

The Daw Suu of BURMA: Between the reaffirmed honours of today and the challenges of tomorrow

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Aung San Suu Kyi, the world-renowned former political prisoner, was in Strasbourg in October 2013 to collect, after 23 years, the Sakharov Prize she won in 1990. For a total of 15 years, Suu Kyi had been placed under house arrest by the Burmese military regime on multiple occasions, until she was finally released in November 2010. The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named in honour of the Russian dissident and activist for civil rights Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov, is the most prestigious human rights prize annually awarded by the European Union to people and organizations in recognition of their struggle for freedom and justice. During the award ceremony at the European Parliament on October 22, Aung San Suu Kyi said in her speech,

This is for me a joyful and deeply meaningful occasion. A joyous one because I have been given the opportunity to thank all of you for the support that you have given me, my party and all those who believe in democracy in Burma, for over two decades... To achieve the position of a society which would have had approval of Professor Sakharov, we would have to work a lot harder. Our people will have to do the greater part of the work, but I do believe that all of you can help us in our endeavours... Freedom of thought is essential to human progress. If we stop freedom of thought we stop progress in our world, because of this it is so important that we teach our children, our young people the importance of freedom of thought. Freedom of thought begins with the right to ask questions, and our people in Burma have not had this right for so long that some of our young people do not quite know how to ask questions.

A worldwide source of inspiration and a symbol of democracy, she was warmly greeted by the entire European Parliament, which welcomed her speech with a standing ovation. However, Mr. Sajjad Haider Karim, the Conservative Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for North West England and the first British-Pakistani European Parliamentarian, noted his disappointment:

I found certain aspects of her engagement with us quite disappointing because the speech that she made really was that of an activist. But she has moved on from that role now, she wants to be the leader of a nation. She had nothing to say about the role of Burma in the region, how by investing in Burma, by creating the sort of society we want to see come about in Burma we can actually bring about change not just in Burma but throughout the region, and I believe Burma can act as a catalyst. Along with that, she made no reference at all to the human rights abuses that are being suffered by minorities such as the Rohingya and indeed the Christian communities as well.

It is certainly true that the advocacy of democracy in a country like Burma necessarily involves a discussion of the various political, civil, social and cultural rights violated. These violations affect the establishment of a fair democracy, where freedom of thought, religion, association and so on are respected as birth rights of every citizen. Although Aung San Suu Kyi is now a free woman, it would be politically very difficult for her, both abroad and in her own country, to make strong statements regarding the Rohingya situation or other issues, given the level of freedom of speech accepted in Burma.

Since 2012, she has been attending parliament as leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the opposition party which she helped to found in 1988 and whose winning electoral result in 1990 was nullified by the military. It is clear that she is attempting to build an effective parliamentary base for her party, and understandably, she does not want to be placed back under house arrest or be again excluded from the political arena. Burma's current circumstances are complex, and the entire country is going through a transition stage. Daw Suu (Mother Suu, as she is also known in Burma) has a personal and

political challenge ahead of her as a key player in the democratization of her country as well as its progressive opening towards diplomatic relations with the international community. She has also announced her intention to run for presidency in the 2015 elections. In addition, she started advocating for the reform of the 2008 army-dictated constitution, which includes a provision that reserves a quarter of the seats in the Burmese parliament for the military, resulting in a parliament composed of many unelected members and therefore undemocratic and only nominally civilian. Furthermore, the 2008 constitution seems to enumerate a number of restrictive clauses compromising transparency and even excluding her from the possibility of becoming president, since she is both the widow and the mother of non-Burmese citizens (her two sons were born in the United Kingdom and are of British nationality). Such provisions appear to have been tailored to act against Daw Suu.

After being in Europe twice in 2012, on 18 October 2013 Aung San Suu Kyi undertook her third tour of the old continent, stopping in France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Luxembourg and Italy. The main purpose of her visits was to seek stronger support by the state members of the European Union in order to push through pro-democracy measures and changes to the Burmese constitution. From France she travelled to the United Kingdom, where she visited the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) in order to learn more about how British armed forces are trained in accordance with international standards and democratic accountability. In Belfast, her visit was aimed at exploring the reconciliation process between Northern Ireland and Britain as a lesson that could be learnt and applied to the ethnic conflicts troubling several communities in Burma.

On October 27, Suu Kyi landed in Rome. She recalled visiting the eternal city for the first time many years ago while still a student at Oxford and how impressed she was by the city's monuments and architecture. This however, was her first time in Italy as the renowned Aung San Suu Kyi. The city of Rome awarded her its honorary citizenship in 1994 and the prize 'Rome for Peace' (premio Roma per la Pace) in 2007. For this second award, as she was still under house arrest, she nominated the Italian football player Roberto Baggio, whom she confessed to like a lot, to collect the award in her place. On the Capitoline Hill, one of the original seven hills upon which ancient Rome was built and which is today the site of the main city municipality, she picked up the honorary parchment and a reproduction of the famous bronze she-wolf (lupa capitolina), the symbol of Rome. After meeting the most prominent politicians of the country, The Lady of Rangoon also had an encounter with Pope Francis I. Her visit to Italy included three other cities, where she was further awarded. In Bologna, in particular, together with the honorary citizenship, she received a Honorary Degree in Philosophy (Lauream ad Honorem). This award was also 'decided' a long time ago: in 2000, the University of Bologna recognized the policy of reconciliation carried out by Aung San Suu Kyi as based on the principles of rationality, morality and philosophy in the pursuit of freedom and democracy.

In 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi became the first Asian woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights. Since then, she has grown into an internationally established model of courage and endurance, and a source of inspiration for many individuals across the world, including activists, women, young people, policy makers, artists and so on. In 2011, the French director Luc Besson filmed 'The Lady', which portrays the life of Aung San Suu Kyi from the assassination of her father in 1947 up until the death of her husband Michael Vaillancourt Aris in 1999. Recently, the Italian artist Marcello Reboani included her portrait in his latest exhibition consisting of 'alternative' portraits of 18 courageous women (such as Anne Frank, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Malala Yousafzai) who have become internationally prominent because of their engagement and struggle for human rights. [insert pic. Caption: Aung San Suu Kyi, 'Ladies for human rights' exhibition. Source: <http://www.marcelloreboani.it/ladies-for-human-rights>]

Some people have defined Aung San Suu Kyi as the 'female Mandela', due to her inspiring political leadership, peaceful struggle and personal strength. She is the symbol of the Burmese people's struggle against military rule, in the same way Nelson Mandela is the symbol of the anti-apartheid stance in South Africa.

It is hard to predict what the 2015 elections will bring about in Burma, and whether in the meantime, The Lady will succeed in her attempts to have the 2008 constitution adequately reformed. In her first official political speech on state media in 2012, she strongly advocated for several amendments, including the revocation of repressive laws and the strengthening of the judiciary, which requires independence from political interference.

What is certain today, is that people all over the world will continue to be inspired by Aung San Suu Kyi and will continue to support her and talk about her for a long time. She is indeed a living icon who has already made history.