Aung San Suu Kyi
Leading the Burmese Democracy Movement

Vision and Motivation

Burma was under British control from 1824 to 1948, when General Aung San, the founder of Burma’s modern military, successfully negotiated Burma’s independence from the United Kingdom. But less than a year after Aung San’s political victory, he was assassinated by rivals within the military. In 1962, the military consolidated its power with a coup that overthrew the government and established a military junta led by General Ne Win and his Socialist Program Party. The 48 years since the junta’s rise have been marred by a regime that brought fear and poverty to Burma.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San, was born in 1945, three years before Burma’s independence and her father’s subsequent assassination of her father. After leaving the country in the early 1960s for schooling and a position at the United Nations, Suu Kyi finally returned to Burma in 1988 to be with her ailing mother. Shortly after her return on August 8, 1988, General Ne Win resigned from his leadership position, sparking nationwide protests of Burma’s governance; the military cracked down on these demonstrations, killing thousands of protestors.11

Three weeks later, on August 26, Suu Kyi, already in a role of great political influence as the daughter of General Aung San, called for a democratic government in a speech before half a million people at a rally in Rangoon, then the capital city. After a new military junta, led by General Saw Maung, took control on September 8, Suu Kyi helped establish
the National League for Democracy (NLD) and has remained the party’s Secretary General since its founding on September 27, 1988. But once the government realized that a sizable political movement was forming behind Aung San Suu Kyi’s ideals, she was placed under house arrest on July 21, 1989.

Goals and Objectives

Aung San Suu Kyi has devoted her life to the idea of a free and open Burma, one in which the military junta is replaced by a democratically elected government. In 1988, Suu Kyi believed the best way to achieve that goal was to establish a political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and defeat the military junta in national elections. In the party’s first election in 1990, the NLD won 83% of the parliamentary seats, and Suu Kyi was slated to become Prime Minister; however, the military junta prevented a transition to democracy by rejecting the election results and continuing to rule the country. International political organizations, news outlets and political leaders all recognized the fairness of the 1990 election. When the junta refused to relinquish power, it was clear to both international and local observers that significant violations of civil and political liberties were taking place.

In the face of this direct obstacle, Suu Kyi’s goals shifted, and she began to use her house arrest as a platform to publicize Burmese human rights violations within the international community. Despite a general lack of access to the international political arena and media, Suu Kyi, using the $1.3 million award from her 1991 Nobel Prize, chose to invest in the welfare of the Burmese people and established a national health and education trust. Throughout the 1990s, Suu Kyi, while still under house arrest, continued to communicate with NLD cohorts and the international community through her husband and two sons living in the U.K.
After she was released from house arrest on May 6th, 2002, Suu Kyi immediately began an aggressive national campaign for the NLD, which was tragically shortened after she was sentenced to house arrest again on May 30th, 2003. In the time since her second incarceration, she has continued to garner domestic and international support from countries like the United States and Great Britain, alongside the European Union, who have all aggressively pressed the Burmese government for her release.

**Leadership**

Aung San Suu Kyi’s leadership cannot be attributed solely to her status as the daughter of a political hero. She was deeply influenced by nonviolent civic leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. As a political leader, she has managed to find a comfortable balance between defiance and nonviolence. Despite a government ban on political gatherings of more than four people that began in September 1988, Suu Kyi began a public speaking tour around the country in order to garner support for the NLD; it would not be the first time she would defy government orders, nor the last.

Once while walking back from a speech she had given at a rally in a small town, Suu Kyi and her supporters were suddenly surrounded by soldiers who commanded them to get out of the road. Suu Kyi calmly responded that they would walk down the side of the road instead. Suu Kyi explains, “My thought was, one doesn’t turn back in a situation like this.” Having walked straight up to the soldiers, she stood waiting for them to allow her to pass until a Major suddenly appeared and ordered them to lower their guns. “There is a vast difference in the attitude of a man with a gun in his hand and that of one without a gun in his hand,” avows Suu Kyi. “When someone doesn’t have a gun in his hand, he or she tries harder to use his or her mind, sense of compassion and
intelligence to work out a solution." For her efforts to bring democracy to Burma, Suu Kyi has received a number of the world’s highest accolades, including the Sakharov Prize, the Nobel Peace Prize and the Congressional Gold Medal.

**Civic Environment**

The government of Burma is widely believed to be one of the most repressive in the world. The Burmese regime is far from an electoral democracy; the military junta controls all executive, legislative, and judicial powers, suppresses nearly all basic rights, and commits human rights abuses with impunity. Since rejecting the results of the 1990 elections and preventing the People’s Assembly from convening, the junta has all but paralyzed political parties in Burma. Authorities have jailed many opposition leaders, pressured thousands of members to resign, closed party offices, harassed members’ families, and periodically detained supporters to block planned meetings. According to Freedom House’s 2009 Freedom in the World report, the Burmese government intimidated the population into voting for a constitutional referendum in 2008 that legitimized continued military rule, an election so fraudulent that international observers refused to ratify the results.

Lacking transparency and accountability, government corruption is rampant at both the national and local levels. The military government sharply restricts press freedom, and has also stepped up surveillance at internet cafes and sharply raised the fees for satellite dish licenses. Freedoms of association and assembly are restricted; unauthorized outdoor gatherings of more than five people are banned, and authorities regularly use force to break up or prevent demonstrations and meetings.

**Message & Audience**

Suu Kyi’s core message is a call to nonviolent action in the pursuit of democracy. The influence of Buddhism in Aung San Suu Kyi’s politics has been a topic of scholarly analysis for years, and she believes the idea of mutual forgiveness in Buddhism is central to the function of democratic transition. In an interview, Suu Kyi explained that she
and Gandhi share a belief in the “inevitable sameness about the challenges of authoritarian rule” that gives rise to similar nonviolent tactics among the opposition. Between her beliefs’ Buddhist elements and her familial link to Burma’s revolutionary history, Aung San Suu Kyi’s message was perfectly tailored to resonate with the Burmese populace. The military junta in power clearly had more than enough physical resources to crush any form of resistance by force, regardless of loss of life. Aung San Suu Kyi recognized this and crafted her ideology so that the Burmese population could take action against the government effectively without risking a violent confrontation with the junta’s military forces.

In her famous “Freedom from Fear” speech following the 1990 election, Suu Kyi told supporters, “It is not power that corrupts, but fear.” While under house arrest, it was impossible for her to publicly march with her compatriots, but her ideologies and powerful words were something that no physical restriction could repress. Throughout, she has persevered in her work; “Saints, it has been said, are the sinners that go on trying.” Through a series of large, open rallies and carefully worded letters to the members of the junta from both Suu Kyi personally and the leaders of the NLD during her imprisonment, she managed to galvanize the population towards the pursuit of democracy safely and effectively.

**Outreach Activities**

Since the late 1980s, Burmese activists and their allies have succeeded in creating a vast network of supporters; indeed, without a diverse umbrella of domestic and international support, the Burmese Democratic Movement would not stand tall in the face of oppression. Organized support has developed worldwide, as is evident in the Burma Global Action Network’s yearly event for political change that had 10,000 participants in the United Kingdom last year. This sparked a group of
world powers to call for the release of Burmese political prisoners, including Suu Kyi, showing that the struggle of the Burmese activists had not been in vain.[iv]

Though much has been done to combat the junta, the Burmese people continue to live under a ruthless military regime. Parliamentary elections held on November 7, 2010 had the potential to usher in a new era of Burmese politics, but blatant fraud enabled the military to consolidate their control over government institutions.[i] Six days after the election, Suu Kyi was released from seven and a half years of house arrest to crowds of jubilant supporters. Many feel that her release may force the government to accept greater accountability for its actions and facilitate a transition towards democracy. With her release, Suu Kyi is actively urging pro-democracy movements to form coalitions, “I don’t think that things just happen. We have to make it happen. We want to use this. We want to use this as an opportunity for greater unity and greater understanding between the various groups that all want a democracy.”

Suu Kyi believes that one of the key groups who could facilitate a transition to democracy are the youth and particularly, young members of the Burmese military. She argues that it is a rise in technology and globalization which will lead to their allegiances shifting, “The age is on our side in that sense because it is the age of technology. [The government] cannot keep even these young people, boys, cut off completely from the rest of the world. And I think they are going to have many opportunities now that we never had in the past simply because of the technological revolution.”

Suu Kyi’s continued commitment to nonviolence, combined with the unwavering love and support of the Burmese people, has earned the Burmese Democratic Movement solidarity and respect throughout the free world.[iii]
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**Footnotes**


[8] Ibid.


[10] Ibid. 297.


[12] Ibid. 183.


