

A CLEAR GATHERING OF MIRACULOUS SUCCESS

Winning the Nobel Peace Prize drew world attention to Aung San Suu Kyi's political struggle, and to Myanmar's brutal authorities.

BY JOHN BADGLEY

THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE FOR 1991 awarded Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi focused world opinion upon her, and upon the country's dreaded junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council. Expecting to crush her spirit and the upstart opposition she led, SLORC, as it is known, had placed her under house arrest in July 1989. Instead, the tactic backfired and her National League for Democracy captured eighty percent of the seats in elections in May 1990. In eschewing armed resistance, Aung San Suu Kyi's electoral success stripped Burma's regime of any lingering legitimacy, and revealed its power base to be simply guns and a willingness to use them.

Decrees issued since SLORC's coup d'état on 18 September 1988 have justified brutal oppression with regulations originally written and used by the British during colonial rule, and with edicts created by U Nu, the country's first prime minister, who resorted briefly to martial law during his own term of office.

Since the coup, a series of historical treatises published by SLORC's chairman, General Saw Maung, and its intelligence chief, Major General Khin Nyunt, reveal extraordinary xenophobia and distortions of fact. An indicator of their mindset was the redesignation of Burma as "Myanmar," the Burmese language term used by ethnic Burmans for their empire – a step akin to that of the Khmer Rouge in changing Cambodia to Kampuchea, and the Nazi determination that Germany should be called the Third Reich.

Tyrants generally rewrite their own history, but the innovation of SLORC's new Historical Commission was to pretend allegiance to the rule of law by holding free elections, then flagrantly violate the very civil codes and criminal laws it claimed to preserve while securing enormous financial benefits for its confederates.

BURMA'S CIVIL STRIFE OVER THE FOUR DECADES since independence in 1948 has been labelled an "insurgency." Both ethnic and ideological guerrilla forces have fought Rangoon's armies, usually in isolation from each other, and with devastating consequences for the economy and for Burma's people. General Saw Maung estimated the population has suffered over a

million casualties, probably an exaggeration but closer to the truth than ever admitted by General Ne Win, the *éminence grise* who overtly governed between 1958 and 1960, and again from 1962 to 1988. Ne Win has covertly guided policy since, but remains obscured behind the State Council, a demonic wizard in a land not unlike Oz, where the Queens of Light and Darkness struggle for dominance.

THANKS TO THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE, THE world has now met the good queen, Aung San Suu Kyi – literally, "clear gathering of miraculous success" – daughter of Aung San. Her father founded Burma's independence army during the Japanese occupation, and later led the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) in its drive for independence. Ne Win, one of his trusted lieutenants, took over his military role when Aung San became president of the AFPFL. Aung San's task was two-fold: negotiate independence from Britain, and find common ground among fractious domestic groups, Burma's two communist parties and the larger ethnic minorities. He was remarkably successful on both counts, but tragically was assassinated six months before independence.

Ne Win struggled for years to build the army into a force able to dominate the various rebels in order to enable U Nu's democratically elected government to create a rational economic process that would modernize the entire country. But the government's devout socialism frightened foreign investors, already uncertain about profits in a nation plagued by ideological and ethnic warfare. Burma slowly fell behind most of its Southeast Asian neighbours.

Justifying his coup d'état by the failings in the economy and threats to the constitutional structure from minorities, Ne Win led the military from the battlefield into politics in 1962. He launched an aggressive development scheme, the "Burmese Way to Socialism," which was, in fact, motivated by xenophobic fears of indigenous Chinese and Indian owned business. But Ne Win's goals were compromised by his own political and administrative ineptitude: corruption grew and the insurgencies continued to smoulder. By 1988, the stage was set for

a major explosion that led to his resignation as chairman of Burma's only legal political party, the Burma Socialist Program Party.

Two governments came and went in quick succession. The first, led by Ne Win's amanuensis and former body guard, General Sein Lwin, attempted to suppress mounting popular demonstrations by force, mowing down thousands in the streets. It ended after only eighteen days. The second regime, led by Dr. Maung Maung (one of Burma's leading authors and jurists) lasted ten days longer than the first, but was marked by strong peace overtures to the National League for Democracy (NLD), and promises of an open economy, freedom of the press, and liberalization of travel. Still the demonstrations grew larger.

On 26 August 1988, five hundred thousand people gathered in the shadow of Rangoon's most famous shrine, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, to hear Aung San Suu Kyi speak out for freedom. She had returned to Burma only months before after twenty years abroad.* Among those listening was Dr. Sanda Win, Ne Win's favourite daughter, a British-trained physician, and no less ambitious than Aung San's daughter. Watching her father being challenged by Aung San Suu Kyi, she perceived a competing queen for the throne.

SANDA WIN SET ABOUT REDEEMING HER FATHER'S place in history. Playing on his obsession with security, she moved from her post as a gynaecologist in a medical school to major in the army, with sole responsibility for the old man's health. Ne Win's daughter not only became his chief diagnostician, but also his gate-keeper. With Military Intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt's help, she kept him informed about his enemies.

Sanda Win's capacity for malevolence was observed during the uprisings of 1988, when fellow doctors allege she supplied pain-deadening, fear-suppressing narcotics to agents who were then sent out to give poisoned drinking water to student marchers and demonstrators. The agents were themselves then hacked to death

*Aung San Suu Kyi left Burma at age fifteen, continued her education in India, earned history honours at Oxford University and established a career in New York at the United Nations. Her key writings are found in *Freedom From Fear*, Viking Press, 1991.