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## Encounters with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

During the early 2000s, there were opportunities to have substantive contact with the best-known and most impressive politician in Myanmar, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), had won an overwhelming majority of the seats in the only recent elections in 1990, and who had never been charged with any offence under the law, but was regularly placed under house arrest. Usually, neither she nor the NLD were able to carry out normal political activities of any kind, even though the NLD was legally registered as a political party and had not been banned by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). For its part, the military regime (especially its leader from 1994–2011, Senior General Than Shwe) pursued policies towards Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD that were often contradictory and which swung dramatically from tightening restrictions against her in September 2000 to engaging in (secret) talks in January 2001, before releasing her completely in May 2002.

Suu Kyi's party, the NLD, was basically a coalition of left-leaning groups and military leaders who had fallen out with the mainstream of the army. It was formed to compete in the 1990 elections, and was still an officially registered party until 2010, when it split over whether to contest the 2010 elections. Even as a legal political party, the NLD was under constant pressure from the authorities, who constantly monitored NLD members' movements and activities,

subjected members to various forms of low-level harassment, and actively sought to pressure them to leave the party. Judging by the propaganda in the official media, the authorities seemed to be locked into a campaign to reduce membership of and support for the NLD to the point where it could not compete with a government-organised political party. After 1990, NLD members were systematically harassed and persecuted by military authorities, and many were jailed, often on spurious or technical grounds. Between 2000 and 2002, the authorities consistently mounted public campaigns to pressure NLD members to resign from the party.

During the period 1995–2000, members of the Yangon diplomatic community could have considerable access to Aung San Suu Kyi. While she was not under house arrest but was restricted to Yangon, it was still possible to meet her occasionally, but not frequently, by requesting an appointment through the Myanmar Government. At other times, when the provisions of her house arrest were tightened, no diplomats were able to meet her. Through these years, ambassadors from Western countries and Japan never stopped trying to preserve the minimal contacts they could have with Suu Kyi and the NLD leadership. Other ambassadors — from Asian countries such as China and India, and elsewhere — were noticeable for not seeking to meet her. It was very difficult, however, to convince some of the ASEAN ambassadors that they should make a point of meeting her — the Philippines Ambassador being an exception. All conversations with Suu Kyi were probably bugged by Myanmar's intelligence agency, but this did not necessarily prevent frank and full discussions. In my meetings with Suu Kyi, she did not overtly display any concern about being eavesdropped on — it was simply assumed that this happened.

Writing more than 10 years later, with so many recent changes in Myanmar, it is hard to envisage how comprehensively and cruelly Aung San Suu Kyi was isolated from her own people and the rest of the world by the Myanmar authorities. For most of the time, the only communication she had was her short-wave radio, which she used to listen to the BBC. For most of the time, she did not have use of a telephone; the NLD Headquarters had a phone, but it was often not functioning. She did not have access to the internet and satellite TV broadcasts until after her release from detention in late 2010. The NLD itself was not permitted to have a website until early 2011. As far as I know, Aung San Suu Kyi still does not have or use a mobile phone.

Her isolation between the late 1980s and 2010 was extremely severe. Very few Myanmar people were allowed to visit her, apart from her own staff, her doctor Tin Myo Win (Douglas), and her long-standing lawyer at that time, U Kyi Win (Neville, who is now deceased). Her two sons were living in the UK and were only rarely permitted to visit her in Myanmar. Her older brother, Aung San Oo, with whom she is not close, is a US citizen and lives in the United States.

While fiercely challenging the restrictions on her whenever she could, Aung San Suu Kyi was careful not to step over the line and give the military regime any excuse to take more drastic action against her. So there was always an element of pragmatism, mixed with principle, in her approach. She occasionally met foreign journalists at this time, but was always extremely cautious in what she said to them. Visiting journalists, somewhat in her thrall, may not have always understood the subtlety of her position. However, Suu Kyi's position on political negotiations with the military regime during this period was not especially flexible or successful: she always insisted on a 'dialogue' with the NLD and ethnic groups as a first step in the process of political reconciliation, when it was apparent that the military would not treat her as an equal, and would not elevate or enhance her political standing with the ethnic groups. She always sought to deal directly with regime head Senior General Than Shwe, who was not known for being flexible, open-minded, or well disposed towards her. She rarely raised 'reconciliation' as a goal, which the military might have found harder to object to than 'negotiations'. She generally avoided specifying any particular topic or issue as being one on which the NLD held an incontrovertible position. She gave the impression that she did not recognise or accept that she was not in a position to call the shots, and she would never settle for anything else. Meanwhile, she confronted the regime most vigorously on issues such as her ability to travel, and (not unreasonably) her personal access to lawyers and doctors. Only rarely did she identify a substantive issue or problem as requiring the regime to listen to her views. In other words, the ingredients for a perpetual stand-off between the two principal protagonists were fixed by both sides, and had scarcely moved since 1990.

## Fortunate good access

Normally, a new ambassador could seek a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi after presenting credentials to the head of state and making an introductory call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Military intelligence would decide whether or not to permit and facilitate a meeting, which normally took place at her University Avenue residence. Even this process meant a certain amount of contact between Suu Kyi and the military regime. It was never entirely clear who was responsible for approving the meeting, and whether or not it took place promptly. My first meeting with Suu Kyi in 2000 was arranged through this process, and I do not recall any delays or issues. She had known several of my predecessors, and through them and a few Australians who managed to visit her, seemed to have a high regard for Australia, although not for the Australian Government's initiatives seeking limited engagement with the military regime. The titular head of the NLD at this time, Chairman U Aung Shwe, was a former Ambassador to Australia, so Australian connections with the NLD were good, although not nearly as close as those between Suu Kyi and the US and UK governments.

It was normal at this time for ambassadors of those countries who gave moral support to the NLD to attend occasional important meetings organised by them at party headquarters at Shwegonedine Road in Yangon. Suu Kyi might attend such meetings, but it was not normally possible to talk to NLD leaders on such occasions. On other occasions, it was sometimes possible to arrange meetings with other members of the NLD Central Executive Committee, such as Chairman U Aung Shwe, Deputy Chairman U Tin Oo, and party spokesman U Lwin. It was never easy to meet NLD leaders under such circumstances, but it was possible if one persevered. Some embassies — mainly those from ASEAN and nearby Asian countries — never attempted to meet NLD leaders, on the grounds that the military regime did not want such contacts to occur. Interestingly, when UN Special Envoy Razali Ismail paid his first visit in the middle of 2000, he sought my assistance to arrange (and provide a venue for) his first meeting with the leadership

of the NLD. With Canberra's agreement, that meeting with NLD Deputy Chair Tin Oo took place at the Australian Ambassador's residence in June 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, under such restrictions, Suu Kyi had very limited or no contact with her supporters abroad — whether Burmese pro-democracy activists in exile, of whom there were several hundred thousand, including a government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB),<sup>2</sup> led by Suu Kyi's cousin, Dr Sein Win, or foreign supporters such as the Burma Campaigns in the United States, the UK, and Australia. The NCGUB included a number of NLD members who had been elected in the 1990 elections, a few of whom had permanent residence status in Australia. Suu Kyi rarely touched on her interest in or contacts with Australia in conversations with me; it is not clear whether or not this was deliberate. A number of Australians and Burmese living in Australia purported to be loyal supporters, and followed Suu Kyi's actions and words very closely. (Many young Burmese in Australia were strong NLD supporters, but many older Burmese-born residents of Australia were disinterested in politics.)

When discussing political developments, Suu Kyi always spoke carefully and deliberately, and was usually prepared to cover a wide range of topics. She seemed fully committed to the domestic and international efforts to achieve political reconciliation in Myanmar, even though the prospects for success did not seem high and she was not necessarily negotiating from a position of obvious strength. She never disguised her profound mistrust of the military regime, but did not needlessly pursue unrealistic political goals. Despite the gloomy situation facing the country and its people, she was essentially optimistic about her own role and the future. She did not seem unduly concerned that reform in Myanmar would probably not be achieved without considerable international support, and indeed

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1 I had known Razali previously when we were both serving as diplomats in Vientiane, and while the UN's Yangon Office could have easily arranged this meeting for Razali, he preferred to operate independently to a certain extent. He obviously would not ask the military regime to arrange his meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, nor did the Malaysian Embassy have the necessary contacts. After this, Razali met Suu Kyi in her residence in programs arranged for him by the Myanmar authorities.

2 Until February 2000, Amanda Zappia had been the NCGUB's official representative in Australia.

often explained how she thought this international support should be mobilised and channelled. The central tenet of her approach at this time was a call for ‘genuine dialogue’ with the military leadership, but she tended not to espouse specific, detailed policies.

Naturally, Suu Kyi herself deeply resented the conditions of the unjustifiable restrictions placed on her by the regime, without any charges being brought against her, and without any court imposing such measures, since she and the NLD had not committed any offences. In fact, these were measures imposed under martial law, although this was not often stated publicly. One effect of Suu Kyi’s continuous objection to these restrictions during the period 1998–May 2002 were her endless attempts to assert her basic rights, to defy the authorities, and to travel outside Yangon. These sometimes led to rather theatrical confrontations in odd circumstances, such as her being held for several days on a bridge on the outskirts of Yangon in 1998 and again in 2000, and being refused a ticket on the train to Mandalay in 2000 (which was the reason she was returned to house arrest in August 2000). These were examples of bravery and fierce civil disobedience on the part of Suu Kyi, but they were also humiliating, risky, and had somewhat unpredictable consequences. They did not seem to achieve any concrete outcomes, but did gain considerable international publicity (but not domestically, because of the tight censorship imposed over domestic media). When these incidents occurred, Australia and other pro-democratic countries were mostly concerned about Suu Kyi’s well-being (although there was not much we could do on her behalf) and for the possibility of the situation escalating out of control.

## Being put in one’s place by an ‘icon’

After Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest through the intervention of UN Special Envoy Razali Ismail in May 2002, it was possible to maintain something closer to a normal relationship with her. Appointments could be arranged directly and as frequently as was mutually convenient, and it was possible to invite her to functions at embassies. In 2000, the Australian Embassy arranged for a working lunch for Suu Kyi at the Australian Ambassador’s residence with representatives of the non-government humanitarian organisations that were run from Australia: World Vision, and CARE. Before this,

Suu Kyi had not had opportunities to talk to INGOs about their work in Myanmar. It seemed important that they have a chance to meet her and hear her views, and that she have the same opportunity to find out how they operated on the ground. The lunch went smoothly enough and achieved its purposes. I recall that Suu Kyi fiercely criticised one of the Burmese INGO staff guests (whom she was meeting for the first time) for, in effect, collaborating with the military regime, criticism that was both inaccurate and unfair. Indeed, Suu Kyi interrogated one of the World Vision Burmese female staff so intensely that the woman (a doctor) was reduced to tears.

Under any circumstances, Aung San Suu Kyi would be an impressive person to meet, and much has been said and written about meetings with her. As with others who met her, Suu Kyi's presence, poise, and personality left a deep impression on me. She knows other Australians, and considers Australia to be one of the countries strongly supporting her, both through the Burmese diaspora, and through political and other connections. So she attached some importance to what Australia did in relation to Myanmar, even though she was yet to visit Australia. Her unfailing politeness does not disguise her genuine appreciation for Australian efforts to help the Burmese people, although she might not always agree with every aspect of official Australian policy. She seems to enjoy having unquestioning US and UK support, and would notice the difference in the attitudes of Australian Government leaders. (The Australian Labor Party is probably more disposed to hold up Suu Kyi as a figure of authority, given the close-to-fraternal ties it has with the NLD.) Recalling some years later his own encounter with Suu Kyi in October 2002, Alexander Downer described her as 'feisty and surprisingly aggressive'.<sup>3</sup>

Suu Kyi let it be known quite bluntly that she did not think such INGOs were doing enough to fight against unreasonable or restrictive practices imposed on them by the Myanmar authorities at the expense of the interests and well-being of ordinary people. She believed that most INGOs would do whatever was necessary to stay in Myanmar, even if this meant violating their own principles and offending basic proprieties. However, at that time, Suu Kyi and the NLD did not fully understand the difficult situation faced by INGO staff; they certainly

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3 Alexander Downer, 'Burma's Agent of Change', *The Advertiser*, 1 April 2012. Available at [www.adelaidenow.com.au/archive/news/downer-burmas-agent-of-change/story-e6freac1-1226315903405](http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/archive/news/downer-burmas-agent-of-change/story-e6freac1-1226315903405).

did not realise the lengths that INGO staff, such as those at World Vision, went to quite frequently in order to rescue young Burmese boys who had been recruited against their will as child soldiers. Certainly, under the military regime INGOs had not been allowed to carry out overt political activities, while the NLD's contact with foreigners had not been encouraged.

If I had a particular need to talk to Aung San Suu Kyi about a work matter, the routine was to phone the NLD office to request an appointment. Suu Kyi normally agreed to such requests for a meeting, and I would inform DFAT in Canberra when a meeting with her was scheduled. I do not recall receiving much in the way of guidance or instructions from DFAT ahead of meetings with Suu Kyi. On the whole, it was not necessary to receive detailed 'spoon feeding' before meeting her; some elements of conversations with her were taken for granted: the state of her relations with the regime, her views on the overall political situation, any particular issues or requests she might have, and her views on any specific Australia-related matters. Suu Kyi would respond directly on any matters raised: she was quite comfortable sharing her views on the regime, which were predictably critical, and founded on deep mistrust and suspicion; she would speak with authority on NLD policy, but rarely, if ever, acknowledged any faults on the part of the NLD; she was always full of praise for the NLD and her supporters inside the country, but was noticeably less enthusiastic about her overseas supporters, Burmese or foreign, whom she did not often mention; and she never complained about her personal situation, and would not normally touch on her own health or well-being. On the other hand, she tended to be quite tight-lipped about her dealings with the military regime, and never disclosed confidential discussions with UN envoys or other high-level visitors.

Suu Kyi responded to a request from me for a meeting by saying that she would be happy to call on my wife at the ambassador's residence for afternoon tea, and if I wished to drop in, that was up to me. Years later, Suu Kyi would always show fondness for my wife, and when Suu Kyi visited The Australian National University in November 2013 to receive an honorary degree, my wife (a graduate and former employee of ANU) attended the meeting between Suu Kyi and ANU academic staff, and there is a memorable photograph by an ANU photographer of Suu Kyi embracing my wife at one break during the meeting.



We had one other form of regular contact with Aung San Suu Kyi, which was not 'authorised' by anyone. My wife kept (at our own expense) some 20 chickens in a chicken pen inside the extensive grounds of the ambassador's residence. The chickens produced more eggs than we could possibly eat, so we offered some to Aung San Suu Kyi on a regular basis, as we knew she was supporting a large number of people at her residence. The arrangement was that our private driver would deliver eggs to Suu Kyi's University Avenue residence once a week. After a while, our private car would be recognised as it approached her gate and allowed to pass through unchecked with its valuable consignment. Our driver was delighted to be able to do this, and Suu Kyi was always effusive in her thanks for the eggs. Of course, I assume other well-wishers were also helping Suu Kyi and the NLD in comparable ways, but I never asked about this.

In conversation, Suu Kyi was usually relaxed and showed her wide interests — from domestic affairs to grand policy. But she was always conscious that any comment she made would be passed on and could take on wider importance, and she gave the impression that everything she said was very carefully calculated. She was quick to correct any loose wording or generalised comments. She was always contemptuous and mistrustful of the military regime, and did not seem to have much regard for members of the Myanmar bureaucracy who were prepared to work for it. She did not hide her admiration for the US and the UK, who gave her unstinting support. She was never disrespectful of the United Nations, although it was sometimes clear that she did not always place much confidence in them to assist her cause. Her attitude to the Burmese diaspora was interesting: she was obviously grateful for their great dedication and commitment, but often expressed views slightly at variance from what the pro-democracy activists were saying. However, she was careful not to criticise or openly disagree with them.

Although she assumed a modest manner, and was not boastful or pompous, she was very conscious of her own importance, was naturally formal and courteous by nature, and came across as rather proper. But she also had a sense of humour, and often joked about some of the circumstances she had to face. Suu Kyi was not impressed by the Australian-run *Myanmar Times*, which she would have regarded as an apologist for the regime and altogether too close to military intelligence. Suu Kyi could, however, be prickly to deal with, and I was

certainly not alone in experiencing this. Most written accounts about her tend to reflect an obvious hagiographic perspective, but even the most detailed biography by British writer Justin Wintle mentions Suu Kyi giving insincere people ‘short shrift’.<sup>4</sup> Quite a few Australians interested in Burma would have met her, and some claimed to be in regular communication with her.

## Consulting Aung San Suu Kyi as ‘Leader of the Opposition’

When Aung San Suu Kyi was free to travel and meet whomever she wished, it was natural to view her as the de facto Leader of the Opposition and therefore the person to be consulted about any policy matters or initiatives that were being considered by foreign governments. The US and the UK (who gained more frequent access to her than any other embassies) took this to the ultimate extent, and effectively gave Suu Kyi a veto over their policies towards Myanmar. This was particularly galling for the military regime (as it was intended to be), but it also reduced the flexibility the Americans and British had in pursuing their Burma policies. If Suu Kyi could not make up her mind over an issue, US and UK policies could be frozen instead of adjusting flexibly. Their approach also invested Suu Kyi with a degree of infallibility, which most Burmese would not have ascribed to her even at the time, and almost certainly not in 2013.

Australian Governments did not go this far, nor did most other governments. This meant that while we had good and supportive relations with Aung San Suu Kyi, there was sometimes an element of tension if Australia was attempting something that Suu Kyi did not approve of. Australia’s human rights capacity-building workshops were a good example of this. In October 2002, *The Age* journalist Mark Baker was able to interview Aung San Suu Kyi shortly after Alexander Downer’s visit to Yangon. Baker’s report — carried in *The Age* under the headline ‘Suu Kyi Attacks Canberra’ — quoted Aung San Suu Kyi as saying:

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4 Justin Wintle, *Perfect Hostage: A Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*, London: Hutchinson, 2007.

Australia should endorse a tough regime of sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union and limit its contacts with the regime until it honoured promises to start talks on political reform. She described a controversial Australian program of human rights training courses for Burmese officials as pointless and a waste of money.<sup>5</sup>

Baker — who had been unable to obtain a journalist's visa for the Downer visit in 2002, despite the Australian Embassy's interventions with the Myanmar authorities to allow Australian journalists to cover the visit — describes Aung San Suu Kyi's views as a 'rebuttal' to Alexander Downer. Afterwards, this article was not directly raised with Aung San Suu Kyi: it did not help Australia with the Burma lobby in Australia, nor did it particularly help Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar or with international agencies who had publicly supported this Australian program. At that time, Baker's article would not have been seen by many Burmese in Myanmar at all.

Aung San Suu Kyi had previously discussed Australia's human rights training program with former Australian Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti when he visited Myanmar in 1999.<sup>6</sup> Suu Kyi was invited to meet with the Australian training team of human rights experts (David Kinley, Chris Sidoti, and Kate Eastman) again in 2002 over lunch at the Australian Ambassador's residence.<sup>7</sup> On this occasion, she made it clear that she did not like this program, as in her view it would provide 'cover' for the military regime without reducing human rights abuses, and because the program would not include the main perpetrators of human rights abuses, the army. She was not at all convinced Australian experts' accounts of the free hand they were given to tackle any human rights issues head on, or by the indications they recounted of officials and law enforcement officers finding value in the workshops' treatment of human rights issues that were directly relevant to them, such as interrogation of prisoners, or treatment of prison inmates. She was not at all uncomfortable telling the rare visiting Australian journalist about her misgivings.

5 Mark Baker, 'Suu Kyi Attacks Canberra', *The Age*, 7 October 2002.

6 Craig Skehan, 'Suu Kyi Warming to Rights Seminars', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 2001.

7 The fourth team member, then at Monash University, and alternating as a trainer, was Dr Sarah Joseph.

There was at least one other opportunity where it was possible to consult Suu Kyi in a low-key way about a new Australian Government initiative. This was the proposal by Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer to provide agricultural research assistance to Myanmar through the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR).<sup>8</sup> When the head of ACIAR's International Project Branch, Allan Barden, was visiting Yangon in late 2002 for initial discussions about this proposal with the Myanmar Government, it seemed sensible to consult Suu Kyi about the proposal as well, since the visit coincided with her movements being unrestricted. Suu Kyi naturally took this in her stride and listened carefully as the proposal was outlined. She said she could see the benefits of the project, and, fortunately, did not express any objection to the proposal (as we had not asked DFAT directly about consulting Suu Kyi on the idea). Her only comment was to urge that the project at all times keep the interests of the Myanmar villagers uppermost. This was indeed precisely the way ACIAR projects were carried out, and this particular project (about rodent infestation of rice crops) was exemplary in being embedded in grass-roots needs.<sup>9</sup>

The Australian Embassy briefed Suu Kyi on the Australian Federal Police's engagement in capacity building and law enforcement cooperation with the Myanmar Government as part of broader anti-narcotics cooperation arrangements. This cooperation later expanded to other areas of transnational crime, such as money laundering and people trafficking. Suu Kyi was generally supportive of such programs. If she had misgivings about the Myanmar Police Force as one of the arms of Myanmar's successive authoritarian regimes — occasionally bringing them into conflict with her — she did not allow these views to colour her reaction to such programs. Such Australian Embassy meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi mostly took place at NLD Headquarters at Shwegonedine, and a few other NLD leaders might also participate. Meetings at her University Avenue residence were more unusual, and reserved for high-level visitors such as Alexander Downer. But at those brief times when she was free, it was not unusual to meet her at other functions and venues.

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8 Alexander Downer had previously tried the same idea on another apparently impenetrable regime, the Democratic Republic of Korea, with some success.

9 Media Release, 'ACIAR's first project in Burma', 9 August 2003.

The Australian Embassy had always maintained regular friendly contacts with the NLD leadership: Suu Kyi herself if and when that was possible; U Aung Shwe, Chairman, and former Ambassador to Australia; U Tin Oo, Deputy Chair; U Kyi Maung, Central Executive Committee member; and U Lwin, Spokesman. Telephone communications with the NLD were often interrupted, and the NLD had neither fax nor (at that time) email facilities. Visits to the rather dilapidated NLD head office in the Shwegonedine area of Yangon under full scrutiny of police and intelligence guards were not uncommon. I once tried unsuccessfully to visit the large NLD office in Mandalay. Regime harassment of the NLD and its members was quite systematic and severe throughout 2000–03. I observed NLD offices that had been opened in Mawlamyaing and Indaw (Sagaing Division), but I was admonished by an official guide for photographing a (closed) NLD office in Mogok in early 2003.

During May 2002–May 2003, although Aung San Suu Kyi was notionally free to receive visitors, the military regime still tried to discourage contact with her. Of course, they could not normally prevent UN envoys or ASEAN envoys from meeting her, even when her movements were restricted. (They did manage to dampen down media briefings being given in Yangon about these meetings.) I recall only one situation where Aung San Suu Kyi participated in discussions with the Yangon diplomatic community at which she was essentially treated as Leader of the Opposition. This was a meeting between the international donors and NGOs about HIV/AIDS, which had been publicly proposed by UN Special Representative Razali Ismail as a potential field for cooperation between the military regime and the NLD. The meeting was uneventful. It was more an exchange of views than anything else. Suu Kyi did not dominate the discussions and was very attentive when experts were providing their views. The NLD had been somewhat more ‘progressive’ on the issue of HIV/AIDS compared to the military regime, and had opened its own HIV/AIDS ‘Prevention and Treatment Centre’ as early as 2002, but had not really sought to make HIV/AIDS a differentiating issue.<sup>10</sup> However, the idea of some partnership between the military regime and the NLD on a ‘national emergency’ issue such as HIV/AIDS did not progress

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10 An International Crisis Group ‘Asia Briefing’ in December 2004 described the NLD attitude to the HIV/AIDS crisis at that time.

and was eventually dropped. There was never any indication that the Than Shwe regime was prepared to pursue even such a limited 'power sharing' experiment at that time. But, more than a decade later, this is exactly what has happened under the Thein Sein Government, which invited Suu Kyi to participate in parliamentary activities on the Rohingya communal violence issue and on rule of law generally.

Dealings with Aung San Suu Kyi about the political situation were always interesting, and she was always happy to discuss important policy matters, but she could be quite evasive when it suited her. For example, she gave away very little about her ongoing talks with the military regime, which until the end she maintained did not constitute the two-way dialogue among equals that she had in mind. One generally hesitated to offer her advice, as she had usually formed her views on issues. The strong undertone of nationalism underlying her views was sometimes unexpected, but should not have been surprising. For example, she was inordinately proud of Burmese achievements of any kind, and once said, when acknowledging the special role the Burmese military would always play in Myanmar, that she would expect the Burmese army to beat the Thai army in any contest of military power. This was before the 2002 border clashes with Thailand, in which the *Tatmadaw* performed poorly against their Thai counterparts. She made it clear that she has a soft spot for younger people, but equally always spoke with genuine respect for the elderly 'uncles' with whom she shared the leadership of the NLD.

## Suu Kyi's supporters and detractors

Like other ambassadors in Yangon at this time, I occasionally met several of Suu Kyi's advisors, including her doctor, Tin Myo Win (Douglas), and her lawyers, all of whom were subjected to severe and entirely gratuitous harassment by the authorities. They were all brave, loyal, and totally committed supporters, usually very discreet and careful in what they said, even to diplomats. All admired and respected Suu Kyi enormously and were extremely dedicated to working with her. Sometimes, however, they admitted to having some differences of opinion with Suu Kyi. Her economic advisor, the former Myanmar diplomat and UN economist, U Myint, sometimes mentioned having problems convincing her of the rationale for his economic views, and

much later (after 2012) would lose influence with her. Some of Suu Kyi's other advisors would remain loyal to her, including after her election to parliament in April 2012.

One elected member of the NLD who spoke openly of his personal disagreement with Suu Kyi was U Ohn Maung, who was elected as an MP for Inle Lake in Shan State in 1990, and who, like most other NLD MPs, was subsequently arrested for his political activities. After his release from gaol, in the early 2000s Ohn Maung became the proprietor of the Inle Princess Hotel, one of the first of the new generation of tourist hotels on the shore of Inle Lake. Ohn Maung, whose health had been seriously affected by his treatment in prison, spoke of disagreeing with Suu Kyi about the attempts by some in the West to impose bans on tourism to Myanmar. Ohn Maung of course did not agree with this, and said that he failed in his attempts to persuade Suu Kyi of the direct and indirect benefits of tourism for the local people. He always maintained that human rights abuses in Shan State, and around Inle Lake in particular, had decreased noticeably after tourists began coming to the area. Suu Kyi was disposed to support the tourism ban, although she was sometimes careful how she spoke publicly about this. There were never really good arguments for banning tourism, which directly and indirectly benefited local people and the local economies.

Amongst the general public, as far as one could tell in a country that had no opinion polls at that time, Suu Kyi did indeed enjoy remarkable popular support and popularity. It was hard to assess the extent of support the NLD and Suu Kyi had amongst the bureaucracy, as they were not permitted to have anything to do with her, or to mention her name (hence the euphemism 'the Lady'). One would expect that a large number of bureaucrats would have supported her. When she was released from house arrest in May 2002 and was quickly giving interviews at a press conference, I was speaking by phone to a senior bureaucrat in his office during working hours and was surprised when he made it clear that he was watching the CNN coverage of her release by satellite broadcast in his office and described it to me as 'great news'.

On the other hand, the Burmese army was widely said to 'hate' Suu Kyi. Working in Yangon at this time, one certainly often heard members of the military (even the Office of Strategic Studies) speaking critically

of Suu Kyi, but this was often a public expression of what they were expected to say (or what they had been trained to say). There is no reason to think that no members of the military supported or even admired Suu Kyi and the NLD, but neither is there any basis to think that this would translate into an internal rift in the army. Suu Kyi herself sometimes spoke quite favourably of the military intelligence liaison officers with whom she dealt regularly.

More generally, I met several Burmese not connected to the military regime but involved in politics who openly claimed that they did not agree with Suu Kyi, did not have a high opinion of the NLD, and believed that the NLD was not the best political alternative. Indeed, it was rather surprising to encounter quite a lot of Burmese who individually believed that unswerving Western support for the NLD was not the best option for Myanmar. It was also common among ethnic groups to find a considerable degree of doubt about Suu Kyi and the NLD—they commonly questioned whether she knew and understood ethnic concerns, and doubted that she really had ethnic interests at heart. One example I encountered directly was the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) leadership at the time, who in 2002 had still not met Suu Kyi, and asked whether I thought they should do so.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, I encouraged them to set up a meeting with her, which I understand they subsequently did. However, it was notable that in some cases where Burmese had appeared publicly to turn against Suu Kyi, they were subject to campaigns of abuse and criticism in the pro-democratic media.<sup>12</sup>

Journalists, diplomats, and foreigners who had opportunities to meet and know Suu Kyi were uniformly impressed by her personality, her charisma, her poise, her commitment, and her broad command of issues. It was normal to hear more fulsome praise and endorsement of Suu Kyi's views from Americans and Europeans than from Burmese. Most Americans and Europeans were not really objective in their

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11 I had met the then KIO leader Saboi Jum both in Yangon and Myitkina, and I assumed he was checking with many people before he took a possibly risky step, which could arouse the SPDC's ire.

12 I have in mind the case of the journalist, Ma Thein Gi, who had for a time in the 1990s been personal assistant to Aung San Suu Kyi.



reactions to her. This contrasts with the views one might hear from Australians, who seemed more prepared to mention her inflexibility, stubbornness, and occasionally questionable political judgment.<sup>13</sup>

## Meeting again 10 years later

Almost 10 years later, in late 2010, I received an unexpected telephone call from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar Director asking me for details of my last meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi in early 2003. It transpired that Suu Kyi was about to be released from house arrest and the Australian Chargé d'Affaires was to be among the diplomats she would meet on her release (at her request). However, in the intervening years since my last meeting with her at a private social function in Yangon in April 2003, none of the succeeding Australian ambassadors had met Suu Kyi; it had just not been possible for them to do so, as she had been under house arrest informally or formally for all of that time. I had not been able to bid her farewell, as she was attacked and arrested on 30 May 2003 just before the end of my assignment. I wrote her a farewell letter before my departure from Myanmar the following month, June 2003, but she almost certainly would not have received it.

I had met Aung San Suu Kyi next when I visited Myanmar in September 2012, when I was a member of an unofficial Australian human rights delegation. That meeting actually took place in the new capital, Naypyitaw, as she was by then an elected member of parliament.)

In November 2013, Aung San Suu Kyi would finally visit Australia for the first time, and was awarded an honorary doctorate of letters at ANU, when my wife and I met her again.

During her visit to the east coast of Australia, much larger numbers of the Burmese community than expected attended functions in Suu Kyi's honour in Canberra, Sydney, and Melbourne, and it was apparent that many Burmese who were not necessarily politically involved nevertheless admired her and were keen to see her in the flesh. So, whether at home or overseas, she commanded enormous respect and affection from ordinary Burmese people.

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13 A good example is Hazel Lang's frank 2006 article, 'The Courage of Aung San Suu Kyi', *Overland*, Issue 183, Winter 2006.

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