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# The Idea of Freedom in Burma and the Political Thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

Josef Silverstein\*

THERE is a serious political struggle in progress in Burma today which turns on the idea of freedom. Since September 18, 1988, when the military violently suppressed a peaceful democratic revolution, its leaders, organized as the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC), have ruled by martial law. Although SLORC allowed a free and fair election on May 27, 1990 and the National League for Democracy (NLD) was chosen overwhelmingly to form a new parliament and establish democratic rule, the decision of the people was ignored and the parliament was not allowed to form. Instead, SLORC proceeded to perpetuate *its* rule by pressuring delegates *it* selected to a national convention *it* formed to write a constitution *it* dictated, to insure *its* goals would be achieved.<sup>1</sup>

Do the Burmese people have the right to decide how to be governed and by whom, or do those who seized power by force have the right to construct the political forms, make the rules and govern as they see fit? Is freedom, in the broadest sense, a part of Burmese thought and tradition or is it a relatively recent addition, claimed only by the Westernized intelligentsia and not by the majority of the people? Is freedom individual or collective?

These and other questions are not new; they were raised during the Burmese quest for independence and, later, in the struggle against authoritarianism of both the Left and the Right. When given the opportunity through free and open elections, an overwhelming majority of Burmese uphold the standard of freedom and popular rule against those who would deny it.

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\* The original draft of this revised and updated paper was read at the Conference on the Idea of Freedom in Asia, held at the Australian National University, July 4–5, 1994.

<sup>1</sup> “Statement of Daniel Aung, Member of SLORC’s National Convention Panel of Chairmen and Political Party Group on the Reasons why he left the Convention and came to the liberated area of Manerplaw” (Manerplaw, May 1, 1994, Mimeographed).

Today, there is a single dominant voice in defense of freedom and a return to democratic self-rule. When Daw Aung San Suu Kyi stepped forward in August 1988, in the midst of the popular peaceful revolution, she instantly became the leader who united the people in their quest for freedom and democracy. From the moment she moved into the political arena, she spoke unflinchingly to those in power and challenged their right to rule and deny the freedom which the people won from the British four decades earlier. As the daughter of Burma's leader, Aung San, who brought the nation to the edge of independence in 1947 only to be assassinated before achieving that goal, she appeared to have picked up her father's mantle and was ready to lead Burma's second struggle for freedom — this time against the army her father created.

On July 20, 1989, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest and denied freedom to communicate with family, political followers and party, although no formal charges were filed and no trial was held. Over time, the terms of her confinement were modified; on July 10, 1995, she was released and given the same limited rights other people in Burma were allowed.

It is the thesis of this paper that the idea of freedom in Burma has two sources, one deeply embedded in Burma's religion and culture and the other, ideas and values brought to Burma by the British rulers following their conquest. By the beginning of the twentieth century the two streams merged and, today, the idea of freedom in Burma is a mixture of the two traditions.

A further argument of this paper is that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's idea of freedom is in the mainstream of Burmese thought and, therefore, easily understood and widely accepted by the people. From the outset of her involvement in the peaceful political struggle, she offered a fresh vision of a free Burma where the people might enjoy self-rule and basic human and civil rights. The Burma military rulers and their supporters abroad often say that political freedom is an alien idea with no roots in Burma. But, as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has argued, the idea of freedom in Burma has its roots in the Buddhism, customs and traditions even though it was not claimed in its own right before the advent of colonial rule.

#### THE ROOTS AND EVOLUTION OF DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS

Theravada Buddhism, the faith of an overwhelming majority of Burmese, centers on a basic contradiction: all living things are lashed to the wheel of rebirth but only man has the power and freedom to escape if he accepts (1) the four noble truths regarding suffering, attachment, impermanence and escape and (2) the eight-fold path, the way of salvation. "Each man has in him the potential to realize the truth through his own will

and endeavor and to help others to realize it.”<sup>2</sup> The Buddha also taught that men must think for themselves and test the truth of things they hear and are told as truth.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Burmese Buddhists traditionally believed that the socio-political system was something they could not effect. Although they believed that everyone and everything was subject to the law of impermanence and change — a fundamental assumption of Buddhism — they did not speculate about alternative political forms in the secular world. Since their thoughts and actions were concentrated on activity in this existence so as to improve those in the next, they found no reason to reflect upon or concern themselves with the political and social system in which they existed. Thus, Burmese Buddhists never made the intellectual leap from freedom in the religious realm to the political.

Burmese tradition incorporated the idea of a strong state under an absolute monarch. Many believe that Buddhist political thought argues that men originally lived in a state of nature where they were virtuous, respected the rights of others and fulfilled their obligations consciously. However, over time, their behavior degenerated to anarchy and terror and, to overcome this, they united to elect one amongst them to be king and entrusted him with power to enforce the laws and maintain order. A good king was “expected to be charitable, moral, sacrificing, just, humble, penitent, non-wrathful, nonviolent, patient and harmless.”<sup>4</sup>

But once kingship was established, its holders assumed unbridled authority and their power rested, not on contract and election, but on control of the military, wealth, territory and charisma. Obedience to the ruler became a quasi-religious duty.

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<sup>2</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Winston L. King, *A Thousand Lives Away: Buddhism in Contemporary Burma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 117–18.

<sup>4</sup> The “contract theory of the State” in Buddhist thought is not to be confused with the Western liberal formulation. Whereas scholars, such as Balkristna G. Gokale, in “Early Buddhist Kingship,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (Nov. 1966), pp. 16–22, advanced the argument that kingship evolved from a decision of the community to raise one amongst them to uphold and enforce the *dhamma* and the moral order, William Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, No. 34, 1990), p. 71, offers a different theory. “The ultimate source of sovereignty in Burmese political thought could never have resided in the people because the people were by definition immoral. The consecration oath of Burmese kings was actually a pledged [sic] of loyalty to *dhamma*, wherein lay the ultimate source of authority. The legitimacy of the state was rooted in the enforcement of the moral law in society.”

In theory the state, as a reflection of the king, was strong and controlled from the center; in practice, it left a great deal of room for individual freedom. Office holding in Burma was dependent upon the king's whim, and a commission to hold office could come to an end at any time, and certainly with the king's death. Each king could void all acts and orders of his predecessors; each change of kings saw an administrative breakdown as appointees had to receive new commissions.<sup>5</sup> Each new ruler adopted the system of his predecessor as his own, and never thought about how to improve and make it more lasting. The Burma state proved to be only as strong as the king who controlled it.

Freedom in the system was to be seen at the village level. Even when the system was under a strong king, his representative had limited powers — tax collection, command performance of services and adjudication of disputes. In most other matters concerning the peoples' lives, he did not interfere. With only short periods of strong kings, the direct authority of the monarch was felt only sporadically by local leaders and their followers, especially in areas lying at great distances from the palace; this resulted in the villagers controlling most of their own affairs.

Although Burmese village society was composed of two broad social classes, *ahmudan* — those who were obligated for military or other service — and *athi* — those who paid rent for land and were obligated for various services which might be demanded by their patrons or protectors, there was mobility between classes and easy intermarriage.<sup>6</sup> Women enjoyed great freedom in marriage, divorce, inheritance and property ownership. The people were not tied to the land; and given the fact that the countryside was underpopulated, individuals could escape from too demanding patrons by moving away and swearing allegiance to a new protector.

The minorities, living in the hills surrounding the Burma heartland, who accepted the nominal suzerainty of the Burman monarchs, in fact, enjoyed great freedom through continuing to govern themselves in their traditional ways, practicing and preserving their cultures and social institutions and using their own languages.

In Burma, before British rule, freedom was implicit in Buddhism and explicitly practiced by Burmans and non-Burmans alike without ever being extracted and claimed as an independent good.

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<sup>5</sup> Koenig, *Burmese Polity*, pp. 92–93; 103–07.

<sup>6</sup> J. S. Furnivall, *The Political Economy of Burma*, 2d rev. ed. by J. R. Andrus (Rangoon: Burma Book Club, 1938), pp. 38–39.

## THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION UNDER BRITISH RULE

British colonial rule spawned a revolution in thought and action. It introduced a whole new way of looking at politics and society. Because the colonial system was concerned only with the here and now and not with the hereafter, it challenged the fatalism of those who believed that nothing could be done about this existence and concerned themselves only with the next.

The British quickly proved that they were more efficient than their indigenous predecessors in establishing and maintaining authoritarian rule. Their system rested on important principles: that the state and its rulers were of this world; that authority was based on power and not divine inspiration; that the state and its officers could be challenged when either transcended the legal limits. The British did not come to Burma to introduce Western ideas of liberty and freedom; those and other ideas entered Burma as a by-product of their authority and concern for the rule of law, property rights and order.

The initial priorities of the new system were to provide strong administration and domestic tranquility in order to encourage investment, trade, development of economic resources and profit. To run the state as cheaply as possible, the British encouraged private investment, mainly from Europe, to develop and expand the economy and allowed Indians, with whom they had worked for more than two centuries, to come to Burma and fill the lower ranks of the administration, police and military and serve as money-lenders in the villages and shopkeepers in the cities.

Church and State were separated; the British rulers, not wishing to interfere or assume responsibility for an alien faith, cast the Buddhist clergy adrift.<sup>7</sup>

Monastic education continued in the rural areas under the *sangha* (order of monks). However, the knowledge and skills imparted were largely unusable for employment in government and business. To teach new ideas, skills and language, the colonial rulers encouraged Christian churches to establish schools and provide an English education. In addition to math, science and the English language, the missionary schools included the study of British history, thought and institutions which exalted the political success of the British in building a strong state at home and an empire abroad. This was meant to inculcate respect for an appreciation of what colonial rule meant.

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 43–57.

The British had no intention of making Burmans into Englishmen and assimilating them. The colonial rulers recognized that they were displacing a value and social system with which the majority of the people still identified, and that new Western ideas and practices were dividing the local population between those who adopted the new and those who held tightly to the old. To rally support for Britain during World War I, the colonial government tried to unite the contradictory ideas of loyalty to empire and patriotism to Burma through a policy called the “Imperial Idea,” but had little success.<sup>8</sup>

It was in this new and changing context that the idea of freedom took on meaning for the Burmans. Set in a legal and constitutional framework, it theoretically applied to all: individual and group; ruler and ruled; indigenous and alien. To use and enjoy it required knowledge of the law, the political system and experience.

While the British found it convenient administratively to join Burma to India as a province, it quickly worked to their disadvantage politically as the emerging Burman elite emulated the Indians in their own demands for political reform, greater participation in governance and more freedom. By 1923, Burma, like India, had a partially elected legislative council and ministers in the Governor’s Council; under the 1935 constitution, Burma was separated from India and given responsible government wherein four Burmans served as prime ministers.

Before the beginning of the present century, the new emerging Burman elite began to use the political freedoms, implicit in the new institutions, in defense of tradition. In 1897, it sponsored nonclerical Buddhist schools with a Western-type curriculum modeled after the missionary schools. Early in this century it formed the Young Men’s Buddhist Association, on the Western model of the YMCA, and launched a campaign to revive Buddhism amongst Burmans; and later, to campaign against desecration of and disrespect for religious buildings and areas by non-Buddhist visitors.<sup>9</sup>

Between the First and Second World Wars, freedom and political development went hand-in-hand, but followed two different paths; while the urban population moved in the mainstream of constitutionalism, liberal democracy and independence, the rural population moved in a different direction — one which led back to the values and institutions of the precolonial period.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> During World War I, the British sought to promote the “Imperial Idea,” by which the contradictory ideas of loyalty to empire and patriotism to Burma were united. See John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 195–99.

<sup>9</sup> Maung Maung Pye, *Burma in the Crucible* (Madras: Khittaya Publishing House, no date), pp. 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> For a good brief discussion of the local politics of this period and the division of the General Council of Burmese Association into two groups, see Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of Revolution 1939–1946* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 7–15; and Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 282–98.

The Westernized Burmans in the mainstream exercised their freedom through party formation, voting, participation in parliament and a variety of direct action activities. The younger Western-educated Burmans expanded the idea of freedom through the use of strikes to achieve political and social ends, the use of the Burmese language in writing and publication to revive interest and pride, the study and adoption of Western literature to acquire world knowledge and the mobilization of workers and peasants for economic and social ends. Within this mainstream, the competing ideologies of Europe — communism, fascism, nationalism, democracy and others — found adherents and inspired the formation of local political movements. The British tried to channel some of these developments within the institutional changes which gave Burmans greater participation in politics and curb those which they saw as a threat to their rule and long-term political/economic interests.

Freedom also applied to communication: speech, publication and writing. Young Burman intellectuals formed the *Dobama* (We Burman) movement which demanded that its members be addressed with the salutation, *Thakin* (master); advocated the revival and updating of the Burmese language; and quickly transformed the cultural message to a political nationalist one by advocating, “Burma for the Burmese.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to newspapers in Burmese, Western novels were adapted to Burman locales and given a local veneration. They gradually gave way to Burman stories, characters and issues. By the end of the 1930s, novels, critical of foreign rule, modern Buddhist monks who cloaked violation of vows under their yellow robes and other local subjects indicated how widespread freedom of speech had become.

Freedom in the mainstream meant many things — personal, social, intellectual and political — and led to greater participation by the people in political organizations, elections and direct action outside the legal limits. Together, they reflected a fundamental change in the popular outlook toward politics. Man, they were coming to believe, could effect his political condition in this existence and it did not depend upon his *kharma*.

A second stream of politically aroused Burmans looked in a different direction. Using their new-found political freedoms, they organized *Wunthanu Athins* (nationalist groups), offshoots of the national General Council of Burmese Associations, primarily in the rural areas, against corruption, taxation and other government and private activities which were seen as contrary to traditional Burmese/Buddhist values. They rejected the emphasis placed on Western political development by their

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<sup>11</sup> Khin Yi, *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, Monograph No. 2, 1988).



urban counterparts and sought remedies to their own problems — the cultivation and sale of agricultural products in an economic system of landlords, tenancy, moneylending and the British system of taxation with its penalties of being displaced from the land under laws they did not fully understand and which always seemed to work against them.

Many Western-educated *Wunthanu* leaders found themselves more in tune with the politically active monks than with their urban counterparts. Contrary to the traditional restrictions on the *sangha* — not to become involved in politics — the *General Council Sangha Sametggi*, a political organization of monks, played a strong role in the rural areas, mobilizing and agitating against British rule and preaching a message that colonialism threatened Buddhism. While their sermons and political activity were rejected by conservative monks and Buddhist orders, they found a wide audience amongst the peasants, especially amongst women. Two in particular, U Ottama and U Wisara, gained national attention; their arrest and imprisonment only strengthened their hold on their followers, and death in jail made them martyrs in the national struggle for independence.<sup>12</sup>

Out of this movement came the most direct challenge to British rule, the Saya San Revolt in 1930. Led by an ex-monk, it sought to force the British out and restore the monarchy. By using magic and amulets and imitating some of the royal ritual to claim the former throne, the revolt, mainly in central/lower Burma, drew modest rural support and hardly any from the urban areas. Its failure marked the end of inward and backward-looking movements.<sup>13</sup>

In the minority areas surrounding Burma proper, the people continued to live apart from the Burmans. While the latter moved along the constitutional line toward eventual dominion status, the Shan States were grouped together in a separate federation which reinforced the perpetuation of traditional rule. The changes in education and the opportunities to learn about and exercise political freedom in the Burman area were not available in the hill areas; there, traditional patterns of behavior existed and only the sons of chiefs, who were educated in Western schools, acquired a different outlook.

#### CHALLENGES TO THE IDEA OF FREEDOM AND THE POLITICS OF INDEPENDENCE

The short interlude of Japanese control of Burma left a legacy which seemed to reverse the growing trend toward freedom. Just prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War, when Aung San secretly left Burma to seek foreign help in freeing his country, it is believed that, following his arrival in Japan,

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<sup>12</sup> Cady, *Modern Burma*, p. 231; Smith, *Religion and Politics*, pp. 92–107.

<sup>13</sup> Cady, *Modern Burma*, pp. 309–18; Patricia Herbert, *The Hsaya San Rebellion (1930–1932) Reappraised* (Melbourne: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asia Studies, 1982), working paper no. 27.

he wrote “Blue Print for Burma” which convinced his hosts that he shared their ideas of a strong totalitarian state.

What we want is a strong state administration as exemplified in Germany and Italy. There shall be only one nation, one state, one party, one leader. There shall be no parliamentary [sic] opposition, no nonsense of individualism. Everyone must submit to state [sic] which is supreme over the individual.<sup>14</sup>

During the early war period, he was not alone in employing the language of fascism. Dr. Ba Maw, the wartime head of state, included it in his speeches and the Burma wartime Declaration of Independence. With the approval of his Japanese advisors, it said,

The New State of Burma, is...established upon the principle of Burmese unity in one blood, one voice and one leader. It was national disintegration which destroyed the Burmese people in the past and they are determined that this shall never happen again.<sup>15</sup>

When Aung San’s essay is read together with the total body of his writings and speeches of both the war and postwar period, it is clear that the ideas in “Blue Print for Burma” were not central to this thought. The wartime statements and writings of Dr. Ba Maw, too, were a reflection of the times and a direct response to Japanese demands.<sup>16</sup> There is no evidence that dictatorship in place of freedom was the desire of these and other leaders as a permanent condition in Burma.

In 1944, Burmese military and civilian leaders met secretly and formed a revolutionary organization and issued a manifesto. It had two objectives: the expulsion of the Japanese and the writing of a constitution for a free Burma. They gave greatest emphasis to the building of a free society wherein the people would enjoy the freedom and rights common to people living in free societies as well as from their ancient traditions. The manifesto called for the freedoms of person, speech and thought; it also called for “freedom to follow and develop one’s own language and culture.” It anticipated some kind of union with the hill peoples by calling for “the

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<sup>14</sup> Aung San, “Blue Print for Burma,” in Josef Silverstein, *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1993), pp. 19–22. See headnote about its disputed origin. Dr. Maung Maung cited it as the theoretical basis for the military dictatorship then in existence in Burma. Maung Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1969), pp. 298–99.

<sup>15</sup> “Declaration of Independence of Burma,” *Burma*, vol. 1, no. 1, (Sept. 1994) (Rangoon: The Foreign Affairs Association). For the views on this by the man who said he wrote it, see, Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, p. 327.

<sup>16</sup> Thakin Nu, *Burma Under the Japanese: Pictures and Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1954), pp. 54–59; Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma*, pp. 95–97; 279–82.

state to provide adequate safeguards in respect of economic, social and political interests of the minorities."<sup>17</sup>

The wartime goals of freedom and rights were realized four years later, in 1948, when a freely chosen constituent assembly wrote Burma's first constitution for their forthcoming independent state.

The political activity in the Burma heartland immediately after the war was not matched in the hill areas. But the war had its impact upon the hill minorities and they were of different minds about their future. Some feared the prospect of an independent Burma under Burman rule and sought either independence or continued British rule. In 1946, and again a year later, several leaders of different minority groups met at Panglong, in the Shan States, to discuss their political future; at the second meeting, several freely agreed to join the Burmans in forming an independent federal union.

The Karens were not among those who opted for union. They traditionally feared Burman domination and looked to the British for protection; they still had vivid memories of assaults by units of the young Burma army in 1942. During the war years, Aung San worked to convince the Karens that in a future independent Burma the two could live together peacefully, and the Karens could share power and enjoy equal status with the Burmans. Despite his efforts, the majority of Karen leaders opted out of the proposed union. The question of the political future of the Karens was not resolved at the constitutional convention; and while the constitutional authors left the issue of their place in independent Burma to be resolved after independence, Burma-Karen armed conflict grew. In 1949, the Karens went into open revolt.

When Burma became a free nation in 1948, the idea of freedom was well established. The two traditions had come together; from the pre-colonial past, man inherited the idea that he was free to determine his future destiny by the way he lived; from the colonial past he learned that government was not divinely ordained and unchangeable. Freedom to achieve things in this world became as real as freedom to achieve them in the next.

#### THE QUEST FOR UNITY AND DEMOCRACY: THE TRIUMPH OF DICTATORSHIP

Written in haste before resolution of socially divisive problems, the constitution included many contradictions giving rise to unrest, revolt and anti-freedom forces which, eventually, overthrew it. It proved easier to identify and define the idea of freedom than to translate it into specific political institutions and processes.

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<sup>17</sup> AFPFL, *From Fascist Bondage to New Democracy: The New Burma in the New World* (Rangoon: Nay Win Kyi Press, 1946 [?]), pp. 13-15.

Two issues suggest the dimensions of the problem. Freedom and equality were expressed in the granting of religious freedom to all, regardless of their faith; at the same time, the constitution declared that the "State also recognized the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union."<sup>18</sup> Many Buddhists took this to mean that the faith should be given the status of the state religion. In 1961, the parliament passed a constitutional amendment carrying out this objective. But, instead of uniting the nation, it divided the society because non-Buddhists saw the amendment as ending the guarantee of religious equality and freedom. Even the passage of another amendment, to assure members of other faiths that their rights and privileges still were protected, did not heal the social wounds.

An even thornier issue arose over whether or not the ethnic minorities and the Burman majority enjoyed equal political freedom and power. Was Burma a federal or unitary state? In an address to the 1947 preconstitutional convention, Aung San said, "In my opinion, it will not be feasible to set up a Unitary State. We must set up a Union with properly regulated provisions as should be made to safeguard the rights of National Minorities."<sup>19</sup>

But shortly after the Union of Burma came into existence, the Attorney General said, while arguing a case before the Supreme Court, that Burma's system of government was federal in theory and unitary in practice. His statement only confirmed what many of the larger minority groups had come to realize as they sought to preserve and protect their cultures in their own areas against the policies of Burmanization emanating from Rangoon. This led to misunderstandings, widespread revolt, calls for secession and the creation of independent states. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations such as these together with new anti-democratic, anti-freedom forces threatened to destroy the new state and constitution.

On the political left, the Burma Communist party sought to overthrow the government and erect a Marxist dictatorship; on the right, various indigenous ethnic groups rose in revolt either to secede from the union or gain greater autonomy in their historic areas. In addition, Nationalist Chinese troops, seeking to find refuge from their Communist enemies, entered Burma and refused to be disarmed or accept Burmese rule. To defend against these challenges, the government turned to the military to hold the nation together and protect it from its enemies instead of relying

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<sup>18</sup> Constitutional Assembly, *The Constitution of the Union of Burma* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Printing and Stationery, 1948), no. 21 (1, 2).

<sup>19</sup> Josef Silverstein, *Political Legacy*, p. 158.

on political means to achieve solutions and voluntary compliance.<sup>20</sup> The Burma armed forces misused martial law in the war zones and their actions clashed with the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of the people in the area. This undermined the public's faith in the federal system and the central government in Rangoon. Worst of all, it laid the foundation for the belief amongst the members of the military that only they were loyal defenders of the constitution and protectors of the state, and they came to see themselves as outside and above the law.

Also during the first decade of independence, there were men in power who used their authority without regard for the restraints and restrictions embodied in the constitution and the laws of the land. Many abused their mandate to govern by passing legislation without adequate debate or consideration of the rights of the opposition, by interfering with civil servants who tried to perform their duties impartially, and by using police power to intimidate the press and public.

Offsetting these and other abuses were the efforts of justices of the High and Supreme Courts to establish a tradition of due process and protection of the individual from arbitrary government action. In doing so, they ruled against the government's use of preventive detention and other legal devices which violated personal freedom in the state's pursuit of its goals.<sup>21</sup> If the idea of freedom was not upheld and implemented fully in Burma's time of troubles, it was still the ideal for which most of the political and intellectual leaders strove.

From independence until 1962, the constitutional anchor held firm and the Burma ship of state resisted the challenges to freedom. The man who stood at the helm during most of the period and symbolized the ideas of freedom drawn from Buddhist and Western liberal traditions was U Nu, the successor to Aung San and the elected prime minister during most of the democratic period.

Nu's values and ideas were squarely in the mainstream of Burmese thought. Using Buddhist stories and drawing upon the Buddha's teachings, Nu sought to explain how free and democratic societies worked, and taught the people that where government's power was limited and exercised in conformity with the law, man could fulfill himself both as a Buddhist and as a citizen.

For Nu, the rule of law was essential for the protection of freedom. There were two kinds of law, he once said:

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<sup>20</sup> Josef Silverstein, "Politics in the Shan State: The Question of Secession from the Union of Burma," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Nov. 1958), pp. 43-58.

<sup>21</sup> Winston Christian, "Burma's New Constitution and the Supreme Court," *Tulane Law Review*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1951), pp. 47-59.

Those that guarantee the freedom and equality of the individual against the state and those that ensure that individual freedom is exercised without affecting the rights and freedom of one's neighbours or the orderly working of society. ... [T]his sense of the rule of law must be created in the minds of both the ruler and the ruled, and there must be constant effort to develop it and strengthen it until it becomes a part of our very life and thought.<sup>22</sup>

Nu contrasted voluntary obedience to law and forced compliance. The free way was obedience to law; the forced way was at the point of the gun. In a democracy, he said, compliance was secured through the rule of law; in a totalitarian society it was gained by force and fear.

In 1962, the constitutional anchor was cut loose. Freedom and limited government gave way to order and discipline under a military-led totalitarian dictatorship. General Ne Win, who seized power, drew his ideas and values from his military training under the Japanese and his years as the unchallenged leader of Burma's armed forces.

Until 1962, Ne Win's public statements and those of the military indicated that he and the armed forces were constitutionalists and accepted democracy and civilian authority. Following a 1958 split in the governing party, which threatened a new civil war, Ne Win accepted Nu's invitation to form a temporary caretaker government to restore and maintain order while organizing and carrying out a new election. Speaking as a constitutionalist, he told parliament, "we must work to establish widespread and effective enforcement of the laws of the land. ... In the performance of this task... my Government will fully respect the Constitutional guarantees concerning justice, freedom and equality. The underlying policy of my Government is that all those people who respect the Constitution will receive all the rights and privileges that they are entitled to. But, those who break the law will be severely dealt with."<sup>23</sup>

Four years later, the general and the armed forces dropped all pretenses of loyalty to the constitution and defense of freedom as they overthrew the elected government, abrogated the constitution and erected a military dictatorship. The military rulers, now organized as the Revolutionary Council declared,

Burma's "parliamentary democracy" has not only failed to serve our socialist development but also, due to its very defects, weaknesses and loopholes, its abuses and the absence of a mature public opinion, lost sight and deviated from the socialist aims.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Burma Weekly Bulletin* (new series), vol. 8, no. 50 (April 5, 1960), p. 459.

<sup>23</sup> *Is Trust Vindicated?* (Rangoon: Director of Information, Government of the Union of Burma, 1960), p. 548.

<sup>24</sup> Revolutionary Council, *Burmese Way to Socialism* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1962), para. 14.

For twelve years, the Revolutionary Council governed without legal restraints and without popular consent. In 1974, it handed over power to the party it created and controlled, the Burma Socialist Program party, to rule under a constitution it wrote. The new fundamental law recognized no inalienable rights; rights, which were granted, were linked to duties. The military rulers sought to stamp out freedom and, in the peaceful revolution of 1988, the people sought to reclaim it.

#### THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF DAW AUNG SAN SUU KYI

The synthesis of the two traditions is clearly expressed in the essay, "In Quest of Democracy." Writing in 1988, before her arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi found nothing new in the rhetoric of the opponents of freedom and democracy who questioned the ability of the people to judge what was best for the nation and condemned the liberal ideas drawn from the West as "un-Burmese." She argued that even without the sophisticated techniques and methods of political and economic analysis common to the West, the Burmese could find answers to the terrible political and socio-economic conditions in Burma

by turning to the words of the Buddha on the four causes of decline and decay; failure to recover that which has been lost, omission to repair that which has been damaged, disregard for the need of a reasonable economy and the elevation to leadership of men without morality or learning,

and apply them to their situation. Put in modern terms, she said,

when democratic rights had been lost to military dictatorship sufficient efforts had not been made to regain them, moral and political values had been allowed to deteriorate without concerted attempts to save the situation, the economy had been badly managed, and the country had been ruled by men without integrity and wisdom."<sup>25</sup>

For her, the 1988 peaceful revolution was an attempt by the people to act as the Buddha had taught and take back their right to rule and reverse the process of decline.

For Aung San Suu Kyi, the contradiction between Buddhism and dictatorship begins with the question about the nature of man. Buddhism, she argued, places the highest value on man who alone has the ability to attain the supreme state of Buddhahood. "Each man has in him the potential to realize it." But under despotic rule, man is valued least, as a "faceless, mindless — and helpless — mass to be manipulated at will."<sup>26</sup>

If man is endowed with reason and has the innate ability to realize his potential, then the political system and social environment must allow him freedom to pursue that end. For Aung San Suu Kyi, only in a democratic

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<sup>25</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, pp. 167–79.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

society can man truly exercise his freedom. Democracy acknowledges the right to differ as well as the duty to settle differences peacefully.

The idea of law and order, she wrote, is frequently misused as an excuse for oppression. In Burmese, the idea is officially expressed as *nyein-wut-pi-pyar* (quiet — crouched — crushed — flattened). Aung San Suu Kyi noted that a prominent Burmese writer drew the conclusion that this “made for an undesirable state of affairs, one which militated against the emergence of an alert, energetic, progressive citizenry.”<sup>27</sup> She, on the other hand, equated law with justice, order and the discipline of a people, satisfied that justice has been done. This could only exist, she argued, where the people’s elected representative made laws and the administrators had no power to set them aside and replace them with arbitrary decrees. Drawing on Buddhist precepts, she wrote that the concept of law was based on *dhamma*, righteousness or virtue, not on the power to impose harsh and inflexible rules on a defenseless people. Toward the end of the essay she summed up the blend of the two traditions by saying that “in their quest of democracy the people of Burma explore not only the political theories and practices of the world outside their country, but also the spiritual and intellectual values that have given shape to their own environment.”<sup>28</sup>

Implicit in her writings and speeches is the idea that freedom is a universal idea, which was given modern approval in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN in 1948. As she noted, Burma voted for the resolution with no reservations and because it was consistent with the thought and goals of the nation’s founding fathers at the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) preconvention meeting (1947), the constituent assembly (1947) and the language of the constitution.<sup>29</sup>

But, for Aung San Suu Kyi, freedom was more than constitutional guarantees, it was also psychological. In an address which, because of her imprisonment, she could not deliver at the European Parliament, in response to being awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, she spoke to the people of Burma who lived under corrupting military rule since 1962. She wrote that, as important as the traditional ideas of freedom are, man is not truly free if he lives in fear. “It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.” Fear stifles and slowly destroys all sense of right and wrong. Fear contributes to corruption; “when fear is rife corruption in all forms becomes entrenched.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Information, *Burma’s Fight for Freedom* (Rangoon, 1948). See AFPFL Preconvention for the original fourteen points (arts. 6, 7, p. 58); for the actual Seven Points Directive Resolution, see art. 4, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 181.



Aung San Suu Kyi demonstrated her courage in the face of threat and showed that she would not be intimidated or made fearful. It was her model of courage which sustained the people who looked to her for leadership. Recalling something her father said in an earlier time of troubles,

Democracy is the only ideology which is consistent with freedom. It is an ideology that promotes and strengthens peace. It is therefore the only ideology that promotes and strengthens peace. It is therefore the only ideology we should aim for.<sup>31</sup>

She said that is the reason why she was participating in the struggle for freedom and democracy.

Aung San Suu Kyi has given much thought to the question of whether or not the priority of economic before political growth is the way to bring happiness and democratic rule to Burma. Starting from the Burmese saying, "Morality (*sila*) can be upheld only when the stomach is full," she argued that the maxim was "hardly a faithful reflection of what actually goes on in human society." While conceding that the need to survive has driven men to crime and immorality, "it is equally evident that the possession of a significant surplus of material goods has never been a guarantee against covetousness, rapacity and the infinite variety of vice and pain that spring from such passion."

Given that man's greed can be as pit as bottomless as his stomach and that a psychological sense of deprivation can persist beyond the point where basic needs have been adequately met, it can hardly be expected that an increase in material prosperity alone would ensure even a decline in economic strife, let alone a mitigation of those myriad other forces that spawn earthly misery.<sup>32</sup>

For Aung San Suu Kyi, true development involves much more than mere economic growth.

At its heart there must be a sense of empowerment and inner fulfillment. This alone will ensure that human and cultural values remain paramount in a world where political leadership is often synonymous with tyranny and the rule of a narrow elite. People's participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time.<sup>33</sup>

It is against this background that her recently expressed ideas about foreign investment in Burma must be considered. Writing in *Mainichi Daily News* of February 5, 1996 she said it was not yet time for foreign investment in Burma. Instead, she argued, businesses should invest in democracy for Burma if only for the sake of their profits. "Businesses that frame their

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<sup>31</sup> "Speech at Shwedagon Pagoda," Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 200.

<sup>32</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Toward a True Refuge* (Oxford: Refugee Studies Programme with the Perpetua Press, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Empowerment for a Culture of Peace and Development* (Address to the World Commission on Culture and Development, Manila, 21 Nov. 1994, Mimeographed), p. 10.

investment policies with a view to promoting an open secure political system based on confidence and credibility will find they are also promoting an open, secure economy based on confidence and credibility where optimum returns can be expected by investors.”

Aung San Suu Kyi believes that the resolution of all problems and differences is best achieved through free discussion or dialogue.

I have always asked for dialogue. . . But dialogue is not a debate. There will be disagreements and arguments. Dialogue does not involve winners and losers. It is not a question of losing face. It involves finding the best solutions for the country.<sup>34</sup>

In expressing her ideas about freedom, dialogue and democracy, she has said that while there is no one form of democracy, that it will have its own characteristics in each country where it exists, there is a basic requirement that the people should be sufficiently empowered to be able to participate significantly in its governance. “Without these rights, democratic institutions will be but empty shells incapable of reflecting the aspirations of the people and unable to withstand the encroachment of authoritarianism.”<sup>35</sup>

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s leadership and political principles were put to the test in November 1995, when she pulled her party’s representatives out of the national convention. In 1993, SLORC convened a national convention of hand-picked delegates to draw up the principles for the future constitution and directed them to declare that the military shall have a leading role in government. Despite the outcome of the 1990 election, SLORC named only 15.34 percent of the elected representatives as delegates, thus making them a permanent minority in a body which had no legitimate right to execute its charge.

In addition to being underrepresented, based on the party’s vote in the 1990 election, Aung San Suu Kyi gave six additional reasons for its withdrawal: (1) the convention was undemocratic and the rights and freedoms of the delegates were abridged; (2) the objective and working procedures of the convention were not drawn up in consultation with the delegates; (3) papers offered by delegates were censored and corrected in accordance with the wishes of the authorities; (4) decisions were announced before issues had been fully discussed; (5) decisions were made on details as well as broad principles; and (6) there was no fixed timetable for the convention. Because the work procedures of the body were “not democratic and the basic principles for the proposed constitution include some which are not consonant with a true democratic state,” she called for a new approach, dialogue, and for “all concerned to join together in mutual trust and good-

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<sup>34</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Transcript of Aung San Suu Kyi Interview*, BurmaNet, May 13, 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Empowerment, Development*, p. 9.

will to work toward building up a genuinely democratic nation in accordance with the wishes of the people."<sup>36</sup>

This action put Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her fellow leaders on a collision course with SLORC; and while her statement and action were denounced as traitorous and NLD delegates were dismissed from the convention, the confrontation demonstrated that she will speak out and act without fear for principles and ideas which have been central to her thought and action regardless of what the military may do to her.

The political thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is not offered as an example of that of a scholar or reflective thinker at work in the abstract. Rather, it is presented as an example of a special person who, because of her name and family, gained an immediate audience and, by using language and expressing ideas the people understood and related to, was pushed into the leadership of the revolution against totalitarian rule. Despite the military's effort to isolate and silence her, they did not erase her presence from the mind of the people and their loyalty to her; her release from house arrest made it possible for her to re-form the bonds that united them. Aung San Suu Kyi's forthright criticism of SLORC's constitutional ideas and the support of the people in her fearless defense of freedom and democracy make it clear why she, and not her military opponents, is the one who represents the political tradition of Burma.

#### CONCLUSION

The idea of freedom in Burma is not contrary to tradition; it has been part of it from the very start. Burma was not frozen in time in the face of the British military victories and the imposition of colonial rule. The Burmese learned new meanings for freedom from the British and the West, and blended those new meanings with their own beliefs and values. By the end of World War II, the emergent elite spoke of freedom and democracy to an audience who understood and freely followed in that direction. But Burma was not destined to have an easy transition to political freedom; even after independence in 1948, several rebellions erupted challenging the democracy and authority of the constitution.

The efforts of the military rulers, since 1962, to root out the nascent democracy of their predecessors and create a totalitarian dictatorship with a population of "rice-eating robots" failed. The memory of, and desire for, freedom remained alive in the minds of the people. The student-led peaceful revolution provided the means to release those pent-up memories; the speeches of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi reacquainted them with the meaning of freedom and rekindled their desire to recover it.

*Rutgers University, New Jersey, March 1996*

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<sup>36</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Observations of the National League for Democracy on the National Convention* (Rangoon: Press Conference Statement, Nov. 22, 1995).