



## Aung San Suu Kyi's Letters: Writing Political Dissent in Burma

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### ABSTRACT

Aung San Suu Kyi's letters, essays and speeches came to play significant roles in foregrounding democracy in Burma after 1988. In choosing a letter form, she has found the direct address to the world audience, engaging personal accountability to the purpose of voicing more than what is personal. The letters facilitated the nuances of Burmese culture, religion, and ordinary lifestyle, such as festivals, teashops, travelling, and grassroots experiences, to address deep political problems in Burma. In these writings, both the learning of modern practices of citizenship as well as her faith in the principles of Buddhism are blended to form a critique of repressive military rule in Myanmar. These writings have firmly founded principles of protecting human rights and freedom in contemporary Myanmar.

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Letter as a form of writing is a space pertaining to privacy, intimacy, domesticated, imaginative, feminised, and non-standardised form. In the twenty-first century, the letter form, as Elizabeth Cook observed, was always already political and crucially transnational (Cook, 1996). This is crucial as women writers can address their audience by navigating the urgency, immediacy, and importance of their works and reflections. As observed by Gilroy and Verhoeven, this form of writing can de-essentialise the personal nature of the letter and show its disruptive potential (2000, pp. 10-11). The contention of the letter as a form of political writing represents the act of knowing and the disruption it causes. Letters open the writer's 'double entendre draws her story into history' as Cixous discussed in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (Cixous, 1976, p. 881). Letters are interstice spaces for continual engagement of experience of representation, dissent, identity, and subjectivities.

It is a site of emancipation and transformation of self, of identity formation. As such, women writers who attempted to write in this form are privy to specific audiences, selective and personal at times. The

general parlance is that it is for a close circuit. When such a form is engaged to disseminate an opinion and observation to reflect on a shared experience, cause, feeling, or memory, invoking the readers to partake in the experience, it ceases to be personal anymore. The letters of Aung San Suu Kyi (Kyi, November 1995-December 1996) invoke the shared experience of the people of Myanmar as to how painful it was to live under the junta. Her letters brought a kaleidoscopic experience of the past into lost smell, sound, sights, joy, and the shadow of sadness cast by an enveloping military regime. These letters also indicated a journey of self-discovery. Seeing her writings against the backdrop of the military junta, one can find Aung San Suu Kyi's faith in the ordinary lives, traditions, freedom and camaraderie, resilience, and hope of her people. These letters also left a legacy of a personal narrative of the spirit of freedom. The legacy was not only in the name of her person but carried the strength to believe in the cause, which united the writer of the letters to the people.

Aung San Suu Kyi's political letters were a critique of the repressive junta that had been controlling Myanmar since 1962.<sup>1</sup> Myanmar got a brief break from the rule of the military junta after the massive electoral success of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) as Myanmar had the opportunity of living under an elected government from 2012-2021, which included resounding victory of NLD in 2015 Election. However, the junta again returned in February 2021 deposing the elected government. With it came vengeance for its electoral loss and the insecurity with Aun San Suu Kyi in power. As a result, she was sentenced to another 27 years of imprisonment after the junta was back in power.

### **Reeling under the junta**

In 1962, General Ne Win overthrew the government in a military coup and instituted what he called a Revolutionary Council with his handpicked military officers. He abolished the constitution and began to rule Burma by decree. Under the decree, many foreigners were expelled, borders were shut down, and all industry was put under state control. The press was absorbed by the government or forced out of existence, a new censorship board was formed, private schools were nationalised, and a government-controlled Burmese language curriculum was imposed throughout the country (Fink, 2001, p. 34). General Ne Win's totalitarian rule marked a period of food shortages, economic hardships, and violent

suppression of dissent. Further, to legitimise the military rule, there was a national referendum in December 1973 in which people had to vote for or against the new constitution, which called for a unitary state under one-party rule. General Ne Win sought to use the BSPP or Burmese Socialist Programme Party, which was the sole political party in Burma, through sinister designs of booth tampering and other unfair electoral practices. The referendum that gave his rule 90 per cent support with 95 per cent of eligible voters was utilised to cement the allegiance of civil servants and others to his military-backed regime. In 1981, after nearly 20 years in power, Ne Win stepped down as president but continued to be chairman of the ruling party. During his reign, a number of idiosyncratic experiment was performed in matters related to policy and administration. The uprising of August 8, 1988, was against Ne Win's atrocious rule and violation of human rights. The uprising became a national revolution demanding the restoration of democratic government in Burma. Over a six-month period following the uprising, as many as 10,000 citizens had been killed by Burmese security forces. Government covered-up attempts inflamed public opinion while thousands of students were arrested and carted off to prisons. In one of the worst incidents, soldiers followed a group of protesting nurses into the compound of Rangoon General Hospital and opened fire, killing and wounding doctors, nurses, and bystanders (Watcher, 1989, p. 177).

Ne Win resigned as chairman of the BSPP. But, instead of loosening its military hold, the ruling council used the unrest to impose martial law and to form the ultra-repressive State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (Maung, 1990). SLORC was made up of 19 top military commanders. The SLORC's main targets have been the students, the minority insurgents, and the three principal political opponents: Aung San Suu Kyi, U Tin Oo, and U Nu of the National League for Democracy. As Muang writes of the political changes of the military regime,

“In the name of the rule of law, military commanders have passed arbitrary laws with the single purpose of suppressing freedom of expression and assembly, among them the infamous Order No. 2/88 prohibiting outdoor assembly of more than four persons, Notification No.8/88, Martial Law Nos. 1/89 and 2/89, and the revocation of the Press Registration Law of 1962.” (Maung, 1990, p. 619)

In recent times, the nature of the military institution in relation to politics of control has not changed much. The National League for Democracy came to power in 2016 after securing a massive mandate a year earlier; the new government was concerned with reforming existing regulations and practices in jade and gemstone mining licences. As Oliver Slow observed in his book *Return of the Junta*, if the

reform was complete, it could have a hard blow on the military's economic interests as it controlled almost 10 per cent of all jade and gem licences. The military coup in February 2021 was reasonably anticipated. And the military culture of impunity enforced by the Tatmadaw (the junta) since the 1960s has been further deepened. With all the routine bouts of violence and terror, killing has returned amid a widespread anti-military protest in Myanmar (Slow, 2023, p. 63).

### **Letters of Political Dissent**

Starting from her release in 1995, Aung San Suu Kyi wrote with a distinctive narrative form in her letters to address a more significant part of the audiences throughout the world. They served not only as the backdrop of the democratic movement in Burma but also highlighted the most ordinary things in the life of the familiar people. The letters were used as a campaign against the military regime by explaining the philosophy of a democratic movement. In fact, the letters brought into focus various issues that the people of Burma should be aware of to strengthen the struggle for democracy across the country. As a person who was deeply involved in the movement for democracy in Burma, it was always her intention to concentrate on the sufferings of the people who had no political rights in the country. Politics for Aung San Suu Kyi was about people, and she tried to connect people and politics through her letters. One may understand her political letters as fundamental components of the struggle to witness political reforms in Burma. Reinstating the idea of Carol Hanisch's 'personal is political', her letters can be seen as a site of protest, as a collective voice, and a hope for change and emancipation, a readiness for consciousness and commitment.

The letters touched almost every aspect of peoples' lives and their relation to the ongoing struggle. She always tried to bring the vigour of her movement through ordinary, cultural events, thereby invoking the masses that the spirit of freedom, peace and fearlessness were their cherished possession as witnessed in their history and thus should be upheld in the ongoing struggle. It is this sense of inheritance of Burmese identity that the letters inspire to correspond. For example, her letters intended to revive, in the wake of the years of authoritarian rule in Burma, the tradition of social awareness and political activism established by the students at Rangoon University during the colonial days. She reflected that the young minds of the country should believe that security for their families could not be protected if freedom of thought and freedom of political action were not guaranteed by the law of the land. This needed a political defiance, which, according to her, was the natural response of anybody who disagreed with the opinions of the government in power. Aung San Suu Kyi believed that the great majority of people in

Burma had been perpetually engaged with political “defiance in their hearts, if not in their actions” (Kyi, *Defining Political Defiance, Democracy*, September 16 1996).

In one of the letters, democracy was understood as a choice, and she observed that it should be sufficient to indicate a pluralistic political approach. This was what she understood of democracy in Burma and rejected NLD being called as opposition by the junta. To call a party after having won an unequivocal mandate of the people, Aung San Suu Kyi observed in the same letter was to misunderstand the basic concepts of democracy (ibid.). In similar letters related to the 1990 election, her commitment to the value of democracy was presented as a reassurance to the courageous people of Burma who displayed their faith in the electoral signboards of NLD amid the brutalities of the junta (Kyi, *Seeds of Democracy Flowers in Rural Burma*, November 27 1995). She believed that love and truth could move people more strongly than any form of coercion (Kyi, *Thamanya: A Place of Peace and Kindness*, December 10 1995). This remained a strong guiding force for her as she always believed and maintained that the foremost thing in democracy was to rule with the consent of the people. But that was happening outside of Burma. She envisaged the possibility of democratic governance in the country and was looking for this possibility in the direction of political reform of those rules and practices that suppressed political dissent in Burma. Her letters offered glimpses of the ordinary to recover the spirit of patriotism as a principle of defence of the people’s right to political dissent and reform. She took on the regime with the wings her letters gifted to her and spread the joy of cultural fervour to the people (ibid.). Quite often, she wrote in her letters to reclaim the festivals of joy and love. She could create love, friendship, and joy among the people as the foundation of the fundamental struggle for democracy. Friendship was a bond that could fight the atrocities of military rule (Kyi, *NLD Stresses Non Violent Path Towards Democracy*, June 17 1996). For Aung San Suu Kyi, traditional festivals are celebrations for participation in healthy community lives. The joy of commingling, whether in water festivals or New Year festivities, is an expression of the people. She appealed in her letters that people must ignite community participation and not be stifled by repressive measures (Kyi, *Burma's New Year Festivities Stifled by SLORC*, May 6 1996). She noted that ‘teashop sitting’ was once a scene of informal talk and discussion on various topics and appealed to the people of Burma to revive these conversations. She was aware that the ordinary situation of people's talk drifted from the earlier practices under the influence of state surveillance. Her letter on the need to revive the tradition of such talk hinted at a possible articulation of political dissent amid repression (Kyi, *Gathering at Teashop Popular Pastime*, April 14 1996).

## Freedom and democracy in Aung San Suu Kyi's other writings

In an illuminating article in *Freedom from Fear*,<sup>2</sup> A collection of her essays written between 1988 and 1989, including works of others, Philip Kreager makes a strong case for Gandhi's influence on Aung San Suu Kyi. He asserts that the principles underlying her politics are "derived from her study and reflection on Gandhi's philosophy and practice of non-violent civil disobedience" (Kyi, 1991, p. 287). According to Josef Silverstein in the same book, Aung San Suu Kyi has been able to convince the Burmese people that Buddhist principles of human freedom can be linked to socio-political ideas of freedom, which originated in Western thought (ibid., 42).

When Aung San Suu Kyi appeared on the political scene in Burma, the concept of democracy got a new surge in the political life of the people after a quarter of a century of military rule. There was a surge of people's enthusiasm for absorbing the ideas of modern politics and political institutions and positive responses to such basic ideas of representative government, human rights, and the rule of law. The surge of the democratic movement of 1988 gave rise to the hope to realise democracy. Students' movement, intellectuals, old freedom fighters and the masses widely supported the ideals of democracy. She argued that without sophisticated techniques and methods of political and economic analysis typical to the West, the Burmese could also find answers in very ordinary acts of defiance to the possibility of living under democracy amid the terrible conditions in Burma. For her, the 1988 peaceful revolution was an attempt by the people to take back their rights to rule as they wished and reverse the process of decline. She emphasised that the Burmese need not only a change of government but also a change in political values to one that could provide basic human rights, justice, peace, and security. Aung San Suu Kyi observed that the Burmese people needed to explore the political practices of the outside world and blend them with homegrown spiritual and intellectual values. To ensure a nourishment of these political and cultural values, she appealed to inculcate to change the ways children were raised in Burma. Using threats in raising children, according to her, severely deprived the children of their due to be explained. If they were to be explained what they should be doing and should not, they could understand themselves. This mistake of child-rearing in Burma was translated into the political realm when teaching by intimidation was used by the military rulers to rule over the minds of the people as it helped the military government to control them by invoking fear (ibid., 227). Aung San Suu Kyi discussed fear on a psychological ground that could affect the psyche of the people under the military regime. Fear was a

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<sup>2</sup> All references in this section are from this book.

norm used as a strategy by the regime. Within a system which denies the existence of basic human rights, fear became normalised. She emphasised that to bring a democratic revolution, people must stand courageously for their demands. But she emphatically stated that fear was not a natural condition of civilised man, and such is the condition of civilised life to raise their voice for their rights.

The revolution was not only a change in political policies and institutions for improving material conditions but also the very revolution of the spirit. The human spirit to fight for his fundamental rights and freedom can come only through a naturally emancipated spirit which was fearless and true. She appealed to the people to be united, to persevere in the struggle, to make sacrifices in the name of enduring truths, and to resist the corrupting influence of desire, ill will and ignorance. Freedom from fear was both a means and an end. People who would build a nation in which solid democratic institutions were firmly established as a guarantee against state power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear. Freedom for her was more than constitutional guarantees; it was also psychological. In response to being awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, she wrote that ‘man is not truly free if he lives in fear’. For her, fear contributes to corruption ‘when fear is rife, corruption in all forms becomes entrenched’ (ibid., 181). It was her conviction that fear could be conquered if people started from their own upbringing of children by relentlessly guiding them to the principles of courage to face injustice, one’s own regard of rights and duties and of others. She wrote, “Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it, and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it (ibid., 180).”

Since the regime did not recognise the concept of human rights, which is an integral part of the democratic movement in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi noted that the emergence of an alert, energetic, progressive citizenry could resist the atrocious situation. She equated law with justice and order with discipline of people. Her forthright criticism of SLORC’s disrespect for constitutional ideals clearly reflected the political aspiration of the people of Burma. The writings of Aung San Suu Kyi were an attempt to get people reacquainted with the values of freedom, and all her letters and other writings could rekindle the desire to recover lost traditions of the Burmese peoples’ respect for law, freedom, and justice.

Against the backdrop of the return of the Military Junta in 2021 (Slow, 2023), the undying spirit of the letters relentlessly inspires the revolution at heart to reinvigorate and voice fundamental human rights. Aung San Suu Kyi’s writings minutely capture the authoritarian practices of the military rule in Burma

and put them in her engagement with an invocation of a desire and perhaps the destiny of forming a powerful political reformation, all under clearly defined ideas of democracy and freedom. Truly, her writings represent a voice of political dissent in a society that severely lacks freedom and order.

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