

## REPORTING FROM BURMA: THE YEARS OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

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I can still remember the shock of opening the newspaper on 18 September 2007 and being confronted by a large colour photo of an impassioned Buddhist monk with a megaphone exhorting fellow marchers on a street corner in Yangon. That was the day the monks assumed leadership of the protest movement against the Burmese military junta, and the ‘Saffron Revolution’ was born.

Over the following four weeks, as government repression and human rights abuses escalated, Burma remained front page news around the world. Yet while I recall registering how unusual it was to see Burma in the spotlight for so long, I never gave a thought as to how the extraordinary footage kept appearing in the West, or at what cost.

It wasn’t until earlier this year when I attended a screening by Open Channel of *Burma VJ*, followed by a Q & A session with Toe Zaw Latt, Bureau Chief of Democratic Voice of Burma in Thailand, that I began to appreciate the human cost involved in keeping the rest of the world abreast of the turmoil in Burma.

*Burma VJ*, by the Danish director Anders Østergaard, started life modestly as a profile of Joshua, a young Burmese video journalist (VJ). But with the outbreak of the Saffron Revolution, the short film morphed into a full-length documentary. As Østergaard put it ‘(at that point) the material presented an obligation’.

The resulting film follows various members of the small, scattered video journalist underground as they attempt to evade the ever-present secret police and

military to cover the protests. Usually working alone, they dash from one hot spot to the next, while trying to maintain contact with each other by mobile phone. Their courage is awe-inspiring - on one occasion a young reporter trapped in a stairwell composes himself for death as the police close in, but he never stops filming.

Without the VJs there would be no visual evidence of the gunning down of the Japanese reporter, Kenji Nagai. The West might also have missed the visual impact of the high level of public support for the protests. Because, despite the danger, thousands marched with the monks, and the route was lined and the adjacent rooftops filled with wellwishers applauding the marchers.

Without the VJs we would also know nothing about a curious incident which occurred when a group of soldiers on guard outside Aung San Suu Kyi's Rangoon residence removed the barriers – apparently spontaneously - to allow the marching monks to approach her front gate. There the Opposition leader was filmed blurrily and from a distance making an obeisance to the protestors.

The filmmaker lingered over this image of 'The Lady'. And Aung San Suu Kyi's shimmering presence reminded me of representations of the apparition of the risen Christ and the markings on the shroud of Turin. It suggested the quasi-religious awe she evokes in her fellow countrymen and women.

Tragically, many journalists are still paying a huge price for their coverage of the Saffron Revolution. Some are serving long prison sentences. Between ten and fifteen are missing or still in hiding, while others, including Joshua, live in exile. Toe Zaw Latt, who both coordinates the VJs and is head of a committee dedicated to freeing imprisoned journalists, continues to monitor their situation as best he can.

With the Government's crackdown the Saffron Revolution collapsed at the end of September 2007 and Burma once again disappeared from the world's view, at least until Cyclone Nargis made landfall in the Irrawaddy delta on 2 May 2008.

The cyclone was the worst natural disaster ever recorded in Burma. It left an estimated 138,000 people dead and a further 2.4 million homeless or orphaned or in otherwise devastating circumstances. And the situation was immeasurably worsened by the slow and inadequate response of the government and its initial refusal to accept international aid.

Just a week after the cyclone, in anticipation of the upcoming election, a referendum on proposed changes to the Constitution went ahead. Amidst reports of widespread intimidation and rorts, the military junta claimed that the changes - including the award of 25 percent of parliamentary seats in perpetuity to the military and a foreign marriage provision that would ensure Aung San Suu Kyi could never be President - had been approved by a massive 92.4% of voters.

During these terrible months, the reporters struggled as usual to circumvent the media blackout to keep the outside world informed about Burma's plight. As a result, according to a joint bulletin issued by the Burma Media Association and Reporters Sans Frontieres: 'At least 12 journalists and dozens of media workers, including poets and writers, have been behind bars since the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis and the May 2008 constitutional referendum.' Ein Khaing Oo, a young female journalist from the 'Ecovision Journal' was just one of those imprisoned. She was charged with investigating the condition of the Nargis survivors and approaching the Rangoon-based international NGOs with her story.

We can anticipate that with Burma's first election in 20 years scheduled for 7 November 2010, the lives and safety of the VJs and their fellow reporters will once again be in jeopardy. Certainly the signs are not looking good. For a start, no visas to Burma are being issued past October 1, no doubt to reduce the amount of international scrutiny of the elections. With fewer external reporters present, this is bound to put more onus on the locals.

The reporters inside Burma are certainly well supported by an extensive network of journalists outside the country. Working along the borders in Thailand, India, Bangladesh and China, these outriders will be covering the election for magazines like Irrawaddy and for the newly-established website committed to providing a Burmese perspective on the election (<http://www.burmaelection2010.com>) as well as for Western news networks. But it is the locals who place themselves in grave danger every day.

While there is certainly increasing international pressure for a free, democratic election, many observers within and outside Burma have concluded that that is no longer a possibility.

The exiled Women's League of Burma, a prominent advocate for Burmese women's rights, is adamant that the international community should not support the election. As the group's general secretary, Lway Aye Nang put it: "We cannot accept the government's 2008 basic constitution which didn't include any resolution on security and insurance for the women and was approved without the true will of the people."

Within Burma itself, the All Burma Monks' Alliance, for example, makes the point that with the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) fielding nearly 1000 candidates to its nearest rival's 161 a democratic process is

impossible. Their spokesperson, Dhamma Siri concludes: 'We are calling on the people of Burma to boycott the 2010 elections, which are intended to transform the military dictators into a legitimate government, by not voting.'

Aung San Suu Kyi is spearheading these calls for a boycott. In March she was banned from standing for election and her party, the National League for Democracy, which achieved a landslide electoral victory of eighty-two per cent in the last general election in 1990, is the largest of the ten parties dissolved over the last few months.

It has become abundantly clear over recent years that, whatever the danger, reporters in Burma will once again risk everything to cover this election and its aftermath. I am reminded of an image from *Burma VJ*, which involved one of the cameras so crucial to the work of the video journalists. This particular camera was left running when, to avoid detection, it was stuffed hastily into a canvas bag. The eerie image of shifting lights and shadows looked just like a pulsating heart. Perhaps it is the heart that keeps alive the hopes of this oppressed community.

#### POSTSCRIPT

The Burmese people went to the polls on November 6. Individual candidates such as former activist U Yan Kyaw, standing for the safe government seat of Pazundaung in downtown Yangon, garnered considerable support. But the results in almost all the seats were known long before a single vote was cast, and the final outcome was never in doubt. Although the official count has yet to be released, a land-slide victory for the USDP is predicted. And in the aftermath of the election, amidst violent conflict between government troops and ethnic Karen tribesmen, thousands of Burmese have fled across the border into Thailand.