

FREE AUNG SAN SUU KYI...AND SAVE DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR

“Every thought, every word, and every action that adds to the positive and the wholesome is a contribution to peace. Each and every one of us is capable of making such a contribution.”

— Aung San Suu Kyi

Today the world comes face-to-face with the brutal reality and consequences of words carelessly spoken.

On May 24th of this year, images surfaced of Myanmar’s State Counsellor and Nobel Peace Laureate, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, bound and guarded in a military tribunal, where she faces a sentence of life in prison, based on fraudulent charges from a corrupt and torturous, totalitarian regime, led by the former general-turned-dictator, Min Aung Hlaing. That this is occurring in Myanmar is unconscionable and it telegraphs an urgent message to the world, to stand up in defense of this courageous icon of democracy. Where are the activists, artists, filmmakers, and journalists, who ought to be able to come to her defense?

To fully comprehend the significance of this moment, it is important to understand how misinformation led to this blatant, deliberate defamation of her character, and has further enabled a wall of silence.

In light of the recent military coup in Myanmar, it is of the utmost importance that we critically re-evaluate the narrative in which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been wrongly vilified by the media. We must remember who she is and what she stands for. This is not a trivial matter, but one of immense significance. She is a bastion of hope and a beacon of democracy for the people of Myanmar, and particularly for the 54 protesters—and their families—who died in March, during peaceful demonstrations. Even though those massive protests ended, she is still under attack.

If we do not seek to understand the truth of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, we ourselves will perpetuate our complicity in this tyranny.

The military takeover, initiated on February 1, 2021 began with the seizure of Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and other prominent, democratically elected leaders, including President Win Myint. Originally detained in her home, Aung San Suu Kyi has since been removed from her house and taken to a new location, while blindfolded, in the night. It is not known where she is being held.

Tatmadaw is the official name for the military forces in Myanmar, but given the explicit disregard for the rule of law—witnessed around the world—it is no longer a term that can accurately be used to describe the armed forces. Instead, the regime can be easily recognized by the acronym MAH-SAC, or the Min Aung Hlaing - State Administration Council, a terrorist body that can readily be likened to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Min Aung- Hlaing is the modern Pol Pot.

The protests of Myanmar’s civil disobedience movement are broadcast on television and can be seen live on social media. Each day that passes brings about new civilian deaths. Innocent women and children are brutalized, as the world silently watches. Since the start of this reign of terror, more than 800 people have been killed and 4,000 have been detained and possibly

tortured. These detainees are the poets, artists, professors, and democratically elected civilians who dared to speak out against this assault on universal human rights. These activists are an inspiration for democracy in action—democracy, in its purest and rawest form. This is the movement that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has worked tirelessly to achieve, for nearly 40 years, starting in 1988, with her “Revolution of the Spirit”—a crusading effort to awaken a love of freedom and non-violence in her country.

I bring this situation to your attention with a degree of intimacy: Having worked in Southeast Asia from 2016 to 2019, I visited Myanmar many times. During a particular visit in 2017, I was invited to visit Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha, a renowned meditation center in Yangon. It was here that I first met Alan Clements, one of the first westerners to be ordained as a Buddhist monk in what was then Burma; this particular center was the place where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and many other members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) received classical Buddhist training from the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw.

This was the same place where Clements was ordained as a Buddhist monk, before ultimately being expelled from the country by the former military dictatorship, led by Ne Win, the former president, from 1962 through 1981.

Alan Clements intimately knows Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. He met with her over the course of six months inside her home in Yangon, shortly after her release from her first house arrest in July, 1995. The conversations that they shared ultimately formed the basis of Clements' internationally acclaimed book, *Aung San Suu Kyi, Voice of Hope: Conversations with Alan Clements*. This book and Clements' recently released, four-volume set, “Burma’s Voices of Freedom,” (Co-authored with Fergus Harlow) both served as formative works, inspiring me to more fully understand and immerse myself in the elegant thought process of Daw Aung San Su Kyi, and by extension, deepen my respect for her courageous form of political activism.

For the first time, I could see how her actions are deeply rooted in the ethical foundation of mindfulness meditation and imbued with a deep and abiding belief in nonviolent action. Rightly understood, her political posture reflects a nuanced and radical attempt to forge a path toward truth, reconciliation, and democracy in a country that is still deeply entrenched in the strongman grip of an authoritarian, military regime.

Back in September, 2016, during a speech addressed to the Asia Society in New York, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, acknowledged the long way left to travel before Myanmar could possibly lay claim to democracy, admitting that the real work could be said to have started only at that point in time. There had been much celebration after the so-called civilian government came to power in 2010, but most of the populace was not aware that 80 percent of the members of government were still retired members of the military.

Daw Aung San Suu Ky, then shared with the group that she, along with her party, the NLD, won the 2012 election, addressing three key issues: to amend the constitution; bring about internal peace; and establish the rule of law. She stated, “We need peace in our country. We have had armed conflict in our country from the very first day it became independent on the 4th of January, 1948. We are now at a juncture of our history where we have the opportunity to put an end to internal conflict.” Understanding Aung San Suu Kyi’s resolve to meet these goals—while facing the constant challenge to bring about reconciliation in a multiethnic state that has

been traumatized by decades violence—we can begin to understand the deeply nuanced appeal she will make three years later at the Hague in front of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Those who have not watched State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi address the ICJ in 2019, must know that she did not appear before the court to political grandstand, but rather, to take the place of defendant for her native Myanmar, resisting the severe invocation of the 1948 Genocide Convention. This is a treaty that was made following the systematic killing of more than six million European Jews in World War II. It is the strongest classification used by the court. A classification that the court refrained from using in the case of *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro* for the displacement of one million people Kosovo between 1992 and 1995. This established - through case law - a precedent in which there must be specific intent to destroy a group, in part or whole, and that must be the only possible explanation.

In addressing the allegations, Aung San Suu Kyi states, “Even before the events of 2016 and 2017 Muslim, Buddhist and other communities in Rakhine faces what the Kofi Annan Advisory committee described as complex challenges of low development and poverty rooted in enduring social conflict between the communities.”

She outlines the ways in which the Myanmar government is committed to addressing these challenges, in order to “nourish a spiritual mindset of unity.” These efforts include an already launched campaign to expedite citizenship with an ID card; an assurance that all children born in Rakhine, regardless of religious background, would be issued birth certificates; and that more scholarships would be awarded to Muslim students, providing them the opportunity to attend classes at universities across Myanmar.

Aung San Suu Kyi did not seek to deny or cover up the tragedy that occurred in the Rakhine state in 2016 and 2017. Nor did she try to justify the military's brutal actions against the Rohingya minority. By highlighting the cyclical violence that has taken place within the community, she sought to present the full complexity of the situation and the need for truth and reconciliation. She wanted an opportunity to address these war crimes through a domestic, criminal justice process, that would lend credibility to emergent, democratic institutions. Failing to recognize the nuanced nature of this position, the media galvanized, portraying her as a handmaiden for genocide. This could not be further from the truth.

Those who know the history of Myanmar intimately, know the tightrope Aung San Suu Kyi has been forced to navigate in her unwavering pursuit to bring the freedom of democracy to her people. In 2008, the NDL was prohibited from participating in the establishment of a national constitution. The military has consistently discredited the NLD's sweeping wins in general elections, oftentimes, the so-called "free and fair elections" have been used as a way to target members of the opposition for arrest or torture.

At this very moment, Aung San Suu Kyi is being paraded in front of a military tribunal under transparently false charges. This is the very same regime that the media has alleged she has aided and abetted; hypocrisy reveals itself in plain view.

The dizzying spectacle of the news cycle today has made us careless. Amidst the frenzy of liking, sharing, and reposting, it is far too easy to propagate misinformation and promote misguided ideas and, thus, be complicit in lies. Or worse, to fall into a narrative without full respect to the complicity of nuance for the circumstance that surrounds it. Aung San Suu Kyi concludes her speech to the International Court of Justice with a statement that is powerfully relevant in the world today, declaring, “Hate narratives are not simply confined to hate speech. Language that contributes to extreme polarization also amounts to hate narratives.” Ironically, she herself has become a victim of a hate narrative, and this is because, quite simply, she has refused to hate.

Alan Clements said it best in a Facebook live stream, posted on May 24th, the day pictures first circulated of Aung San Suu Kyi's abduction:

"In 1988 Aung San Suu Kyi began what would be called a revolution of the spirit. She employed, along with the people of her country, an epic expression of non-violence. But it is deeper than that - beyond a willingness to refuse using arms—it is the absolute refusal to villainize or demonize. The radiance of making friends with enemies. Refraining from violence. Refraining from vilification. The courageous, open-heartedness to reconcile even with those who rape and torture and persecute. It is beyond imagination that today this woman, along with the president and numerous other elected civilians sit in a military prison in the capitol waiting to be sentenced to a life in prison."

It is not enough for us to sit quietly in our minds and our homes, thinking that perhaps we did get it wrong. In our ignorance, we have accepted a false narrative. By our silence, we have perpetuated it. It is time we admit our self-deceit and re-elevate this inspiring leader and appreciate the wisdom in her words. We must become wise to understand the incalculable sacrifices she has made in her heart-centered approach to achieve democracy for her citizens.

Now is not a time for any confusion regarding responsibility. This is a clear moment for decisive action. We must demand that she be released immediately. We must demand it now. We must demand it loudly - through any means at our disposal. She is more than just a symbol. She is truly an iconic hero on the global stage and deserves to live out her remaining days in peace, celebrated for her legacy, rather than vilified in ignorance.

Right now, the people of Myanmar are fighting for the most basic of freedoms. They are fighting for the ability to think, feel, and express what is in their hearts and minds. To speak without fear of being taken from their homes in the dead of night and imprisoned or tortured. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi stands for these brave men and women and we must stand with—and for—her.

In 1996, when asked by Clements if she had ever lost hope or had become fearful while detained by the military, she responded with a remarkable reply: No, she wasn't afraid. She wasn't afraid because she didn't hate them. “I do not think you can be truly fearful of people you do not hate. Hate and fear go hand-in-hand.”

If you would like to learn more about Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy, please seek out “Burma's Voices of Freedom” by Alan Clements. Please speak out and let your voice be heard.

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