

Burma
The release of Suu Kyi from house arrest – what does it signify?

Andrew Boe¹

Yesterday, 6 May 2002, the Burmese military junta, who call themselves the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), released Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and granted her permission to again act as the General Secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party that was elected by an overwhelming majority of Burmese people at elections in 1990. Suu Kyi's release is of course the cause for much celebration. She has been a martyr and symbol for democracy for more than a decade and her release is the most public act that the SPDC could do to announce to the international community changes in the nature of Burma's military rule. Suu Kyi's release was reportedly coupled with the following statement:

"Today marks a new page for the people of Myanmar and the international community. As we look forward to a better future, we will work toward greater international stability and improving the social welfare of our diverse people" and "We shall recommit ourselves to allowing all of our citizens to participate freely in the life of our political process, while giving priority to national unity, peace and stability of the country as well as the region".

Reuters' report that the SPDC engaged a US-based public relations company appears likely to be correct, as the release of Suu Kyi and the statement made do present the SPDC in the most favourable light that Burma has seen since the indication in 1990 that free elections would be held. However, if true, the SPDC's 'buying' of a positive image through words on the face of a mere brochure suggests that recent developments should be viewed with healthy scepticism.

The complex history and makeup of Burma will now provide a complicated backdrop to what happens from this point. The Australian Government have been quick to take credit on the basis that its "constructive engagement" policy is now reaping its rewards, despite initial criticism, although it is in truth too soon to judge whether such credit is properly due. Foreign Minister Downer's approach, which included sending officers of the Human Rights Commission over to Burma 2 years ago to teach the military what torture was, riled many Burmese as to them it was akin to telling a murderer that he had been killing. Perhaps, Downer and Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti may well have been right in ignoring pleas from Suu Kyi not to take these steps. However, if in fact the Australian Government's official line has been instrumental in bringing about a genuine change of heart in the military junta, then there is a dire need to sharpen the focus on what steps should now be put into place to allow the people of Burma to move towards democracy "*in our own way*", as it was put by Suu Kyi at her first press conference upon release.

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Australia has an unparalleled record in making democracy work well for the majority of its people. On the world stage the only blight that it carries is the treatment and status of indigenous Australians and refugees. Following East Timor, it has been made quite clear in the region that Australia has the capacity to co-ordinate the type of relief and support effort required to re-establish a democracy. Burma poses a much larger challenge, if Australia chooses to play a continued role. First, Burma has a population in excess of 40 million compared to East Timor's 1.5million. Second, there is a hierarchy in existence in Burma, at the top of which rests the military and those connected to it - who have profited materially to almost obscene levels from their rule - and at the bottom of which sits a generation of people living in austere poverty. Third, the military remains omnipotent and the idea of the military staying in place allowing a democratic movement to form a government and create a democratic Constitution seems unlikely, short of a farcical Orwellian pretence of doing so. Fourth, from where does a broad-based democratic movement arise in light of painful memories of 1988 when thousands of students, monks and ordinary Burmese were slaughtered by the military in one day, as a direct move to quell just such a movement? The people in Rangoon that I have spoken to still whisper in fear when pointing to the pedestrian overpasses near the City Hall, where the people were killed, as they suspect that they have been constructed to allow soldiers better positions from which to shoot next time. Fifth, how can the Burmese people's now deeply-ingrained institutional fear of government be undone?

In 1991, upon receiving the 1990 Sakharov prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament, Suu Kyi wrote a seminal piece about what was needed for there to be change in Burma. It was entitled "*Freedom from Fear*" and included:

"Within a system which denies the existence of basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day. Fear of imprisonment, fear of torture, fear of death, fear of losing friends, family, property or means of livelihood, fear of poverty, fear of isolation, fear of failure. A most insidious form of fear is that which masquerades as common sense or even wisdom, condemning as foolish, reckless, insignificant or futile the small, daily acts of courage which help to preserve man's self-respect and inherent human dignity. It is not easy for a people conditioned by fear under the iron rule of the principle that might is right to free themselves from the enervating miasma of fear."

It is of course primarily for the Burmese themselves to sort out the mess they are now in. However, the British, the Americans, the Chinese and the Japanese have all played roles in Burma, particularly during World War 2 and since. There are even Australians buried there. The international community is now perfectly poised to flex economic muscle on the military junta to push it further in the right direction and avoid losing the momentum now gained. It seems obvious that the rapid escalation in inflation in recent months has had some bearing on the junta's decision to release Suu Kyi, and the economic sanctions that are in play will be the focus of the military's campaign to attract international favour. How first world countries such as Australia should act in economic, trade and aid terms must be assessed by reference to the actual impact any action will have on the people of Burma. The strength of the Australian dollar can either be used to assist the Burmese, or to create profit for individuals both in Burma and abroad.

It would be plainly silly to think that an equitable society will emerge where there is such opportunity for profits to be made by 'investing' in an emerging democracy after 40 years of

military rule, but there needs to be a resolve and a commitment to support Suu Kyi and the NLD towards being able to participate in a free and fair election. Only then should the international community relate to the elected government not just as an opportunity for bi-lateral trade potential - although that might come later - but to provide the support required to set up systems to ensure that the tyranny of the nation by a minority cannot succeed again. The Australian way of life is supported by a rule of law that protects most of us from arbitrary treatment. Only once the Burmese people can freely associate and decide their own political fate will there be any potential for a just society to exist in Burma.

As Suu Kyi has repeatedly said: *“Democracy first and then we will deal with the many problems that have been left for us”*. The International community should follow this prescription. As heartbreaking as the effects that poverty, lack of education and AIDS are having on a generation of Burmese children, Mr Downer should listen to Suu Kyi and other voices of democracy before providing any further “constructive engagement” with the military.

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LiNK Ed’s note. An edited version of this paper appeared in the *Courier-Mail* a Queensland Newspaper (Australia) on 8 May 2002.

The full text of Daw Suu Kyi’s paper can be found at: [Freedom From Fear](#)

Boe is preparing a report of his April 2002 visit to Burma. His report of his 1999 attempt to document child poverty can be found at [Burma – Report May 2000](#)