**Aung San Suu Kyi: Burma's First Lady of Freedom**

By Hannah Beech/Rangoon Wednesday, Dec. 29, 2010

**Part I**

The special branch (Myanmar secret police) had chased us across the city for hours, through the haunted, plant-nut-stained streets of old Rangoon, past street-side tailors hunched over ancient sewing machines and open-air bookstalls selling worm-eaten copies of Orwell and Kipling. Unable to shake the latest batch of state security men following us by foot, we jumped into a wheezing taxi of mid-20th century vintage. The young driver's eyes widened at the foreigners who hurled themselves in the back and ordered the car to move — fast. As we lurched into motion, he showed us where he stood by reaching into his shirt pocket and pulling out a laminated picture. It was, of course, of the Lady.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the 65-year-old Burmese Nobel Peace Prize laureate who was released from house arrest on Nov. 13, was not in the taxi with my two colleagues and me. But she is always carried in the hearts — and her image in the pockets, lockets and secret hiding places — of millions of Burmese. Among the most oppressed and impoverished (poor) people on the planet, they draw sustenance (energy and hope) from this graceful woman who, armed only with the principle of nonviolent resistance (think Gandhi), dares to stand up to the generals who have controlled Burma for nearly five decades. For 15 of the past 21 years, the military regime (leaders) kept her locked up. But if the generals wished for Suu Kyi to fade into obscurity (hope people would forget), they failed. Continued confinement (jail time) turned her into the world's most famous political prisoner. Emerging from her most recent stint of seven years in detention, she is just as determined to fight for the civil liberties of Burma's 50 million people. "What we are calling for is revolutionary change through peaceful means," she told me when we recently met in Rangoon. "I'm not afraid to say it, and I'm not afraid to ask for all the help I can get."

The extent to which the junta (military leadership) has gone to try to stop the Lady, as Suu Kyi is fondly and universally known in Burma, is remarkable. For refusing to participate in a rigged election in November that the junta's proxy (military leadership’s) party won, Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was stripped of its political rights. The NLD overwhelmingly won at the polls in 1990, which presumably would have made Suu Kyi the nation's Prime Minister. But the junta ignored the people's verdict (votes) then, and a new constitution contains clauses specifically designed to keep her from ever serving as Burma's leader.

Since 1962, Burma's battle-hardened generals have faced down communist insurgents, ethnic armies, even the Western governments that impose economic sanctions on the military leadership. But they still act as if there is no greater enemy than this slight woman with flowers in her hair. Their fear of Suu Kyi is not entirely misplaced. "We think our leader is the ideal woman, not just for Burma but for the whole world," says Aye Aye Nyein, a teacher and member of the NLD's youth wing. "We Burmese live in a prison. She teaches us how to fight for our freedom." And the public's desire for freedom, of course, is why security agents were hunting us, snapping pictures with telephoto lenses fit for Hollywood paparazzi. Earlier that day, a total of at least a dozen special-branch officers trailed us, calling in our movements on their cell phones.

It took the taxi driver only a couple of minutes to figure out we had a tail (people following). Pointing back at a car practically on our bumper, he grinned and gunned the engine. For more than half an hour, our high-speed chase wound through the streets of Burma's moldering former capital, past the carcasses of Victorian-era government buildings abandoned when the junta (military leadership) mysteriously moved the seat of power to a remote area five years ago. We circumnavigated (drove around) the massive golden spire of Shwedagon pagoda, Burma's holiest site, and careened (sped) by the hulk of Insein prison, where Suu Kyi was once jailed and where some of the country's 2,200 political prisoners still languish (wasted away).

Dusk (the sun) was falling. Screeching through an open-air market, the taxi finally shook our pursuers. Gratefully, we bid our driver goodbye. He reached into his pocket again, offering me Suu Kyi's picture as a gift. I was touched, but it was his talisman to cherish. I could leave Burma. He needed the Lady to keep him safe.

**An Unending Struggle**   
Her carriage is regal (seems like a queen), her English accent impeccable (perfect English). The flowers she customarily wears in her hair never seem to wilt (always seem fresh), even as everything else droops in Burma's sullen heat. In the NLD office, with its intermittent electricity (power doesn’t always work) and maps of mildew (water vapor) spread across concrete walls, Suu Kyi floats like some otherworldly presence (seems to glide around), calm and cool as others are flushed and frenetic (acting crazy and stressed). Ever since she was released in mid-November, Suu Kyi's days have been divided and subdivided into one-hour or 15-minute increments (slots), during which she has met a dizzying array of people: foreign diplomats, AIDS patients, NGO directors, local economists, U.N. officials and the families of political prisoners. She even chatted by phone in December with former First Lady Laura Bush, who had championed the Burmese cause.

But even as the world watches Burma with renewed interest in the wake of Suu Kyi's release, she has not yet met the people with whom she most wants to talk. The regime (military leadership) has ignored her repeated offers for national reconciliation dialogue (getting together and talking through Burma’s problems). Since releasing her, the junta (military leadership) has dealt with Suu Kyi by acting as if she didn't exist, taking out any mention of her from the local press and hoping that, despite her busy calendar and the huge crowds that gather wherever she goes, she will somehow dwindle into nothingness (think Rebecca Black). "I wish I could have tea with them every Saturday, a friendly tea," Suu Kyi says of the generals, who refused to allow her dying husband one last visit to Burma in 1999. And if they turn down a nice cup of tea? "We could always try coffee," she says mockingly.

Far from being a simple story of good vs. evil, the Lady against the generals, what happens in Burma carries global significance (impacts countries throughout the world). Jammed between Asia's two emerging powers, China and India, Burma is strategically sensitive, a critical piece in the new Great Game of global politics. This is no totalitarian backwater like North Korea (the country is more open than North Korea). Even though many Western governments have imposed sanctions on Burma's military regime (military leadership) for its terrible human-rights record, a new competition is unfolding in this crossroads nation: regional powers are scrambling for access to Burma's plentiful natural gas, timber and minerals. Already, resource-strapped China is building oil and gas pipelines across Burma to create another vital artery to feed its economic engine. Beijing's cozy ties with Burma have spooked democratic India, which has exchanged earlier condemnation of the junta (military leadership) for trade missions — a stance that earned President Barack Obama's public disapproval when he visited India in November. For Burma's top brass (military leadership) — who have at their disposal a 400,000-strong military corps and a record of institutionalized (government supported) torture and forced labor — democratic reform would mean not only giving away political power but also surrendering the opportunity to become wealthy by stealing from the government.

Unlike South Africa's apartheid government when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, Burma's dictatorship is not in its death throes (it’s still strong). If anything, because of burgeoning foreign investment in Burma, especially over the past five years, the junta (military leadership) is even more powerful than when Suu Kyi was last free, in 2003. Two previous attempts at popular protest have ended with the crackle of gunfire and the silence of a scared people. The most recent tragedy came in 2007 when soldiers ended weeks of monk-led protests by shooting dozens of unarmed civilians.

The other foiled democracy movement was in 1988, when Suu Kyi found herself literally thrust on the political stage. The daughter of assassinated independence hero Aung San, she spent much of her early life overseas in India, the U.S., Japan, Bhutan and England. In the 1980s she was content to focus on academic research and serve as the mother of two sons and the wife of a British academic at Oxford. On picnics in the English countryside, Suu Kyi wore shorts and drank soda; she gave little hint of the democracy icon she would become.

In 1988 Suu Kyi went home to care of her ill mother. That Rangoon summer grew into Burma's version of a Prague spring (a famous revolution). The generals' mismanagement had turned what was once one of Asia's breadbaskets into an economic basket case, and students, monks and workers gathered by the hundreds of thousands to call for the regime's (military leadership) downfall. The army fired on the protesters, some of whom tried to fight back. As the child of the general who had stopped the British, Suu Kyi thought she might have the authority to prevent further clashes. In front of half a million people, she made her first public address, mixing Buddhist values with Gandhian principles of nonviolent resistance. Less than a month after Suu Kyi's plea for peace, the army unleashed another crackdown, killing hundreds. Two years later, the electoral victory of the NLD, the party she helped found, was disregarded. It was as if time stopped in Burma.

**Questions**

1. Why are Myanmar’s secret police following the reporter?

2. How has the military leadership dealt with Suu Kyi since 1988?

3. Who is Suu Kyi compared to in the article? Hint\* other leaders that have been imprisoned

**Part II**

**Multiple Fronts**   
Today, despite Suu Kyi's release and the influx of foreign investment (money being brought in) that has brought the occasional Hummer and day spa to Rangoon, Burma is still a country that has a lot of oppression. In North Korea, the broad, desolate avenues and badly dressed people make for a perfect tableau of authoritarianism. Burma's sprays of life, its gold temples and the sway of schoolgirls dressed in the sarongs called longyis all create a false sense of contentment. But life in Burma is not easy. Roughly 40% of the national budget is spent on the army, while just around 1% each is reserved for health and education. The new capital in Naypyidaw, which means "abode of the kings," was built with billions of dollars, even as nearly a third of Burmese live below the poverty line. For farmers, a hand-to-mouth existence is made worse by routine land seizures and orders to work without pay for the military. Even in Rangoon, power outages are as common as junta informants (military spies); both leave the population in the dark. In a sign of just how removed the generals are from their subjects, confidential U.S. embassy cables released by WikiLeaks refer to the junta (military leadership) lavishing money on a nuclear program with alleged help from North Korea, while junta leader supremo Than Shwe pondered spending $1 billion on Manchester United at the behest of his soccer-loving grandson.

Although Suu Kyi's moral leadership helped bring Western sanctions against the regime, the fact that many ordinary Burmese also feel their effects hasn't escaped her. "I am ready to reconsider my support of sanctions if it's for the benefit of all of us," she told me with surprising vehemence, countering critics who think her too unyielding. "I'm not afraid to consider change." Her openness will surely start further debate in Washington, where there is a growing recognition that sanctions on Burma, despite their moral appeal, have not worked.

But the most immediate revolution is needed within Suu Kyi's party. Ever since the unfair outcome of the 1990 elections, the NLD has been stuck in a time warp, endlessly arguing over laws and political theory even as many of its leaders get older and more stooped. There is a strange connection between Burma's opposition leaders, known as the Uncles, and the junta's clutch of aged generals. In a 2008 cable released by WikiLeaks, an American diplomat in Rangoon bemoaned, "The way the Uncles run the NLD indicates the party is not the last great hope for democracy and Burma." Since then, a leadership reshuffle has brought new energy to the party in a way, and Suu Kyi's release has excited a new generation of political youth. But it's no wonder that a younger NLD faction called the National Democratic Force defied the NLD's (and Suu Kyi's) call for an electoral boycott and contested the November polls. Suu Kyi says she's not worried about a possible split in the opposition. "We are all fighting for democracy," she says. "Our goals are the same."

Suu Kyi, a woman who first used a cell phone on the day of her release, says she's committed to nurturing a new generation of technologically savvy political youth. "The advantage is they're very electronic. They can communicate with the world," she says, referring to the NLD youth wing's members who use Facebook to debate politics when there's enough electricity to power computers. "Everything goes on the Internet. Did you know that?" The power of the digital revolution ties in nicely with the philosophy that has inspired Suu Kyi, that of Czech dissident and fellow Peace Prize laureate Vaclav Havel, who wrote of "the power of the powerless." "My very top goal is for people to understand that they have the power to change things themselves," she says. "Then we can do it together. Then we'll be home and dry."

**A Heavy Burden**   
It's a lot to ask of one woman: restart her banned party, persuade the generals to talk, make the cause of Burma a global priority, help to the sick, comfort the families of political prisoners. Serving as a symbol of democracy is hard enough, without having to deal with the nitty-gritty of everyday political life. Add to that the real worry that Suu Kyi may be operating on borrowed time. "Our people are in and out of prison all the time," she says. "All I have to say is, 'Is so-and-so in or out?' and they know exactly what I mean."

For now, she is out. But there's little doubt that if the junta (military leadership) sees in her any realistic challenge to its authority, she will be sent in again on whatever made up charge the military can create. "I want to do as much as I can while I'm free," she says. "I don't want to tire myself out, but we never know how much time we have."

Beyond the possibility of rearrest, Suu Kyi's safety is an even more primary concern. The army has shown it is quite prepared both to lock her up and to endanger her life. On three occasions, Suu Kyi and her supporters have been attacked by mysterious thugs, with resulting fatalities. "She is like her father in that she has no worries about losing her life," says Win Htein, an NLD elder who was released in July after 14 years in jail. Suu Kyi gasps when I ask her whether she would consider wearing a bulletproof vest. "I wouldn't dream of it," she says. "Then it would look like I'm trying to protect myself from the people who support me."

Suu Kyi may cherish her interactions with ordinary Burmese, but there is a distant quality to her, a sense that she lives most comfortably in her head, not among the crowds. Part of her remove is how/where she was born. She speaks proudly of being her father's favorite child, yet he was assassinated by political rivals when she was just 2. For so much of her recent life, Suu Kyi has been kept away from normal human contact; ideas and fine words have kept her company. While under house arrest, she read books ranging from biographies to spy thrillers. "People think that I had nothing to do [while in detention]," she says. "But I spent five or six hours listening to the radio every day. If you're under house arrest and you miss one item, there's no one there to tell you about it, so I listened very carefully." Even her taste in classical music speaks to her sense of discipline and composure. Mozart, she says, makes her happy, which is all well and good. But she prefers Bach. "He makes me calm," she says. "I need calm in my life."

Right now, Suu Kyi is in the eye of a storm, a place of that is pretending to be calm. Rangoon is a city of whispers, and while the people I met there used different words — a honeymoon, a window, a reprieve — their hushed intent was the same: this, they felt, was the calm before the crackdown. The November elections were part of what the generals call a transition to a "discipline-flourishing democracy." One thing is certain: when the leaf of civilian government arrives in 2011, there will be no place in it for the Lady.

Still, for all her years of imprisonment and whatever problems may come, Suu Kyi considers herself lucky. It's not because of the people's love of her but because of their respect — a value she believes stems from a generosity of spirit. "In my life, I have been showered with kindness," she says. "More than love, I value kindness. Love comes and goes, but kindness remains." When her son Kim was in Rangoon to see her for the first time in a decade, his kindness came in the form of a gift, a puppy to keep her company. "He's my guard dog," she jokes, even though the tiny mutt hasn't shown much bark or bite. "He has an active tail and lets me know when someone is coming. That should be enough, don't you think? A little wag of the tail?"

**Questions:**

1. How have other countries shifted how they are treating the Myanmar government over the last decade? What is motivating them?

2. What is the NLD and why is it important for it to reform (or change)?

3. Why should Suu Kyi feel removed or not extremely close to the people that she is trying to help?