

Introduction

Radical upheaval, political turmoil and social strife are the characteristics that have defined Burma's tortured history over many decades. At the hands of the Japanese and the British, the country experienced atrocity after atrocity in the grip of occupations that served foreign powers. At the hands of the brutal, totalitarian governments that seized the reigns in the wake of these horrors, suffering, already entrenched, was mercilessly perpetuated. Against a backdrop of hurt, pain and exploitation, Burma sank to the bottom of the UN's list of least developed countries in the 1980s and long remain there despite material wealth held fiercely by a handful of men in power.

There are few words to adequately express the resilience felt by the population of a country labelled by the world's media as a land of 50 million hostages. For decades no one got out and nothing came in; the iron grip of dictatorship sealing off all avenues for communication and development. Despite these great odds there has been something even more valuable: a spirit of defiance, of hope, of the courage to care about something larger than one's own self-interest, principles voiced by those who have lived and breathed that struggle. It is this spirit that we have set out to capture, through the series of in-depth, feature length interviews with key government figures, celebrated activists and religious leaders that we present in this book. Through their own words we tell the story of how strife can strengthen integrity, how terror can inspire hope, and

how the human spirit, in approaching radical defiance, may approach the indomitable and transcendent.

Despite the work of the first democratically elected government in 60 years, Burma continues to convulse from decades of dictatorship, with no clear means to peace in sight. Within this epic complexity of institutionalized, patriarchal-driven violence on the one hand, and feminine-inspired, nonviolent political transformation on the other, we are privy to what Aung San Suu Kyi has termed a “revolution of the spirit.” This is a nonviolent revolution with reconciliation at its heart; a revolution that refuses to condemn, demonise, or further distance self from other.

Justification for violence can be found beneath every stone and in every crowded corner. Yet, for 30 years, brave men and women, young and old, have championed dialogue over confrontation, peace over retribution and the authority of the human spirit over out-dated but incumbent models of power. Seven years in the making, this series of books are the definitive portrait of Burma's three-decade-long struggle for democracy. Drawing on my previous interviews with Aung San Suu Kyi in my earlier work, *The Voice of Hope: Alan Clements in Conversation with Aung San Suu Kyi* (1997 & 2008), these four new volumes document the evolution of the pro-democracy movement and Aung San Suu Kyi's ideas over the past 21 years.

Make no mistake: there are no easy answers here. Burma is on the cusp of becoming a failed state; a faltering economy, old guard cronyism, rampant

poverty, multiple armed insurgencies, the threat of another military coup d'état, and the return of dictatorship always imminent. The world's media has by and large forsaken this 30-year struggle in favour of sensationalised headlines about a single region, the complexities of which it hasn't begun to grasp. The ghost of Western imperialism lurks behind every ignorant expression of concern, history eschewed and the needs and will of the people discussed taking a backseat to our vain need to champion a cause we otherwise seek to obliterate with drone strikes and rocket attacks in any corner of the world that takes our interest. As observers and as commentators of a foreign political process, we are in danger of alienating another culture to suit our own need for redemption.

What we are witnessing is a nearly impossible attempt to remove the seeds of conflict from a culture constricted, emaciated and ravaged by a half century of totalitarian dictatorships. Those people whose voices we hear in this book have spent decades in prison, often enduring hard labor, extreme torture, sometimes abandoned to solitary confinement, in the service of freedom. All this, when they could have simply conceded to the will of patriarchal, might-is-right corruption, taken up arms or fled into exile. It is their right and their right alone to give voice to the idealism that characterises their own revolution. This is a revolution that has taken place amid poverty, sanctions, embargoes and the everyday threat of incarceration and death; repercussions extending not just to self but to their friends and family, their co-revolutionaries and loyal supporters.

Easy answers are not what we've tried to capture in these pages. What we've tried to capture is the character of this revolution of the spirit. In these final and definitive editions, I draw on my 40 years of personal and spiritual connections in Burma to lift the veil of secrecy and suppression, going straight to the source to reveal the stories that were silenced for so many decades. Covering the eight years that followed the NLD's by-election victory in 2012 and former president Thein Sein's un-blacklisting of key activists in 2013, readers are granted rare front-row access to Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues as they share the intimate details of what inspired them to rise up against an oppressive regime, what sustained them through decades of detainment and deprivation, how they succeeded in ushering in democracy through nonviolent activism, and how they view Burma's future, including reconciliation and integration with ethnic minorities.

As a country scorched by decades of atrocity and greed, Burma's political landscape has now undergone a seismic shift towards democracy and restorative justice, a shift that will remain precarious without understanding and support from outside the country. This transition was facilitated by the nonviolent activism of those who chose decades of imprisonment over compromising their conscience, and who too often paid with their lives. Their courageous voices are brought to the world in our books, *Burma's Voices of Freedom*, crafted from new and exclusive materials, including many hours of rare, never-before-transcribed audio recordings, an extensive photographic collection of iconic historical

images, a detailed chronology of key events, and dozens of feature-length interviews with every key leader of Burma's long struggle for freedom, including Aung San Suu Kyi's closest colleagues and mentors: the late U Win Tin (who spent 19 years in solitary), U Tin Oo (who spent 19 years in detention), U Win Htein (who spent 20 years in prison), and the late U Kyi Maung (who spent 11 years in solitary).

In addition, we present an unprecedented section with Aung San Suu Kyi's cherished spiritual advisor, the late Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita, from whose book *In This Very Life* Aung San Suu Kyi learned meditation during her many years of house arrest, and to whom she turned to for guidance upon her release. One of Burma's most eminent Buddhist scholars and mindfulness meditation masters, an inspiration to many in the pro-democracy movement, the 95-year-old elder monk passed away in April 2016, just weeks after delivering his "final words" to me in a series of nine interviews that followed on from our original discussion in 2013. The set of conversations, titled by the Venerable Sayadaw, "Wisdom for the World and Dhamma Advice to My Nation," illuminates the spiritual *requisites of national reconciliation*, the centerpiece of Aung San Suu Kyi's new government's policy of peace-building and healing through the "practice of non-retribution" or "active *mettā*" (loving-kindness) and "active *karuṇā*" (compassion).

Far too few people know that national reconciliation is the foundation stone of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy's hope for process

of democratization. As critics clamour for referrals to the Hague and awards are stripped from the once idealized icon of democracy, thrust unwillingly upon an impossible pedestal that pandered primarily to Western needs for validation, Burma's peace process is in danger of becoming obscured and maligned. "Collusion" is the accusation from those uneducated in and unaware of this revolutionary concept of reconciliation that may be the pinnacle of political transformation on earth at this time.

Additional interviewees include Aung San Suu Kyi's most trusted advisers, members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers, U Ohn Kyaing (who spent 19 years in solitary), Zaw Myint Maung (who spent 19 years in prison), Dr. May Lwin Myint (who spent 9 years in prison), and Phyu Phyu Thin (famous for her HIV/AIDS activism and hunger strike in prison).

Other important voices completing the picture are those of Parliament member and winner of the prestigious International Award for the Most Courageous Woman of 2012, Zin Mar Aung (who spent 11 years in prison, 9 in solitary) and renowned journalist and editor of The Independent and PEN Freedom to Write Award Winner, Ma Thida Sanchaung (who spent 5 years in prison).

Joining their voices to the above are 88 Generation leaders, Min Ko Naing (who spent 19 years in solitary), described by the New York Times as Burma's "most influential opposition figure after Aung San Suu Kyi," Ko Ko Gyi (who spent 19 years in prison), Nilar Thein (who spent 4 years in prison), Kyaw Zwa

Moe (who spent 7 years in prison) co-founder of the Irrawaddy (Burma's Time magazine), and many others.

Added to these perspectives are those of prominent Burmese monks, journalists and filmmakers; religious figures, including Archbishop Bo of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Yangon; humanitarians and activists; actors and comedians, including the late U Par Lay, Burma's most famous political satirist, who spent 13 years in prison for his performances, pounding rocks 20 hours a day chained in leg and arm irons; and dozens of additional former prisoners of conscience.

For more than three decades, I have had the honor to be a consistent voice in Burma's nonviolent struggle for democracy. As an author and journalist, my passion for Burma's freedom is rooted in my nearly four years living as a Buddhist monk in a monastery in Rangoon. This passion was crystallized with my investigative journalism and human rights work in northern Burma and the writing of my then ground-breaking book in 1990, *Burma: The Next Killing Fields* (with a foreword by the Dalai Lama), followed by *Burma's Revolution of the Spirit*—a large format photographic tribute to Burma's nonviolent struggle for democracy co-authored with Leslie Kean, with a foreword by the Dalai Lama and essays by eight Nobel Peace laureates. After these came *The Voice of Hope*, the internationally acclaimed book with Aung San Suu Kyi, conducted during six months of secret, taped conversations at her home in Rangoon, following her first release from detention in 1995. The disks containing these recordings were

smuggled out of the country and transcribed, forming the content of this celebrated book.

Shortly after its publication, Aung San Suu Kyi was rearrested, and I was “permanently banned” from re-entering the country by the military authorities. Until now, *The Voice of Hope*, originally published in 1996 by Editions Stock in Paris and translated into numerous languages, was the most comprehensive account of the Nobel Peace Laureate's political and spiritual philosophy. This book was acclaimed as “*a message the world should hear*” by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and endorsed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and numerous other Nobel Peace Laureates and world leaders.

In 2013, after 17 years on a government blacklist for my book with Aung San Suu Kyi, the ban on my entering the country was lifted by Burma's former President U Thein Sein. At that time, I began returning to Burma to document the country's epic transition from dictatorship to democracy. These new books, *Burma's Voices of Freedom*, build on my previous work to present a definitive source of insight into Burma's ongoing struggle for freedom. Through an unprecedented series of in-depth interviews with those at the heart of the struggle, including two substantial sections of excerpts from Aung San Suu Kyi detailing her most essential views from the time of her release in 2010 to the present, the books elucidate the principles, politics and philosophies that enabled a beleaguered nation to walk a path of courage and reconciliation, while serving as

a blueprint for the politics necessary to prevent dictatorship from making a resurgence.

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