in local assemblies in the next election, there is the curious paragraph 183 in the constitution which has to be reproduced in full to be believed: "Although there are vacant seats, the Region and State Hluttaw (assembly) shall have the right to carry out



its functions. Moreover, the resolutions and proceedings of the Region and State Hluttaw shall not be annulled, notwithstanding the acts of some person who was not entitled to do so and voted or took part in the proceedings are later discovered." In plain language, it is possible for a group of unknown people to enter the local assemblies and vote, although they had no right to do so — and if and when that is discovered, the decisions taken with the help of those imposters will still be valid.

When asked about any precedent to this peculiar rule, an international law expert responded: "That is the weirdest clause I've ever seen in a constitution."

The semblance of reform, however, has improved Burma's standing in the international community, as are other steps expected to be taken by Thein Sein's government, including new laws allowing for limited public protests and the creation of labour unions. From Rangoon, I drove 330 kilometres north to Naypyidaw, the new capital the former junta built in 2005. At the time, some Western newspapers wrote that it had been "carved out of the jungle" in "the middle of nowhere". In fact, it has been a long time since there was any jungle in that part of the country. It is located on a dry, bushy plain near the old town of Pyinmana, about halfway between the old capital Rangoon and Mandalay. And that central part of the country was deforested decades ago.

It is nevertheless a very curious capital. Its huge buildings are spread out over a large area and connected by immensely wide roads. The widest of them all, which leads up to the new parliament building, has 10 lanes — and almost no traffic. One road is lined by a string of what seems to be almost empty luxury hotels. The USDP's headquarters is a monstrous edifice, certainly not comparable with the tiny shop house in Rangoon which serves as the NLD's main office.

There is also a "Tatmadaw Military History Museum" — *tatmadaw* being the Burmese name for the country's armed forces. I went there, hoping to find some literature or other material about the history of the army, and, hopefully, to see some interesting exhibits. The building, or rather buildings, was bigger than anything else I saw in Naypyidaw — a whole complex of monumental structures connected with open colonnades and covered corridors. Old aircraft were parked on an open field outside the actual complex and I saw some patrol boats anchored in a nearby pond. But the buildings were virtually empty. Martial music blared out from loudspeakers in the corridors, but I saw no exhibits apart from portraits of Burma's past and present military leaders in the — also exceptionally huge — entrance hall. The shop sold no literature, just mostly plastic toy guns for children. I was told that there would be some literature for sale, "perhaps next year".

On Naypyidaw's parade ground — which equals Moscow's Red Square in size — stands newly erected larger-than-life statues of the three main warrior kings in Burmese history: Anawrahta, who in 1044 founded the first Burmese empire; Bayinnaung who reigned in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and conquered territory as far east as Chiang Mai in today's Thailand and Vientiane in Laos; and Alaungpaya, who in the 18<sup>th</sup> century founded the Konbaung dynasty, the third and last of the Burmese empires.

For more than four decades after Burma's independence from Britain on January 4, 1948, Armed Forces Day, which falls on March 27, was held to commemorate the day in 1945 when Burmese nationalists, led by Aung San Suu Kyi's father Aung San, turned their guns against their erstwhile allies, the Imperial Japanese Army. This decisive event led to the liberation of Burma a few months later. Today, Armed Forces Day celebrates Burma's warrior kings. Aung San is not totally forgotten, but definitely pushed into the background. The problem with Burma's three warrior kings is that they were brilliant military strategists and conquerors — but never managed to build up any functioning administration in the areas they subdued. Consequently, their

"empires" fell apart as soon as the king was dead. As such, these old warrior kings can hardly be seen as role models for today's Burmese leaders in their task of reuniting this ethnically diverse country, where civil wars have raged since independence in 1948.

My main purpose of going to Naypyidaw was not to admire this monstrosity of a sprawling but seemingly sparsely populated city, but to meet Aung San Suu Kyi. She doesn't live here, but maintains a house in one of Naypyidaw's residential quarters. She was in the capital to attend a sitting of the Lower House of Parliament to which she was elected in April this year.

Her house was more modest than most buildings in Naypyidaw, and could have been a suburban home anywhere in the world. She greeted me with her usual, somewhat stiff smile and invited me in. There were only a handful people in the house, but they soon withdrew and I was alone with Aung San Suu Kyi and her personal assistant, a young female doctor called Tin Mar Aung.

It was late in the evening and time was limited, so I decided to get straight to the point: the criticism she has been subjected to for not speaking out more on the plight of the country's ethnic minorities, in particular in the far north of the country, where bloody battles are being fought between government forces and guerrillas from a local resistance force, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The fighting has forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes; most of them to makeshift camps in KIA controlled territory along the Chinese border and some to government-held towns in the state. In March this year, Human Rights Watch released a 91-page report titled "Untold Miseries: Wartime Abuses and Forced Displacement in Burma's Kachin State" which details serious abuses committed by the government's army. Villages have been shelled and people forced to flee and, the report says: "Soldiers have threatened and tortured civilians during interrogations for information about KIA insurgents, and raped women. The army has also used antipersonnel mines and conscripted forced labour. Children as young as 14 have been tortured and forced to serve as army porters, including on the front lines."

Human Rights Watch also states that the KIA has been involved in serious abuses, including using child soldiers and antipersonnel landmines. But the proportions differ widely; when I visited one of the refugee camps near the Chinese border late last year, I asked people — mostly women, children and old people — why they had fled, the answer invariably was that "we are afraid of the Burmese army." When I asked them if they were afraid of the KIA as well, even old grandmothers responded that, "Oh no, those are our boys."

Aung San Suu Kyi, however, told me that she did not want to condemn either side in the conflict because that would complicate the situation, and, she said, the NLD would be perceived as obstructing the peace process, i.e. ongoing talks between the KIA and the government side, which so far have led to nothing. But she insisted that the NLD had helped the refugees with money and expressed sympathy for their plight. As for human rights abuses, she was less precise: "I am keen on a third-party investigation into the allegations." When asked who that could be, she replied that she would like to see the United Nations Human Rights Commission visit the area, but she also admitted that it would be difficult because of the security situation in Kachin State.

While her arguments may be sound, many Kachins — and other ethnic peoples — are disappointed. Nang Seng, a Kachin activist in Britain, wrote on the *Huffington Post* website on October 2: "As an ethnic Kachin human rights activist from Burma, I have been supporting Aung San Suu Kyi since I was 13 years old. She has been an icon, a hero and an inspiration for me. Living in London as a refugee, I was heavily involved in the campaign to release Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. I travelled across the UK, sometimes speaking to audiences of a dozen people in a church hall, sometime to hundreds



at bigger conferences. I spoke about how she was a remarkable leader, of how she represents peaceful resistance to oppression, a true leader for Burma not only for the majority Burman people, but for all ethnic groups in the country."

Now, however, Nang Seng, feels betrayed by Aung San Suu Kyi: "In one recent speech in Burmese at Queens College, USA, she says that the silence was justified so as 'not to add fire to any side of the conflict.' What does it mean? Does she really see this as if it were two equal sides fighting each other, when in fact it is Kachin people who have been attacked by the Burmese Army? She said, 'What is it that I have to strongly condemn? If it is a human rights violation then I will strongly condemn.' And yet, she remained silent over serious human rights violations committed by government army soldiers, including attacks against civilian populations, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, internal displacement, the use of human shields, the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as forced labour. Elderly women, children, and a disabled woman were all raped and many killed afterwards. Doesn't she see that many women and girls are being raped by the Burmese Army soldiers she said she has a 'soft spot' for? Is her understanding of what is going on in Kachin State so bad that she doesn't understand how insensitive it was to use language like that?"

Those were harsh words, but Nang Seng is far from alone harbouring such feelings. Khun Htun Oo, the leader of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, SNLD, a party representing the Shan people in the east and northeast of the country, visited the United States at the same time as Aung San Suu Kyi, and was also there to receive an award for his struggle for democracy. Khun Htun Oo was arrested in 2005 for opposing the junta, but released in early 2012 in a presidential amnesty. He told reporters at a press conference in Washington: "Opposition forces in the Parliament including Aung San Suu Kyi have been neutralised by the government by giving them posts in the Parliament. So she can no longer speak for the rights of the people."

Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to be aware of the criticism and is taking it seriously. But she is also in a terrible dilemma. Anything she says can be used against her, and there is little doubt that the military, and the USDP, will do everything in their might to marginalise her in time for the next general election, which will be held in 2015. The by-elections this year was a wake-up call for the ruling elite; they had perhaps expected the NLD to do well, but not score such a sweeping victory. That was probably why the by-elections were free and not rigged like the polls in November 2010. But, as *D-Wave* editor Win Tin had told me in Rangoon: "People are no longer afraid. That was why we won this by-election." The NLD won even here, in the capital Naypyidaw where one of its seats was won by Zayar Thaw — Burma's most famous hip-hop artist and founder of Generation Wave, an anti-government youth movement that used graffiti and pamphlets to spread pro-democracy messages after the monk's failed "safron revolution" in 2007.

Cornering Aung San Suu Kyi on the ethnic issue is one way of depriving her of some of her popular support — at least among the ethnic minorities. The other factor that could ruin her political future is the constitution. I was not surprised that Win Tin had told me that the country's undemocratic constitution has to be revised, but Aung San Suu Kyi said more or less the same when I met her in Naypyidaw: "We have said repeatedly that we want to revise the constitution." She also emphasised, rather controversially, that "the judiciary is totally corrupt from top to bottom" making it difficult to establish transparency and the rule of law, two things that she feels Burma needs the most.

I left Aung San Suu Kyi's house with very mixed feelings. I remembered what Myat Thu Pan, a Burmese commentator, wrote for the news site Mizzima shortly after her visit to the United States:

"Her power as a democratic leader is enormous not only for Burma but for the whole free world, and she cannot allow herself to be reduced to only the leader of the NLD. Once an icon, she will always be an icon with additional responsibility as a lawmaker. This is her cross to bear."

While in Rangoon, I had also met the Shan leader Khun Htun Oo in his home near a Shan pagoda in a northern Rangoon suburb. He had been even blunter than Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Tin when commenting on the constitution: "We do not accept the 2008 constitution. There are no rights for the nationalities. Our aim is to recreate a federal union." And he does not hold much hope for the 2015 election: "The army always loses elections, but somehow manages to remain in power." In May 1990, free and surprisingly fair elections were actually held. The NLD captured 392 out of 485 contested seats while the party favoured by the army, the National Unity Party, won only ten. Khun Htun Oo's SNLD with 23 seats won was actually the second biggest party in the election.

But the elected parliament was never convened; two months after the election, the military government claimed that the parliamentary election, as it was called, was not really a parliamentary election. First, a constitution drafting assembly would have to be convened to draw up a new charter for the state. About 100 of the MPs elected then had to sit together with another 700 delegates, all hand-picked by the military, to complete that task. Many foreign pundits have bought this line and still argue that it wasn't a parliament that was elected in 1990. But the figures speak for themselves: why elect 485 MPs if only less than a quarter of them would be selected to sit in the "constituent assembly" — of which nothing was mentioned before the election? The issue, of course, was that "the wrong party" won; if the NUP had won the election no one doubts that the parliament would have been convened within days and a new government taken over.

So can something similar happen again, if the NLD wins the 2015 election? Very possible. When I asked Aung San Suu Kyi about the "democratic reforms" that president Thein Sein has implemented, she responded: "We have said it repeatedly that we don't think the situation is irreversible." Another military crackdown cannot be ruled out; there is no other reason why the military has been given the right to do exactly that under the terms of the 2008 constitution.

But it will not be easy the next time around. The people have learnt from their bitter experiences since 1988, or even 1962, and, as the gathering in Rangoon on October 16 to commemorate the death in custody of student activist Thet Win Aung clearly showed, the spirit of resistance lives on.

I came across the same strong spirit among ordinary people when I travelled north from Naypyidaw to Monywa, a town three hours drive north of Mandalay. There, local people have launched a campaign against a copper mine, which is a joint venture between UMEH and a subsidiary of China North Industries Corporation, NORINCO, a leading Chinese weapons manufacturer. Two dozen villages have been dislocated by the mine and residue from it is polluting the water and ruining surrounding fields.

The struggle is led by two young women, 29-year-old Thwe Thwe Win and Aye Net, 34. Half a year ago they were selling vegetables in the local market and neither of them has more than five years primary education. Now they have become national celebrities and I met them in a house by the Chindwin River, right opposite the copper mine. In the distance we could see trucks from the mining company move earth across what looked like a lunar landscape. The destruction of the environment is easy for anyone to see; for the local farmers it is their livelihood that has been lost.

"The Chinese company came with bulldozers and destroyed our fields," says Thwe Thwe Win. "We tried to stop them but the Chinese



officials had very bad manners. They waved their penises at us and were rude." Thwe Thwe Win and Aye Net were arrested and spent five days in prison in Monywa until messages of support, coming from all over Burma, forced the local authorities to release them. The struggle is still continuing, and Thwe Thwe Win told me that they would not give up until and unless the Chinese mining company, NORINCO subsidiary Wanbao, has been forced to leave.

The struggle against the Chinese company comes less than a year after a similar campaign prompted the government to suspend a US\$3.6 billion hydroelectric power project in Kachin State. The dam, to have been built at Myitsone where the Mali Hka and Nmai Hka rivers converge to form the Irrawaddy, would have been the world's 15<sup>th</sup> tallest and submerged 766 square kilometers of forestland, an area bigger than the Republic of Singapore. Under the 2006 deal, 90% of power generated from Myitsone would have gone to China. The suspension of the project, which was announced by President Thein Sein on September 30 last year, was seen as a turning point in Burma's relations with China. Burma has depended on its powerful northern neighbor for trade, political support and arms deliveries since the West shunned the Burmese regime following massacres of pro-democracy demonstrators in 1988. Now, Burma wants to improve relations with the West — hence many of the "democratic" reforms we have seen over the past year. But Burma has to tread carefully; China is and will always be a powerful neighbour and if a second multi-million project, the Monywa copper mine, is also scrapped or suspended, it would have serious repercussions on the relationship between the two countries.

At the same time, there is no doubt that "the China factor" was the most important reason why Burma's ruling generals decided to change their course, domestically as well as internationally. In the

wake of the massacres of pro-democracy protesters in 1988, not surprisingly, Western countries, led by the United States, condemned the carnage. Later, sanctions were imposed on the regime, but they were always half-hearted and had little if any effect in terms of foreign trade. Still, sanctions turned Burma into an international outcast and prevented it from having full access to UN funding and international monetary institutions.

China, which long had coveted Burma's forests, rich mineral and natural gas deposits, and its hydroelectric power potential, took full advantage of the situation. In fact, it had already made its intentions clear in the September 2, 1985 edition of the *Beijing Review*, an officially sanctioned news magazine and a mouthpiece of the Chinese government. An article titled "Opening to the Southwest: An Expert Opinion," written by Pan Qi, a former vice minister of communications, outlined the possibilities of finding an outlet for trade for China's landlocked southern provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan through Burma to the Indian Ocean. It also mentioned the Burmese railheads of Myitkyina and Lashio in the north and northeast, and the Irrawaddy River as possible conduits for Chinese exports.

Until then, China had supported the Communist Party of Burma and other insurgent groups, but after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the ascendance to power of the pragmatist Deng Xiaoping, Beijing's foreign policy shifted from supporting revolutionary movements in the region to promoting trade. This was the first time this new policy towards Burma was announced, albeit rather discreetly, by the Chinese authorities, authorities, and why the country was so important to them economically.

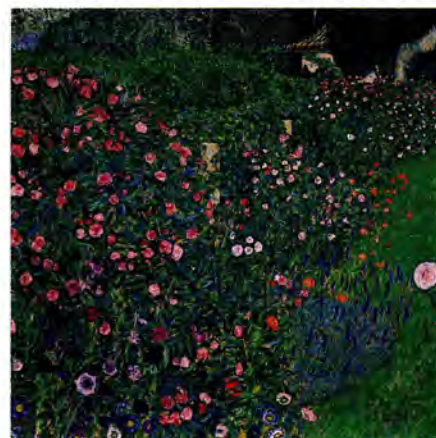
The first border trade agreement between Burma and China was signed in early August 1988, days before the uprising began in earnest. After the movement had been crushed and sanctions were



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Das Grausen, um 1902  
Leopold Museum, Wien  
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Gustav Klimt  
Italienische Gartenlandschaft, 1913  
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Stiftung Sammlung Kamm

## Gustav Klimt



8. Dez bis 10. März 2013

# Alfred Kubin

Das letzte Abenteuer  
Die Sammlung Leopold



earnest. After the movement had been crushed and sanctions were put in place, China moved in and rapidly became Burma's most important foreign trade partner. It helped Burma upgrade its antiquated infrastructure — and supplied massive amounts of military hardware. In the decade after the massacres, China exported more than US\$1.4 billion worth of military equipment to Burma. It also helped Burma upgrade its naval facilities in the Indian Ocean. In return, the junta gave Beijing access to signals intelligence from key oil shipment sea lanes collected by the Burmese Navy, using equipment supplied by China. The strategic balance of power in the region was being upset in China's favour.

But the real resource play came later, and in spades. A plan to build oil and gas pipelines was approved by China's National Development and Reform Commission in April 2007. In November 2008, China and Burma agreed to build a US\$1.5 billion oil pipeline and US\$1.04 billion natural gas pipeline. In March 2009, China and Burma signed an agreement to build a natural gas pipeline, and in June 2009 an agreement to build a crude oil pipeline. The inauguration ceremony marking the start of construction was held on October 31, 2009, on Madaay Island on Burma's western coast. The gas pipeline from the Bay of Bengal to Kunming, in China's Yunnan province, will be supplemented with an oil pipeline designed to allow Chinese ships carrying fuel imports from the Middle East to skirt the congested Malacca Strait. And in September 2010, China agreed to provide Burma with US\$4.2 billion worth of interest-free loans over a 30-year period to help fund hydropower projects, road and railway construction, and information technology development.

Western sanctions did not cause Burma's economic — and strategic — push into "the hands of the Chinese," as many foreign observers have argued. But Western policies certainly made it easier for China to implement its designs for Burma. This has, in return, caused the West, the US as well as EU, to rethink its Burma policy — at the same time as the country's growing dependence on China has caused considerable consternation within Burma's military leadership.

US strategic concerns were outlined as early as June 1997 in a *Los Angeles Times* article by Marvin Ott, an American security expert and former CIA analyst. "Washington can and should remain outspokenly critical of abuses in Burma. But there are security and other national interests to be served ... it is time to think seriously about alternatives," Ott concluded.

But the turn took some doing. When it was revealed in the early 2000s that Burma and North Korea had established a strategic partnership, Washington was alarmed. North Korea was providing Burma with tunnelling expertise, heavy weapons, radar and air defence systems, and, it is alleged by Western and Asian intelligence agencies, even missile-related technology. Pictures of massive underground complexes — tunnels, bunkers and storage facilities for everything from food to tanks — were leaked to me in June 2009, and appeared on *Yale Global Online*, a website published by Yale University in the United States. The revelation caused quite a sensation, and a witch-hunt for those who had leaked the photos was launched.

But none of my sources were apprehended; instead, they sent me even more images of tunnels, new radar systems based on North Korean designs — and copies of shipping manifests from Rangoon and Thilawa ports listing the arrival of North Korean ships which delivered "miscellaneous goods" to the Burmese military and carried rice back. It was evidently some kind of barter agreement. Cash-strapped Burma and North Korea, which was, and still is, in desperate need for food to feed its near-starving population, had reached a deal which suited both countries.

It was high time for the US to shift tracks and start to "engage" the Burmese leadership, which anyway seemed bent on clinging on to power at any cost, no matter the consequences. The 2010 election

in Burma, no matter how fraudulent it was, was just the opportunity that Washington needed. Burma suddenly had a new face and a country run by a constitution, not a junta. It was the perfect time for Burma's ruling generals to launch a charm offensive in the West, and for the United States and other Western countries to begin the process of détente — and of pulling Burma from its uncomfortable Chinese embrace and close relationship with North Korea. Hardly by coincidence, Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, visited South Korea before continuing on to Burma in late November last year. For more than a year, it has been known in security circles that the United States wants South Korea to lure Burma away from its military cooperation with North Korea. The much richer South would be able to provide more useful assistance to Burma than the North, the argument went. At the same time, many staunchly nationalistic Burmese military officers have become dissatisfied with their country's heavy dependence on China as well as uncontrolled immigration by Chinese nationals into the north of the country. The first blow against China came in October 2004, when the then-prime minister and former intelligence chief Lt.-Gen. Khin Nyunt was ousted. The Chinese at first refused to believe that their man in Burma, Khin Nyunt, had been pushed out. How could the generals dare to move against a figure so key to the relationship? Nevertheless, both sides managed to smooth over the incident, and bilateral relations appeared to be returning to normal. Then, in 2009, Burmese troops moved into the Kokang area in the northeast — an area inside Burma populated by ethnic Chinese — pushing more than 30,000 refugees, both Chinese nationals and local people, across the border back into China.

Still, China did not get the message — until the Myitsone project was suspended last year. China has threatened to take legal actions against the Burmese government for breach of contract. This was the final straw. Today, it is clear that Sino-Burmese relations will never be the same. To strengthen its position vis-à-vis China, Burma has also turned increasingly to its partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, which it is due to chair in 2014. Even more significantly, when Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, who was appointed commander-in-chief of Burma's armed forces in March 2011, went on his first foreign trip in mid-November, he did not go to China — but instead to China's traditional enemy, Vietnam. Burma and Vietnam share the same fear of their common, powerful northern neighbour, so it is reasonable to assume that Min Aung Hlaing had a lot to discuss with his Vietnamese hosts.

But the strategic change in Burma didn't happen overnight. In the same year as Khin Nyunt was ousted, an important document was compiled by Lt. Col. Aung Kyaw Hla, a researcher at Burma's Defence Services Academy located in Pyin Oo Lwin, or Maymyo as it was called in the past, an old British hill station in the highlands north-east of Mandalay. His 346-page top secret thesis, titled "A Study of Myanmar [Burma]-U.S. Relations," was leaked to me last year by a trusted source in the military. "Read this, and you'll understand why all these changes are happening," he told me. I did, and it was astonishing reading. The Burmese-language document outlined the policies which are now being implemented to improve relations with Washington and lessen dependence on Beijing. The establishment of a more acceptable regime than the old junta provided has made it easier for the Burmese military to launch its new policies, and to have those taken seriously by the international community.

The thesis states quite bluntly that having China as a diplomatically ally and economic patron has created a "national emergency" which threatens the country's independence. "Aung Kyaw Hla", probably a committee of army strategists rather than one single person, goes on to argue that although human rights are a concern in the West, the US would be willing to modify its policy to suit "strategic interests". Although the author does not specify those interests, it is



in weighing strategic interests against democratisation.

If bilateral relations with the US were improved, the master plan suggests, Burma would also get access to badly needed funds from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other global financial institutions. The country would then emerge from "regionalism", where it currently depends on the goodwill and trade of its immediate neighbours, including China, and enter a new era of "globalisation".

The master plan is acutely aware of the problems that must be addressed before Burma can lessen its reliance on China and become a trusted partner with the West. The main issue at the time of writing was the detention of pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, who Aung Kyaw Hla wrote was a key "focal point": "Whenever she is under detention pressure increases, but when she is not, there is less pressure." While the report implies Aung San Suu Kyi's release would improve ties with the West, the plan's ultimate aim — which it spells out clearly — is to "crush" the opposition. At the same time, the dossier identifies individuals, mostly Western academics, known for their opposition to the West's sanctions policy, and somewhat curiously suggests that "friendly" Indian diplomats could be helpful in providing background information about influential US congressmen. The dossier concludes that the regime cannot compete with the media and non-governmental organisations run by Burmese exiles, but if US politicians and lawmakers were invited to visit the country they could help to sway international opinion in the regime's favour. Over the years, many Americans have visited Burma and are often left less critical of the regime than they were previously. In the end, it seems that Burma has successfully managed to engage the US rather than vice versa.

As everyone can see, relations with the United States are indeed improving, exactly along the lines suggested by Aung Kyaw Hla in 2004. While paying lip service to human rights and democracy, Sino-Burmese relations — and North Korea — were high on Clinton's agenda when she visited Burma late last year. On a visit to Canberra in November 2011, President Barack Obama stated that, "with my visit to the region, I am making it clear that the United States is stepping up its commitment to the entire Asia-Pacific region." The United States is a Pacific power, Obama said, and "we are here to stay." But he was quick to add: "The notion that we fear China is mistaken. The notion that we are looking to exclude China is mistaken."

That statement was about as convincing as Thein Sein's assurance that he had suspended the dam project in the north because he was concerned about "the wishes of the people" — which he said at the time in a speech before the Burmese parliament.

The two old adversaries, Burma and the United States, may have ended up on the same side of the fence in the struggle for power and influence in Southeast Asia. Frictions, and perhaps even hostility, can certainly be expected in future relations between China and Burma. And Burma will no longer be seen by the United States and elsewhere in the West as a pariah state that has to be condemned and isolated.

Whatever happens, no one expects US-Burma relations to be without some unease. Decades of confrontation and mutual suspicion still exist. And a powerful strain in Washington to stand firm on human rights and democracy will complicate matters for Burma's rulers — who are still uncomfortable and extremely unwilling to relinquish any control whatsoever over the state machinery. And last of all, there's China. Burma may be pleased that the reliance on a dominant northern neighbour might be lessened, but with so many decades of ties and real, on-the-ground projects underway, the rela-

tively 60% of Burma's total population of an estimated 48 million people are Burmans while the rest belong to a wide variety of other nationalities: the hilltribe, Christian Kachin in the north; the Shan in the east and northeast — who belong to the same group of peoples as the Thais and the Lao —; the Karen and the related Karenni in the east who have been fighting since 1949 in one of the world's longest-lasting civil wars; the Mons, descendants of old empire builders in the southeast; the Pa-Os, the Palaungs, the Padaungs, the Chins, the Arakanese (or Rakhine), the Nagas and many others.

The powerful KIA in the far north had a ceasefire agreement with the government for 17 years, from 1994 to 2011. But it broke down when the government asked the KIA to lay down its arms and become a "border guard force" under the command of the Burmese army. The KIA refused — and in June last year, government forces attacked Kachin rebel strongholds along the Chinese border.

When I visited Kachin refugee camps on the frontier last year, more than 30,000 people had fled their homes, while thousands more had sought shelter in churches in Myitkyina, Bhamo and other towns in the area. Today, the figure is more than 50,000 — and the fighting has spread to other parts of Kachin State as well.

The flood of refugees has put Beijing in a dilemma as it does not want to allow the fleeing Kachin into their territory and be seen as supporting the rebels. On the other hand, China can ill-afford to antagonize the KIA, which operates over a large geographical area where Beijing has made substantial investments in logging, hydro-electric power, and jade and gold mining. Nor have the Chinese abandoned hope of eventually resuming the Myitsone megaproject.



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West of the Yunnanese town of Ruili, Nongdao is one of many Chinese border areas where people have fled the fighting. The only way to travel to the temporary camp is by motorcycle, more than an hour on a rutted dirt track through the forest and border mountains. I went there on the back of a motorcycle and with a jacket over my face. At a glade in the forest right at the border, I found hundreds of newly arrived refugees staying there in temporary huts and under plastic sheets. Some aid was coming from local church groups and sympathetic ethnic Kachin villagers in China. Although they have not been pushed back across the border, Chinese authorities have made it clear that they are not welcome to stay long-term.

Judging from what the refugees told me—and what was later also recorded in the March 2012 Human Rights Watch report—little has changed in the Burmese Army's behaviour since the heyday of its counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s. Those who have fled tell the same tales of killings, beatings, plunder and rape; tales I have continued to hear during the now more than three decades I have covered the ethnic wars in Burma's frontier areas.

Dashi Kaw, an 87-year-old woman who has to support herself on a wooden staff, told me that she had to walk for two days through the jungle to get to the border because of her fear of government soldiers. Mahka Naw, a 70-year-old Kachin man, says government soldiers came to his village and slaughtered all his livestock and ate them without compensating him. He believes that since he fled his house has been burnt down by Burmese Army soldiers.

On November 28, 2011, Partners Relief and Development, a Christian Non-Governmental Organization, released the first detailed account on atrocities committed by the Burmese Army in Kachin State. According to the 57-pages long report titled "Crimes in Northern Burma", villagers had been tortured, killed and forced

from their homes while others had been forcibly recruited to carry heavy loads for the army. The NGO accused the Burmese Army of war crimes and called for a United Nations-led Commission of Inquiry into its alleged crimes.

However, the Burmese Army has changed in some respects. Prior to the conclusion of ceasefire agreements with more than a dozen ethnic rebel armies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Burmese Army was a poorly equipped but battle-hardened light infantry force. The procurement of military hardware from not only China, but also from Russia, Ukraine, Singapore, North Korea and other countries has certainly improved the quality of its arsenals.

Government soldiers today are much better equipped, have nicer uniforms, and officers have been given ample business opportunities to ensure their loyalty to a regime that almost collapsed under a pro-democracy uprising in 1988. Suppressing the uprising in urban areas and making peace with the ethnic rebels in the border areas were part of the same policy: to prevent a link-up between the urban dissidents and the armed insurgents.

That worked for a while, particularly as the ceasefires held up, but now the policy seems to be backfiring. None of the various ceasefire agreements addressed the main reasons ethnic rebels had taken up arms in the first place; rather, they temporarily froze the problems, and now they are coming back to haunt the new nominally civilian government that has claimed to be working towards national reconciliation. After almost two decades of ceasefires, now smarter-looking soldiers have had little or no fighting experience.

Most battalions are also undermanned since budgets have been used to buy sophisticated weapons' systems instead of supporting the privates. According to a well-placed source with access to inside information, the Burmese Army consisted of 182 battalions

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before 1988. A full battalion should have been made up of 777 men, but the usual strength then was around 500–600. Now there are more than 500 battalions, each with no more than 150–160 men of which on average 40–50 are officers. As a result of that inexperience and dilution, the Burmese Army has taken a severe beating in Kachin State, suffering heavy casualties and having several of its men, including officers, captured alive by the guerrillas. The counter-move has been to use heavy artillery to pound Kachin positions from afar, a tactic that has inflicted few casualties on the guerrillas but caused heavy displacement of the civilian population in the battle zones.

Landlocked in northernmost Burma, with no supply lines for arms and ammunition, the Kachin guerrillas may also soon face severe difficulties. In the past, the KIA benefited from Chinese supplies to the now defunct insurgent Communist Party of Burma, while some weapons and other equipment were previously obtained directly from China.

During the 17-year ceasefire spanning 1994 to 2011, the KIA was able to trade openly with China and most of its non-lethal supplies came from across the border. However, today arms and ammunition are much harder to procure, and Kachin State is far away from South-east Asia's arms black markets. Resupplying ammunition could become difficult as the fighting continues. China's border war dilemma is obvious, especially in light of recent deteriorating Sino-Burmese relations. According to sources in Chinese border towns, it is unlikely that Beijing would opt to use the Kachins and other ethnic groups as a lever against the Burmese government. Instead, Beijing has been seen as aiming to please the Burmese government to protect China's massive and strategic investments in the country.

At the same time, antagonizing the Kachins could have far-reaching consequences beyond threats to cross-border trade and planned hydroelectric power schemes. It could also affect the projected oil and gas pipelines from Burma's southern coast to China's southwestern province of Yunnan. The last stretches of those pipelines are scheduled to pass through Kachin-inhabited areas of north-eastern Shan State, which is currently a theatre of war. And the situation could get worse before it gets better.

China has a strong interest in restoring stability in its Burmese border areas. With peace talks between the KIA and the government going nowhere, the war in Kachin State has only added to China's problems with Burma, where it is now stuck uncomfortably in the middle of the central government and ethnic rebels.

At the same time, there is little sympathy for Aung San Suu Kyi in the far north of the country. News about her statement at Queen's College in New York in September has reached even these remote parts of Burma, where many now feel the same way as the London-based Kachin activist Nang Seng does in her piece for the *Huffington Post* in October. But Aung San Suu Kyi is not the only moral force in the country. There is also what has become known as "the 88 Generation", a loosely organised movement comprising a generation of students who were active during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. When the military crushed that movement, many of the demonstrators were sentenced to prison for various so-called anti-state crimes. A bit over two decades later, many of those activists are now coming of age and are seen by many as the conscience of the nation.

The pro-democracy veterans started to meet and discuss politics in Yangon teashops around 2005. Many of them had spent long years in prison and were plucked from their families, from their studies and, when at last free, they still live in a kind of captivity, locked out from the universities and colleges which once offered them the promise of relatively rewarding academic careers.

In August 2006, the 88 Generation, an informal network, was established using that name. Not surprisingly, the group's most prominent leaders were arrested the following month, but in Octo-

ber other members launched a nationwide petition calling for the release of the estimated 1,100 political prisoners — including the detained leaders of the group — and a start to a genuine national-reconciliation process. Dressed symbolically in white, the group's members travelled around the country and by October 23 had collected 535,580 signatures, which were subsequently sent to the ruling junta, as well as various UN organizations.

In November, the 88 Generation initiated a mass multi-religious prayer campaign. Participants were urged to wear white clothing and hold candlelight vigils in Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim places of worship. Tens of thousands heeded the network's call and offered prayers for a peaceful resolution to Burma's political impasse, freedom for all political prisoners, and help for victims of floods that at the time had devastated many areas of the country.

On January 4, 2007, Burma's Independence Day, the 88 Generation network launched yet another audacious campaign dubbed "Open Heart", entailing a letter-writing campaign encouraging Burmese citizens across the country to write about their everyday complaints and grievances with military rule. The organisers had said that by February 4, the campaign's scheduled last day, they expected more than 25,000 letters to be sent to junta chairman Senior General Than Shwe.

The junta was no doubt taken aback by these massive, but entirely peaceful, expressions of dissent. The junta released the five 88 Generation leaders who had been arrested in September, an unprecedented response to political dissidence from the historically heavy-handed junta.

Some political analysts read the move as a concession to the movement, but more likely the junta's decision was influenced by an upcoming ASEAN meeting, where the junta was keen not to further alienate the grouping's member states with the UN resolution already on the table. Certain ASEAN member states have expressed their concerns about the ruling junta's lack of progress toward a democratic solution to its political crisis, and have privately lamented the frequent international embarrassment Burma has caused the grouping since its admission in 1997.

The most prominent 88 Generation member is Paw Oo Tun, alias Min Ko Naing, a *nom de guerre* that translates from the Burmese as "Conqueror of Kings". In August 1988, he was a 26-year-old zoology student who was eloquently addressing tens of thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators on the streets of Rangoon. After the military cracked down bloodily on the demonstrations and rounded up prominent speakers at the rallies, Min Ko Naing went underground on September 18, 1988.

In March 1989, he was tracked down and arrested by military intelligence and spent nearly 16 years in solitary confinement. When Min Ko Naing was released in November 2004, the once-youthful demonstrator was middle-aged and the years in abysmal prison conditions had left harsh marks on the 42-year-old's body and face. Nonetheless, the long years in detention had clearly failed to extinguish the pro-democracy activist's fighting spirit.

"The people of Burma must have the courage to say no to injustice and yes to the truth," he said at the first 88 Generation meeting in August 2006. "They must also work to correct their own wrongdoing that hurt society."

Min Ko Naing was arrested again in September 2006, released in January 2007 — and then rearrested once more in August of that year, just as an anti-government movement, later led by Buddhist monks, was gaining momentum. And then he was released along with numerous other activists on 13 January 2012, as part of the mass presidential pardon for political activists announced on that day. With thousands of followers, the 88 Generation is an entirely new phenomenon in Burma, but not in Asia as a whole. Many other Asian



countries have certain "generations" that fought against military rule and sacrificed themselves for democracy. In South Korea, for instance, the term "386 Generation" was coined in the 1990s to describe students born in the 1960s who fought for democracy throughout the 1980s. Now in their 50s, many of them are university lecturers, lawyers, newspaper columnists, and even government ministers. In short, they are the country's new political elite, widely admired by the general public for their past sacrifices in pushing the country toward more democracy.

In Thailand, too, people often refer to the "1970s Generation" of pro-democracy activists who took to the streets in October 1973 and forced the military government then led by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn into exile. Three years later, Thanom and some of his associates returned to Thailand—which caused a new wave of student-led protests. These, however, were crushed by the military, and thousands of students, teachers and labour activists took to the jungle, where they joined the Chinese-backed insurgent Communist Party of Thailand, CPT.

Few of them were actually communists, and before long they had fallen out with the CPT's diehard doctrinaire leadership. After a general amnesty in 1980, almost all of them returned to Bangkok and provincial cities, where they too went on to become prominent politicians and literary figures. Nowadays, to have been with the CPT in the 1970s bears no stigma and many from the generation are widely respected because of the hardships they endured in their struggle for democracy.

Now Burma's 88 Generation has come of age, and its recent rise significantly comes at a time when there is more space in society for various political and social groups. They even have their own office in Tingangyun, a Rangoon neighbourhood, with a signboard on the gate. I went there and was received by Min Ko Naing himself and two of his closest colleagues, Kyaw Thin Yuu, who is better known by his nickname "Jimmy", and Ant Bwe Kyaw, once a student activist and now a writer. Like Min Ko Naing, Jimmy also spent nearly 20 years in prison, and Ant Bwe Kyaw was incarcerated for years as well.

For several years, Min Ko Naing was held in solitary confinement in the remote eastern town of Kengtung and there were serious concerns about his health. But neither he, nor any of his comrades, expressed any bitterness over their ordeals. And, in view of recent changes in Burma, they have chosen a middle way: "There are extremists on both sides," Min Ko Naing told me. "There are forces holding the same ideas as in the past, they don't want to give up power to the people. But then there are also those who do not appreciate the changes that have taken place, they are calling for a new revolt." Jimmy said in a similar vein: "On the other side, there are people who want to fight for democracy, but they don't want democracy." After years of fighting the system, they are unwilling to adopt new methods, a new approach to the changing situation, Jimmy argued.

But Min Ko Naing is no naïve idealist. He knows very well that the military despite all the recent hype hasn't really changed that much. After 50 years of military rule, it would also be difficult to expect otherwise. "But we hope to change their mindset," said Min Ko Naing. "And we can only do that by being non-confrontational, by promoting dialogue." Most recently, the 88 Generation sent Jimmy to mediate in the conflict over the copper mine in Monywa. He was successful in having a group of activists released—but failed to get any assurance that the project would be stopped.

In September, Min Ko Naing and four colleagues travelled north to the Hpakan jade mine area in Kachin State, then the scene of heavy fighting between the KIA and government forces. "I want to hear church bells ringing here, not the sound of gunfire. I want to hear school bells ringing, not gunfire," Min Ko Naing told a crowd of villagers, and to hear a Buddhist say that in a predominantly Chris-

## the art in mu

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tian part of the country was well received. But when he sought to talk to the KIA and persuade them to lay down their arms, the mood turned against him. "We need guns to defend ourselves," a Kachin elder told me at the time over e-mail. "We cooperate with the 88 Generation on certain issues such as the Myitsone dam. But they are Burmese politicians. We are Kachins."

The old man's e-mail showed quite clearly how divided Burmese society is, and that national reconciliation is not going to be an easy task in a country that for decades has seen wars and destruction. And despite recent changes in terms of individual liberties and freedom of expression, the military shows no sign of willingness to give up the two areas that matter the most to them: the economy and national security — which includes counter-insurgency campaigns.

But it is also clear that Burma has changed a lot since my last visit inside the country back in 1989. After the military takeover in 1962, a new economic system called the "Burmese Way to Socialism" was introduced, a system which was not based on Soviet or Chinese models. In effect, everything in sight was nationalised and handed over to about twenty military-run state corporations, each of which were meant to generate income for the armed forces.

The first step was to establish so-called "People's Shops" to sell daily commodities to the public. But distribution was so badly organised that the few consumer goods that were produced in the country reached outlying areas months after they had left the factories. Umbrellas appeared when the hot season set in and blankets when the rains began — if anything at all was available. But by adding the word "people" in front of the new "enterprises", and organs of state control, the military tried to give its rule an air of socialism, which they hoped would appeal to the "masses". Beer and alcoholic drinks came from "the People's Brewery and Distillery." Fashion-conscious ladies could have their hair done at "the People's Pride Hairdressing Salon". The public was supposedly protected by "the People's Police Force" and ruled by a number of "People's Councils". And, the neatest of them all, pastries were sold by "the People's Patisseries" while toothpaste came from "the People's Toilet Industry".

The outcome of all this was a flourishing black market — and rapid economic decline, which led to the 1988 uprising. The uprising did manage to bring the "Burmese Way to Socialism" to an end, and force the authorities to allow more political parties than their own, the Burma Socialist Programme Party, BSPP. So something was achieved although the BSPP was eventually replaced by the USDP. Nevertheless, an opposition does exist and it is not illegal. The military-directed "Burmese Way to Socialism" gave way to the military-directed "Burmese Way to Capitalism", which is exercised through UMEH and MEC. But there are still some opportunities for small-scale private enterprises.

On the foreign policy front, Burma's traditional, strict adherence to neutrality and non-alignment was abandoned and first led to a close partnership with China, and now, increasingly, with the West and Japan.

And after years of severe repression after 1988, Burma's pro-democracy movement — coupled with international pressure — has forced the military to relax, but not give up, its control. The protest movement in Monywa would not have been tolerated a few years ago. And the press is freer than at any time since 1962. There will also no doubt be more memorial ceremonies such as the one I went to for Thet Win Aung on October 16. Moreover, Burma, long a forgotten country that attracted only scant attention from the outside world, has time and again since 1988, been front page news in dailies and weeklies all over the world. Changes over the past year have also led many to believe that once the genie is out of the bottle, it will be difficult to put it back in again. Aung San Suu Kyi herself may have said that recent developments are not irreversible. If the situation gets

out of hand as far as the military is concerned, there could be another crackdown. But it will not be easy next time when and if that happens. The spirit shown in Rangoon on October 16 is only one example of how the spirit of defiance and resistance lives on.

Where Burma will stand and what it will be twenty years from now is anybody's guess and it is difficult to make predictions in a country where the situation, in Min Ko Naing's own words, remains "fragile". It could be a smooth transition and lead to more political freedoms and economic liberalisation, which is the hope of many. It could also lead to a renewed bout of repression, which has happened several times in the past after brief moments of openness.

Many people are having great hopes for the 2015 election, which they hope will not be as rigged as the one in 2010. But there are three more years to go before that election, and given the manipulative skills of the military, it is not impossible that the great pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi may have been marginalised by then. As we have seen, she has already lost support from the ethnic minorities, and if she, from her parliamentary seat, proves unable to influence official policies and bring about improvements for ordinary people, her hitherto unblemished standing among the majority Burman population cannot be taken for granted. And without her, the NLD would not enjoy as much popular support as it does today.

The USDP machinery is more powerful and, as Myat Thu Pan pointed out in his commentary for *Mizzima*: "The most glaring NLD weakness is its lack of a designated team of top-rated political strategists and advisers to Aung San Suu Kyi. In contrast, [president] Thein Sein is way ahead of her in having a very savvy group of advisers and four ministers without portfolio to assist him ... he is way ahead in the learning curve."

And then there is the question of the ongoing civil war. I wrote in my history of the civil war, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, which was published in 1994, long before the present changes but when the government first entered into cease-fire agreements with a number of ethnic rebel forces: "The shaky business deals which the ruling military has reached with some rebel groups ... hardly serve as models of ... a [lasting] solution. These agreements have merely frozen the ethnic problems without addressing the underlying issues which caused the minorities to take up arms in the first place."

Those issues include demands for ethnic rights and a federal system, for which there are no provisions under the highly undemocratic, 2008 constitution. As the Kachins have discovered after several rounds of talks with the government — there is no negotiating space for concessions that would jeopardise the military's notion of a unitary state with itself as the most important organ of the state. The civil conflict could easily unravel the present reform process and force the military to play a more direct role in the rule of the country.

And then, almost forgotten in today's debate, is the question of narcotics. Despite international efforts to curb opium production in the Golden Triangle, heroin, and synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines, remain important sources of income for powerful drug lords who are often connected with military officers in mutually beneficial relationships. The drug syndicates would be the last to agree to a change in the *status quo*, from which they have benefitted as long as anyone can remember.

Nevertheless, change has come to Burma and, while walking down the streets of Rangoon for the first time in 23 years, I remembered how it all began in March 1988. It was March 12, a Saturday, and Win Myint, his namesake Win Myint and Kyaw San Win — three young students from the prestigious Rangoon Institute of Technology, RIT — strolled down to a small teashop opposite their campus on Insein Road. It was a simple, country-style bamboo structure with



an earthen floor, not fancy but popular with locals as well as RIT students. A brawl broke out between them and some locals over what kind of music should be played on the teashop's tape recorder: their favourite, Sai Hti Hseng, a singer from the Shan national minority whose songs resembled Bob Dylan's, but set in a Burmese context — or Kaizar, a Burmese crooner who sang only love songs.

The police intervened, but mishandled the situation. A 23-year-old RIT student, Maung Phone Maw, was shot and killed by the police, the first victim of the turbulent events of 1988. From then on, resentment with the authorities grew — and, in August 1988, erupted into a nationwide uprising. Burma would never be the same again. I have no idea where Win Myint, Win Myint and Kyaw San Win are today, and they could never have imagined the avalanche of events they were about to precipitate when they strolled down to that nondescript teashop a Saturday evening 24 years ago.

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# Aung San Suu Kyi

After 1988, to the fore of the Burmese Pro-Democracy movement, leading the popular uprising that was brutally crushed by the military, Aung San Suu Kyi spent fifteen years under house arrest. She is now facing new political responsibilities and challenges.

Many foreigners know her only as the “the Lady”. The Burmese usually call her “Auntie”. For one and a half decades, Aung San Suu Kyi was incarcerated in her own home, an old villa on University Avenue by the shores of Inya Lake in a northern Rangoon suburb. She was there when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in January 1991, and when Burma’s Buddhist monks took to the streets of Rangoon in September 2007 to ask for dialogue with the regime and national reconciliation, they marched past the barricades on the street leading to her house. Now she is free, and her party, the National League for Democracy, NLD, won a landslide victory in the April 2012 by-election. During the election campaign, a mass movement spread across Burma on a scale not seen since the monk-led demonstrations in 2007, and the massive nationwide uprising against the old military regime in 1988 which first brought Aung San Suu Kyi to the fore of the country’s pro-democracy movement. Wherever Aung San Suu Kyi appeared this year on the campaign trail, tens of thousands of people of all ages showed up to listen to her speeches, or just to line the roads and cheer along the routes of her motorcade. Big screen televisions, expensive sound systems and other sophisticated paraphernalia at her rallies were clear indications of support from sections of the private business community, which until recently had links almost exclusively with the military establishment.

This and similar signs have led many outside observers to assume that “reformist” elements within Burma’s quasi-civilian government are strengthening their positions vis-à-vis more “conservative” elements, and that Burma, at long last, may be on its way to becoming a functioning democracy. In an official statement late last month, the EU’s External Action Service counsellor, Robert Cooper, even went as far as characterising recent developments as Burma’s “Berlin Wall moment”.

Not surprisingly, given all the hype, others have a much more down-to-earth interpretation of events. When earlier this year Aung San Suu Kyi was asked by a foreign journalist where Burma’s development towards democracy stands on a scale from one to ten, she replied: “We’re approaching one.”

Now, however, the hard work begins and it has not been an easy transition from being an icon, a heroine representing everything the Burmese craved but did not have — freedom and democracy — to an elected member of the Lower House of the Burmese Parliament. She is still revered by many people across the country, and being the daughter of Burma’s independence hero Aung San, who was assassinated in July 1947 — half a year before the British left the country — certainly helps.

Five months before his death, Aung San signed an agreement with some ethnic leaders with the aim of creating an independent federation of nationalities, but it is doubtful that he would have been able to prevent the country from plunging into civil war after independence. How would he have handled the Karen insurgency, which would have broken out anyway, the Karen not being party to the agreement? Burma’s role in the region? Relations with Britain, the United States, China and Japan? No one knows because he did

not live to become the first leader of an independent Burma. Similarly, no one knows how Aung San Suu Kyi would handle similar problems if she becomes Burma’s next leader, because she has never had a chance to lead the country, and she has been cut off from the outside world for years with only brief stints of freedom. But, somewhat alarmingly, she has indeed said nothing or very little, about the sufferings of the people in the minority areas, where the military continues to terrorise civilians simply because they live in a part of the country where insurgents are active. The global humanitarian agency Church World Service estimated in September 2006 that the military has driven one million ethnic civilians from their homes, of which more than half are still internally displaced inside the country. The situation has not improved since then; on the contrary, now there are tens of thousands more refugees in camps along the border between Kachin State and China.

At the same time, it would be unfair to say that she does not recognise these problems. She is critical of foreign mediation efforts in the civil war because they emphasise development over constitutional reform and rights for Burma’s ethnic minorities. But how can that be done under the terms of the present, undemocratic constitution — and that can be done only with the full support of the military. That may be exactly why she decided to have her party registered and take part in the April by-election.

Since the 1988 uprising she had been demonised within the army, often in a very crude way — but with the unmistakable message to officers and even privates that she is the enemy. For her to meet the soldiers and explain what she stands for was impossible in the past. Now, as an elected MP, she can do exactly that because a quarter of all seats in the Lower House are reserved for the military. She can show them that she has no horns, no tail. “At first, some of them seemed nervous, but they were not hostile,” she told me when we met in her house in Naypyidaw.

She has made some progress since she took her place in the Parliament in May. In August, some of the military representatives were even shifted because they seemed to have become too friendly with her — and so-called hardliners took their places, among them an officer who was identified as the one in charge of crushing the 2007 monks’ movement. Evidently, breaking the power of the military is going to be extremely difficult.

It was evident from my discussions with her that she has her own agenda and refuses to be a pawn. But it is also clear that the government has gained an enormous amount of goodwill by releasing her from house arrest, and letting her travel to Europe and the United States to promote “the new Burma” — without having to give up an inch of its power.

There is still an open question, what will happen at the next general election, scheduled for 2015? Judging from statements by several ethnic leaders and spokespersons, the NLD may already have lost “the ethnic vote” by being vague on issues relating to the civil war and the refugees. Moreover, Aung San Suu Kyi seemed very frail when I met her — and three years from now, she will have turned 70. Her NLD is also not nearly as well organised — and well funded — as the military’s Union Solidarity and Development Party, USDP.

There is no doubt that Aung San Suu Kyi will have her place in Burma’s history — and the world’s — but then perhaps more as a beacon of hope during the dark years of military rule and, in the words of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee in 1991, her “struggle is one of the most extraordinary examples of civil courage in Asia in recent decades. She has become an important symbol in the struggle against oppression.”

As an elected politician, however, she has a long way to go before she becomes a national leader assuming any high office within the state. If indeed she ever gets there.