

Burma had a hundred years of colonial rule, before achieving independence in 1948. A brief period of parliamentary democracy was succeeded by a series of civil wars, resolved by the army taking control. This exercise of power included the denial of human rights to a range of ethnic groups. Burma had been a prosperous country, but by 1988 there was a widespread uprising of protest, in which the streets were full of demonstrators demanding democratic change. Since then the country has spent 23 years under military control with very little scope for free speech. For most of that time Aung San Suu Kyi, despite having huge popular support, has been under house arrest.

In 1993 there was an attempt to hold a constitutional convention, but this was a fake attempt to conceal the true situation, and many delegates attempting to attend the convention were arrested. The military government has 700 party leaders in prison, and has encountered numerous problems, hence the attempt to change their public image – including the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. The Union Solidarity Government claims to represent a wide range of people, but is basically a government creation. The government maintain control, through retaining an unelected 25% of parliamentary seats for the army, and through the stipulation that the President must have military experience.

Khun Saing came from an army background, and as a young man had no political affiliation. His aim was to be a doctor, and he completed five years of training towards that. Witnessing a strike in 1974, he sympathised with strikers, following their unfair treatment and the declaration of unions as illegal. He became drawn into discussions and protests, and was involved in four student strikes.

In 1977 he was sentenced to seven years in prison, but on release was told that he would be barred from completing his medical training. Further involvement in protest led to another jail sentence. He was sentenced to seven years in prison after publishing a history of the student movement, and in addition to imprisonment and torture he also suffered from tuberculosis. He spent a total of 13 years in prison.

In 2004 he was released from prison, and tried to apply for a passport but his application was refused. He was only able to leave the country after active lobbying from an Amnesty International group, based in the Netherlands. In 2007 he was accepted as a refugee in the UK, but remains separated from his wife, whom he had met when both were working in Thailand as human rights workers. She remains there, with their four year old son, whom he has seen only for a total of a few months. Her application to join him here has been refused, owing to a discrepancy in timing between their respective applications.

In the UK he didn't want to receive any unearned support. He works five days a week at a bakery in Sheffield, and runs his own website, being very conscious of the value of freedom. Activists in Burma remain heavily restricted, unable to change the constitution and subject to arbitrary displays of power by the military regime. "Unlawful electronic communication", which might be looking up websites or sending emails about political activity, can carry a sentence of 15 years.

The current government is holding elections, but also gaining power through expensive infrastructure projects – e.g. an oil pipeline, and a massive dam, agreed with China, against which some Burmese have tried to protest but with little effect. The progress towards democracy, which has been heavily publicised, has in fact been very fragile, and could be reversed at any time.

Aung San Suu Kyi aims to establish a parliamentary presence, and from that to influence other members of the Parliament into further moves towards democracy, but although she has hundreds of thousands of supporters the scope for actually changing the constitution is very limited. In the current election only 48 seats are available; the total in parliament is over 600. A recent attempt to reach a peace agreement with some of the 50,000 guerillas in Burma proved to be unsuccessful, and although he wishes to be positive, Khun Saing finds it hard to see immediate hope in the current situation.

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