

## RESTRICTED LIVES: NO SILVER LINING

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Last year, holidaying in the Czech Republic, we visited a medieval town called Kutna Hora, whose meaning in Czech is 'a mined hill'. This town was famous in the thirteenth century for its intensive silver mining, which produced enormous wealth for a lucky few up top. Below ground was a very different story.

There the miners, who were selected specifically for their small stature, moved around by lying on their stomachs on strips of leather, propelling themselves with their hands and feet. They wore white, hooded garments rather like monastic habits so that their companions might have some chance of spotting them in the dark. They were equipped with tiny oil lamps, whose light was so feeble that they mined by touch and sound rather than sight. As many of the shafts were extremely deep and required hours to reach, they frequently stayed underground for days at a time, eventually emerging naked to demonstrate that they were not secreting silver on their bodies.

We took the opportunity to explore a mineshaft that has been preserved in medieval condition. Sometimes we squeezed sideways through the tiny tunnels; other times we bent double. Even with hard hats and torches, it was difficult not to injure ourselves in some small way. At one point we were encouraged to turn off our torches to get a sense of just how dark it really was. Even though we were underground for only forty minutes, I couldn't get out quickly enough. And for the rest of the holiday I frequently found myself thinking about how it must have

been to spend your entire working life in such restricted conditions, at the behest of the rich owners who had you in their power.

So when the first weekend after our return we were invited to a 'house arrest' party to mark the long-term incarceration of Aung San Suu Kyi, I felt a real sense of synchronicity. The Burmese leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) was first imprisoned in 1990. Simultaneously, her party, which had achieved a landslide electoral victory of eighty-two per cent, was ousted by the military junta, which has ruled Burma ever since.

The house-arrest party was hosted by Susan Costello, a fellow Victorian Association of Family Therapists member. It was one of over two hundred such events staged world-wide on the weekend preceding Aung San Suu Kyi's sixty-first birthday, yet another celebrated in detention.

Hosts had all agreed not to leave their houses for 24 hours around the time of the party, to symbolise their solidarity with Aung San Suu Kyi. At the Melbourne party we were surrounded by beautiful images, on loan from Amnesty International, of Burma and the Burmese people. There was food and music from that part of the world and documentaries on the current situation.

The day after the party a forum was held at RMIT, where speakers included NLD parliamentarians-in-exile, Mr Teddy Buri and Dr. San Aung, and representatives of the Women of Burma Group, such as Daw Chaw Po, among others.

I'm ashamed to admit that prior to the weekend my knowledge of Burma, its history and the current tragic situation was very patchy. I knew only a little about Aung San Suu Kyi's incarceration and other human rights abuses.

As I listened and spoke to the Burmese immigrants over those two days I came to appreciate that I was not alone in my ignorance. Burma receives so little press coverage that people the world over are typically ill-informed. The military regime is extremely secretive and opaque and there is no independent media, so even seasoned 'Burma-watchers' are often unsure about exactly what is going on. For example, several of the speakers expressed concern that Aung San Suu Kyi was said to have been ill in recent weeks and she may have been refused access to medical attention, but they were unclear as to the details. Such reports of course increase their fears for their leader.

Some of the important things I learned over the weekend, that may also be news to you, include the fact that Burma has changed dramatically over recent years. From being one of the richest countries in the region, it is now the poorest in South-East Asia. The rapacious military regime and its associated elite have amassed enormous wealth, while the rest of the population suffers more and more. It is estimated that a third of Burmese children are currently malnourished.

Burma has three million immigrant workers who travel to Thailand, Singapore and elsewhere in search of work. There are also record numbers of internally displaced people, many of whom are homeless because their villages have been destroyed by the military. Other people, forced to flee their homeland, have taken up residence in refugee camps along the Thai border.

The medical situation is appalling, with very limited health services, and large and increasing numbers of people with malaria and HIV/AIDS. Infant mortality is extremely high and life expectancy a mere fifty-seven years.

Human rights abuses are rife. There is extensive forced labour and numerous political prisoners, who often experience torture and long-term incarceration. There is also a huge military presence, with an army numbering around 400,000. Although many of the soldiers are forcibly recruited as children or join up because of poverty, their presence everywhere in the streets and villages intimidates people and advertises the power of the generals.

On the positive side, the NLD does have some significant allies. These include the European Union and the United Nations as well as prominent people like the Dalai Lama. While George Bush and Condoleezza Rice also number among its allies, so far this support has not translated into action. And, unfortunately, the military regime too has influential friends, like China, India and South Korea.

For all these reasons, I found myself becoming increasingly pessimistic over the course of the weekend about the prospect of change.

There is no doubt that Aung San Suu Kyi is an extraordinary human being. She is selfless, courageous and a true patriot – given the choice of returning to England to be at her husband's death bed but knowing she would not be allowed back into Burma, she relinquished the chance to be with her husband. She also had to leave her two young sons behind in England when she originally returned to Burma to nurse her dying mother, and she has been able to have only limited contact with them ever since.

The course of her life seems positively Arthurian. Extraordinary parents, assassination attempts, privation, isolation and still she remains beautiful, calm

and luminous. She refuses to see her lot as uniquely tragic and insists that all Burmese people are in the same oppressed position.

A conversation I had at the party with an Anglo-Australian called Janine, who had worked briefly in Burma, gave me a further insight into just what Aung San Suu Kyi meant by that assertion. Janine said that when she first arrived in Burma she was astonished by peoples' quietness and constraint in the streets, something that was in marked contrast to other parts of Asia. When she queried this with her Burmese work mates, they explained that people are quiet because they never know who might be listening. Many people are so poor that it can be tempting to supplement their income by reporting neighbours for politically incorrect statements. Consequently people live cautious, fear-filled, restricted lives.

The Burmese venerate Aung San Suu Kyi. She is referred to locally as 'the lady', and the association with the Christian tradition of Our Lady springs to mind. In fact people make pilgrimages to her home and wait outside for a glimpse of her. A Buddhist in a predominantly Buddhist country, she has assumed quasi-religious status. And there is something saintly about her.

In an interview I watched, despite everything, she still insisted on non-violence and did not express anger at the military, even looking forward to the day when the generals too would reap the benefits of living in a democratic Burma. Her stance reminded me of the Dalai Lama, who takes an identical position with regard to the Chinese and Tibet.

The other figure who springs to mind as a point of comparison is of course Nelson Mandela. He spent twenty seven years in gaol, which he entered as a

vigorous middle-aged man and emerged from, still vigorous, but in his seventies. He then went on, in the midst of international acclaim, to lead the African National Congress to power. When I mentioned this comparison to one of the Burmese immigrants, he replied, understandably, that they want their leader released now. She is already over sixty, and they need her to resume leadership of the country immediately.

Therein lies one of the reasons for my pessimism. The linking of the fate of Burma with the fate of Aung San Suu Kyi was an insistent motif of the forum. For many Burmese, she embodies the fight for democracy. And as she is a celebrity her imprisonment at least keeps the plight of Burma on the international radar. But it is hard to imagine how the Burmese people, divided along ethnic lines, subjugated, impoverished and demoralised as they are, would be able to overthrow the military regime without her spearheading the campaign. And struggles which rely so heavily on one individual are always vulnerable, particularly as what was startlingly absent at the forum was any mention of an organised or unified resistance within Burma itself.

From my reading since the weekend I've learned that people have in fact struggled against the government, but the response has been brutal. For example, in 1988 an estimated 10,000 people were killed in pro-democracy street demonstrations. But any unified resistance is hampered by the fact that Burma is composed of numerous minority ethnic groups, which between them speak hundreds of languages and have a history of conflict.

In view of all this, the conclusion reached by Mary Warren of *The New Internationalist* seems irrefutable. Summarising Burma's political situation as 'appalling', she adds:

'Aung San Suu Kyi remains an iconic figure and a symbol of resistance but she and the National League for Democracy have little immediate prospect of power. The most likely route to freedom is through some kind of infighting within the military that might cause the regime to implode.' (*New Internationalist*, 377, April 2005, p36.)

Given this dismal state of affairs, what can we do?

With its long Buddhist tradition, there are many beautiful things to see in Burma, and in 1996, promoted as the Year of Tourism, the military regime undertook an all-out drive to attract visitors.

We often hope, as tourists, that our spending will improve the lot of the local people. But in Burma there is no evidence of this. Only the ruling elite seems to have benefited by the dribble of tourists (around 120,000 annually), while villages are razed to build five-star hotels and golf courses to service the tourist industry. For these reasons, the influential *Lonely Planet* guide makes a point of discouraging people from travelling there. We can do the same, boycotting Burma as a holiday destination ourselves, and encouraging our friends to do likewise.

I've heard lately about an organisation called Prospect Burma, which was established in 1989 with funds from Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Peace Prize. By funding international educational opportunities for young Burmese, Prospect Burma aims to have trained people at the ready when democracy eventually returns. Contributions to the scholarship scheme from private donors are always

welcome. If you are interested in more information the website is: [www.prospectburma.org](http://www.prospectburma.org)

What the speakers at the forum all stressed was that they wanted their fellow Australians not to forget Burma. They believe that action by the United Nations Security Council represents the only possibility of change, and that by lobbying politicians at local, state and federal levels, we can make an impact.

We may well have doubts about the efficacy of that strategy, particularly in view of the United Nations' powerlessness when confronted with the Coalition of the Willing's determination to invade Iraq. Still there's no doubt it's worth a try. The speakers pointed to the United Nations Under-Secretary's visit to Burma in May 2006 as evidence of the power of international pressure, because for years prior the military junta had managed to block such a visit.

It obviously means a lot to the Burmese to know that people around the world support them. We can demonstrate that support by becoming informed, and speaking up on their behalf whenever we can. Perhaps in that small way we can assist in keeping Burma on the map.

The medieval Czech miners got to live at least part of their short lives above ground. Hopefully, when they returned to their homes after work they were able to leave some of the restrictions of their daily lives behind. But this is not the case for the Burmese; there is no respite from the restrictions imposed on them. As Aung San Suu Kyi put it in a recent interview:

'Let the world know that we are (all) prisoners within our own country.'