

Myanmar and Aung San: The resurrection of an icon

(09:12 AEDT, 31 March 2017)

After independence hero Aung San was shunted into the background by the former military regime, Aung San Suu Kyi has restored her father to the pantheon of national heroes and to a prominent position in Myanmar's official iconography. It could be argued, however, that at times she has pushed this policy too far.

In a recent post on *The Interpreter*,¹ Andray Abrahamian drew attention to the Myanmar Government's decision to name a bridge in southern Mon State after the country's national hero, Aung San, rather than leave the matter in the hands of the regional authorities. As the post noted, the issue has become a source of tension between the ruling NLD and the local community—one that could easily have been avoided.

This case highlights the central government's continuing dominance of the 14 provincial assemblies in Myanmar, which have long struggled to exercise a substantive role.² There is another way of looking at the bridge-naming controversy, however, and that is as an example of the shift

1 Andray Abrahamian, 'Myanmar: NLD Scores Own Goal in Mon State', *The Interpreter*, 22 March 2017, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-nld-scores-own-goal-mon-state.

2 Hamish Nixon, Cindy Joelene, Kyi Pyar Chit Saw, Thet Aung Lynn and Matthew Arnold, *Executive Summary: State and Region Governments in Myanmar* (Yangon: Asia Foundation, September 2013), asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MyanmarStateandRegionGovernmentsExecutiveSummary.pdf.

in the country's political iconography that began under president Thein Sein in 2011 and has picked up pace since Aung San Suu Kyi took power in 2016.

Ever since the country regained its independence from the UK in 1948, successive governments in Myanmar (known until 1989 as Burma) have placed considerable importance on the use of flags, crests and other symbols to foster a sense of shared history, encourage national unity and in various ways promote loyalty to the government of the day.

The most potent of these symbols has been the hero of Myanmar's independence struggle, General Aung San, who was assassinated with his provisional cabinet in 1947. His image was appropriated by the armed forces and, after Ne Win's coup in 1962, was widely used to help legitimise socialist rule. For decades, Aung San's picture hung alongside Ne Win's in all government offices and at many public venues.

After a new military council took over in 1988, Ne Win's portrait was taken down. That was not unexpected, but those of Aung San posed a different kind of problem. For, during the 1988 prodemocracy uprising, and again during the 2007 'Saffron Revolution', pictures of the national hero were used by demonstrators to drum up popular support and call for regime change. They were also potent reminders that Aung San was the father of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Before they were regulated by the regime, NLD publicity materials depicted Aung San alongside Aung San Suu Kyi, emphasising not only the familial connection but also the striking physical similarity between them. Aung San Suu Kyi often received visitors at her Yangon home surrounded by photos and paintings of her father, and she routinely referred to him (and their blood relationship) in her speeches.

The military regime countered by reducing Aung San's public profile. Most of his portraits were removed. Also, in a major break from past practice, none of the banknotes issued by the Central Bank of Myanmar after 1990 included a portrait of Aung San. His image was replaced with neutral designs like the mythical *chintse*, or leogryph. Nor did Aung San's portrait appear on any of the country's new postage stamps.³

3 Andrew Selth, 'Burma Puts Its Stamp on the World: Philately and Foreign Policy', *The Interpreter*, 7 January 2014, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-puts-its-stamp-world-philately-and-foreign-policy.

This policy was not without risks, as the regime exploited the fact that Aung San had helped create modern Myanmar and founded the armed forces. However, it resented efforts by other sectors of society to claim him as their own. When Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar from the UK in 1988 and began to campaign for democracy, she directly challenged the military government's efforts to monopolise Aung San's legacy.⁴

In response, the regime tried to undermine Aung San Suu Kyi's claim to her father's mantle. It emphasised her marriage to a foreigner and her education abroad (in India and the UK). The state-controlled press accused her of turning her back on her country and 'prostituting herself' to the West. She was labelled a 'traitor puppet'. The regime even refused to cite her full name, referring to her as Mrs Michael Aris (her husband's name) or simply *Ma* (a diminutive form of address) Suu Kyi.

After the inauguration of Thein Sein's reformist government in 2011, however, this policy was abandoned. Aung San was once again permitted to be part of the public consciousness. In 2012, for example, the refurbished Aung San museum in Yangon resumed normal visiting hours (since 1999, it had been open for only three hours each year). Official restrictions were lifted on the portrayal of Aung San in local movies.⁵

This shift in attitude was perhaps best demonstrated by a photo published in 2014 of the new president meeting Aung San Suu Kyi under a portrait of her father.⁶ One topic discussed at this meeting was the reintroduction of Aung San's image to public life.⁷ In 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi and the armed forces chief attended a ceremony at the Martyrs' Mausoleum, which was dedicated to her father and other fallen independence heroes.

4 'The Legacy of General Aung', *SBS News*, 26 August 2013, www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2012/03/30/legacy-general-aung.

5 Calum MacLeod, 'Rival Movies Break Taboo on Burma's National Hero', *USA Today*, 31 January 2015, [Updated 1 February 2015], www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/01/31/burma-movie-aung-san/21396503/.

6 Kyaw Phyto Tha, 'Burma's Suu Kyi Holds Talks with President Thein Sein', *The Irrawaddy*, 10 March 2014, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmas-suu-kyi-holds-talks-president-thein-sein.html.

7 'Myanmar Independence Hero Aung San Back in the Limelight', *Deutsche Welle*, [Bonn], 7 October 2011, www.dw.com/en/myanmar-independence-hero-aung-san-back-in-the-limelight/a-6633306.

Most recently, on 17 March this year, a postage stamp was issued to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It depicts Aung San, who is described as the ‘father of modern-day Myanmar and the country’s first foreign minister’.⁸ There are still no banknotes in circulation that carry his portrait, but a new currency issue is being considered that may do so.⁹

Several explanations have been offered for Aung San’s return to the pantheon of national heroes and reappearance in Myanmar’s official iconography.

One obvious reason is the advent of governments that openly acknowledge Aung San’s commitment to national unity and democratic rule. Despite his politicisation by both the military regime and the opposition movement, he remains a popular icon that almost everyone in Myanmar can embrace. In that sense, he is like Sun Yat Sen—the only person depicted on the postage stamps of both Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China.

Another reason is the election of the NLD Government in 2015 and, in particular, the appointment last year of Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor. She has strong political and personal interests in promoting Aung San, both as a national hero and as the father of the country’s de facto leader. It is probably not a coincidence that Aung San Suu Kyi is also Myanmar’s foreign minister—the position commemorated on the latest postage stamp.

A third possible reason is to remind everyone of Aung San’s key role in the 1947 Panglong Agreement between his provisional government and three major ethnic groups. Conveniently forgotten are the agreement’s flaws, its limitations and the later broken promises, but public references to her father help boost Aung San Suu Kyi’s own attempts to forge a nationwide peace agreement through the ‘21st Century Panglong’ process.

8 Ministry of Information, ‘Bogyoke Aung San Stamps and Envelopes to be Sold’, News release (Naypyitaw: Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 13 March 2017), www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng?q=news/8/11/2018/id-10197.

9 Zon Pann Pwint, ‘Aung San Returns to Kyat Notes’, *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 24 November 2013, www.mmtimes.com/index.php/lifestyle/8868-aung-san-returns-to-kyat-notes.html.

Despite the machinations of the military regime, Aung San was never forgotten by the people of Myanmar.¹⁰ His official rehabilitation is long overdue. To push this policy at the expense of national harmony, however, would be to take the matter too far. Indeed, by overriding the wishes of the Mon State authorities simply to name a bridge, Naypyidaw is threatening the very unity and stability that Aung San tried so hard to establish 70 years ago.

10 Naomi Gingold, 'He's Still a Rock Star in Burma, 7 Decades After His Death', *Public Radio International*, [Minneapolis, MN], 6 November 2015, www.pri.org/stories/2015-11-06/man-who-gets-top-billing-next-aung-san-suu-kyi.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.