

Aung San Suu Kyi: A pilgrim's progress

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For decades, Aung San Suu Kyi was a democratic icon, held to be without fault or peer, floating above the grubby political fray. Once she became an elected politician, however, she was obliged to face the harsh realities of retail politics. She could no longer take refuge in broad principles and Buddhist precepts. This inevitably led to more critical news reports about her and her policies, both within Myanmar and outside it.

There was a time when to criticise Aung San Suu Kyi was to court a firestorm of angry responses from her legion of supporters, who ranged from radical activists to conservative Western officials.¹ She was considered by many to be without fault and without peer.

That situation has now changed, as the Burmese opposition leader has gone from being a democracy icon to a practising politician—a process that has obliged her to adopt public positions on a wide range of contentious issues. Criticisms are now being levelled at Aung San Suu Kyi from many quarters, both within Burma and outside it. Questions have even been raised about her future leadership role—something that would have been unthinkable not long ago.²

¹ Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, 'Can Aung San Suu Kyi Lead While Captive?', *The Guardian*, [London], 11 November 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/11/burma-aung-san-suu-kyi.

² Karl-Ludwig Günsche, 'Icon Under Fire: Burma's Suu Kyi Eyes Presidency Amid Criticism', *Der Spiegel*, [Hamburg], 3 August 2012, www.spiegel.de/international/world/aung-san-suu-kyi-eyes-burmese-presidency-but-faces-growing-criticism-a-887665.html.

For more than 20 years, Aung San Suu Kyi was the living symbol of Burma's nonviolent struggle for democracy and human rights in the face of the world's most durable military dictatorship. Despite being under house arrest for long periods, and denied access to her family, she remained true to her convictions. She inspired millions with her high ideals and dignified resistance to oppression. This earned her the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize and numerous other prestigious international awards.³

It did not hurt her global standing that Aung San Suu Kyi was also an intelligent, English-speaking and attractive woman. This stood in stark contrast to Burma's exclusively male military leadership, which was frequently caricatured by activists, the international news media and even some foreign governments as a collection of superstitious and corrupt thugs.⁴ The differences between them were made even more obvious by the regime's blatant human rights abuses and seemingly irrational policies.

Being denied a public voice for so long, Aung San Suu Kyi's views on many important issues were unknown. Even when able to speak publicly, she tended to express herself in terms of broad democratic principles and Buddhist moral precepts. This may have reflected her party's lack of a detailed and agreed policy platform, but it encouraged her supporters, both inside Burma and outside it, to project on to her all their hopes and dreams. Even by some experienced observers, she came to be seen as the answer to all of Burma's complex problems.

Indeed, she routinely attracted accolades like 'the bravest and most moral person in the world'—giving her enormous moral authority.⁵ This was difficult to exercise inside Burma, but she gained a strong following overseas and had a marked influence on the attitudes of the international community. For years, she effectively determined the parameters of US policy towards Burma.⁶ People like UK Prime Minister Gordon

3 'The Nobel Peace Prize 1991', The Nobel Prize, Oslo, www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1991/.

4 Colin L. Powell, 'It's Time to Turn the Tables on Burma's Thugs', *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 2003, online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB105537654192139700,00.html.

5 R.L. Parry, 'West Has No Simple Way to Treat the Lady', *The Australian*, 21 June 2012, www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/world-commentary/west-has-no-simple-way-to-treat-the-lady/story-e6frg6ux-1226403411193 [page discontinued].

6 David I. Steinberg, 'Aung San Suu Kyi and US Policy Toward Burma/Myanmar', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.29, No.3, 2010, doi.org/10.1177/186810341002900302.

Brown and US First Lady Laura Bush became her champions. Other politicians saw benefits in being publicly associated with the photogenic opposition leader.

However, this widespread admiration—adulation even—had a downside. Some of her policies were challenged but, in public at least, there was little critical examination of Aung San Suu Kyi herself. After some mildly negative commentaries were bitterly attacked, few public figures dared to incur the wrath of her supporters.⁷ Others held back for fear of giving the military regime ammunition that could be used in its propaganda campaigns against her. The result was a degree of self-censorship on the part of journalists, biographers and even academics.⁸

Since her release from house arrest in 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi has had to make the difficult transition from political prisoner and democracy icon to party leader and opposition member of parliament. She had always been an active player in Burma's power games—for example, by using her international status to influence the policies of foreign governments and organisations. But she is now expected to have a view on every topical issue—a demand complicated by her interest in running for president (a constitutional amendment permitting) in 2015. Her every action and statement, or lack thereof, is subject to close scrutiny.

This has often placed her in a difficult position. Last year, for example, she was criticised for not speaking out against the sectarian violence in Arakan State⁹ and the civil war in Kachin State.¹⁰ Earlier this year, she was heckled by angry villagers at Letpadaung after a commission of inquiry under her leadership failed to produce the expected results.¹¹ She has had to answer

7 'Aung San Suu Kyi and Western Intervention in Burma', [Letters to the Editor], *The Guardian*, [London], 13 November 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/13/letter-burma-suu-kyi.

8 Andrew Selth, *Burma Watching: A Retrospective*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.39 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2012), www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/469426/Selth-Regional-Outlook-39.pdf [page discontinued].

9 Edward Loxton, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Loses Her Gloss for Failing to Denounce Killings', *The Week*, [London], 29 October 2013, www.theweek.co.uk/asia-pacific/burma/49788/aung-san-suu-kyi-loses-her-gloss-failing-denounce-killings.

10 Eric Randolph, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Has Abandoned Us, Say Burmese Rebels Being Bombed into Submission', *The Independent*, [London], 29 January 2012, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-has-abandoned-us-say-burmese-rebels-being-bombed-into-submission-8471734.html.

11 Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 'Fury Over Letpadaung Copper Mine Report', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 18 March 2013, www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/5175-fury-at-copper-mine-report.html.

criticisms of her low-key response to anti-Muslim riots in central Burma¹² and she was accused of betraying her principles by attending the annual Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyidaw.¹³

While not given as much exposure in the international news media, there are also other critics of Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma (in addition, that is, to hardline elements in the armed forces). For example, she is perceived by many as a strong Burman centralist, unsympathetic to the aspirations of the ethnic minorities to separate states or a federal system of government. She also has detractors among more radical opposition groups who reject her cautious, conciliatory approach to the current government and apparent support for an amnesty on past human rights abuses.¹⁴ These voices are now becoming louder and more widely reported.

Given the quite unrealistic expectations held by her supporters, it was inevitable that many would be disappointed. Just as Aung San Suu Kyi has had to grapple with the harsh realities of Burmese politics, so have her followers. They are learning the hard way that all politicians have to make compromises and, particularly in Burma's volatile political environment, they are rarely able to satisfy everyone. Also, as Aung San Suu Kyi knows, anyone aspiring to a leadership role in Burma has to work with the armed forces—still the country's most powerful political institution.

In international circles, Aung San Suu Kyi remains a charismatic figure. She has recently attracted some criticism, including from prominent human rights organisations,¹⁵ but she is still highly regarded. Also, few politicians, particularly in the Western democracies, want to be openly critical of such a political rock star. Even if they have reservations about

12 'Suu Kyi Meets with Islamic Leaders Amid Growing Criticism', *GlobalPost*, [Boston], 10 April 2013, www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/asianet/130410/suu-kyi-meets-islamic-leaders-amid-growing-criticism [page discontinued].

13 Kate Hodal, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Surprise Spectator at Burma Armed Forces Day Parade', *The Guardian*, [London], 27 March 2013, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/27/aung-san-suu-kyi-burma-parade.

14 Parameswaran Ponnudurai, 'Holding Rights Abusers Accountable', *Radio Free Asia*, [Washington, DC], 12 January 2012, www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/east-asia-beat/junta-01212012180532.html.

15 Alex Spillius, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Facing Backlash for Silence on Abuses', *The Telegraph*, [London], 26 July 2012, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/burmyanmar/9430518/Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-facing-backlash-for-silence-on-abuses.html.

her reputed inflexibility and strong leadership style, her lack of practical experience or her stance on particular issues, they know that they will have to work with her to achieve their aims in Burma.¹⁶

Aung San Suu Kyi's many qualities are not in doubt. However, she is now being viewed more as a real person, with many of the strengths and weaknesses of real people, rather than as some kind of ethereal being floating above the rough and tumble of Burmese politics. She is also gradually becoming accepted as a hardheaded politician trying to hold together a fractious party and act strategically in a divided country where politics is dominated by tactics and personalities.

The critical stories about her appearing in the news media and on websites may upset some, but they reflect a more mature and objective appreciation of her important place in modern Burmese history. In one sense, that is to be welcomed as much as her long-awaited entry into the country's political arena.

16 Steve Finch, 'Suu Kyi's Party Told It's Too Authoritarian as Burma's Activists Quit', *The Independent*, [London], 12 November 2012, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/suu-kyis-party-told-its-too-authoritarian-as-burmas-activists-quit-8307219.html.

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