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Lady Liberty

Style Maven | Yoga Fly | Yangon

# LADY LIBERTY

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AUNG SAN SUU KYI STEPS FORWARD AS MYANMAR  
MOVES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY.

Dead of night is when they normally came. One can scarcely imagine the fear the distant rumble of an approaching motorbike could inspire. A few final moments of calm, perhaps enough time to tell loved ones not to worry, before the knock on the door and the peace would be shattered by Myanmar's brutal Tatmadaw. Handcuffs snapped on, a hood pulled over one's head, the prisoner would be taken away in the back of a truck. Weeks, or maybe months later, having been roughly interrogated, a military-dominated court would rule on a forced confession. Without a lawyer or any semblance of a fair trial, it was over within 15 minutes.

Since 1962, when General Ne Win seized power in a military coup, such a scenario has been all too common in Myanmar under a succession of authoritarian military juntas. Hundreds of people were arrested, tortured and jailed for their political beliefs and for daring to defy a state which tolerated no form of dissent or opposition to its rule.

The struggle for democracy in Myanmar has been a long and often bloody one. Throughout history the student movement has played a decisive role, with courageous uprisings and protests in every decade since 1962 that have brought brief hope that change was imminent, but in equal measure have led to the incarceration of many who spearheaded the movement for change.

While my interest in Myanmar stemmed from the time of the mass democracy uprising in 1988, it would be the country's most recent rebellion, the 2007 Saffron Revolution, which would provide the catalyst for my work photographing Myanmar's political prisoners. I decided to photograph former political prisoners in simple documentary-style portraits, taken in their natural environment whether at work, rest or play. I wanted to somehow provide a link to their colleagues still suffering silently in prison. To have suffered acts of such inhumanity yet still be so calm defies logic and it was this calmness that led me to incorporate the hugely important Buddhist religion to provide the link between the two worlds of former and current prisoners. With each former political prisoner adopting the pose of the Buddhist *abhaya mudra*, on the out-turned open palm of the right hand would be written the name of a colleague still jailed.

The relevance of the hand gesture is symbolic to political prisoners and those who have led the movement for change in Myanmar. The meaning of *abhaya* as "fearlessness" reminds us that this is what political prisoners have shown throughout their lives.

Armed with no more than an idea and belief, I set off around the world with my partner in this project, Jackie San, herself a political exile from Myanmar, as we

attempted to track down as many former political prisoners as possible. The Thai-Myanmar border was our natural starting point, but our journey over the next three years would take us over 100,000 miles, travelling to Europe, Japan, USA and, most dangerously, several times into Myanmar itself. Eventually we photographed more than 300 former political prisoners, joining together to raise awareness for their colleagues still jailed.

With recent developments since the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010 and the formation of a new civilian government, there is the potential for hope on the horizon and the possibility that the waiting game can finally draw to a close. Still, a recent amnesty failed to free key dissidents among an estimated 2,000 remaining detainees.

In February of this year, the final leg of my personal journey documenting Myanmar's political prisoners came to an end with another secretive visit to Yangon. This time, at last, it would be to meet Myanmar's most famous former political prisoner and democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Back in August 2009, with the monsoon rains lashing against the windows, I sat with Myanmar's then most famous political prisoner and Aung San Suu Kyi's right hand man, U Win Tin. Across town in Insein prison, the world waited and watched, while Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced to house arrest once more. As I wrote her name on his hand we joked that one day when she is free I would have to return to take his portrait again. Fast-forward 15 months and as I sat watching the crowds surge down University Avenue and The Lady (as many in Myanmar call her) walk free at last, the final piece in the jigsaw could now hopefully be put in place.

As one by one the world's media clamoured for attention in the steamingly hot offices of the National League for Democracy, we decided to sit it out and wait for our moment when hopefully the euphoria had died down and our chance would arise. Two months after The Lady was released and the timing was now right as not only had the TV crews long gone, but all eyes were firmly back on Naypidaw as a new elected government was about to sit for the first time.

One final telephone call before setting off from our base in Thailand saw my heart stop beating for a moment, when much to my surprise it was The Lady on the other end of the line. With everything confirmed the final journey could commence and hopefully with it would bring an end to three years hard work.

As the taxi turned into University Avenue my mind was cast back to my first visit here many years ago, standing alone outside the famous gates of number 54 while Myanmar's most famous political prisoner sat alone inside.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO VISIT AUNG SAN SUU KYI WAS ONE TO BE TRULY RELISHED.



I dreamt then that one day I would be able to walk in and that more importantly Suu Kyi would be able to walk out. As we pulled up to number 54 the big yellow gates were opened and we drove into the famous compound. I felt a sense of excitement and disbelief mixed with memories and stories shared with me over these past years by former Tri-Colour students and other NLD members who spent so much time here working and looking after The Lady.

To have the opportunity to visit Aung San Suu Kyi at home was one to be truly relished, especially when one has a certain level of involvement and passion for the democracy movement in Myanmar. The moment was not lost on me and it felt like I had to pinch myself to believe I was really standing in the compound, closing my eyes imagining what it might have been like to be standing behind these gates with thousands cheering outside as Suu Kyi delivered her speeches back in those heady days of the late 1990s.

The house is now a hive of activity with building work and restoration ongoing and meetings being held on the front lawn looking out across beautiful Inya lake. A warm smile and welcome came from many that I already knew and others just recognised and I sat down inside, facing a huge portrait of General Aung San and waiting for his daughter, the democracy icon of Myanmar and hero to so many, to walk through the doors.

“The Lady is coming,” said U Nyi before exiting to



THE LADY IS AS STRONG AND RELEVANT  
TO THE COUNTRY'S FUTURE AS ALWAYS.



allow Suu Kyi to walk into the room. Her diminutive presence brings an aura of dignity and grace that belies a steely determination and belief that have clearly held her in good stead for the 16 years she has spent under house arrest. We chatted and shared tea for some time, our conversation roaming from politics and prisoners to pianos.

The time came for photo opportunities and we shared a good laugh when I said all I had and needed was my Leica. With the large portrait of her father as a backdrop, I wrote the name of Soe Min Min, a political prisoner that Aung San Suu Kyi now sponsors, on her hand before shooting the portrait that would bring three years of work towards its conclusion.

With her pet dog Tai Chi Toe, a gift from her son Kim, desperate to muscle in on the action, we decided to head outside to the garden and continue taking some photos. It wasn't long until Tai Chi Toe decided it was time to chase imaginary rabbits in the garden and so I took the opportunity to take a few portraits of The Lady at home. It was no surprise when she adopted her now famous pose so beautifully captured in my friend Nic

Dunlop's powerful black and white portrait from 1996. I later showed him the images out of guilt that I had somewhat inadvertently re-created his classic moment in time, but his sincere approval was re-assuring.

Before I knew it, it was time to leave and step back into the world outside the gates once more, the world that the people of Myanmar must face every day. We joked about the not-so-secret service watching and waiting outside before saying our goodbyes. I've been lucky enough to visit Myanmar on numerous occasions over the years. Whether I will have the chance to go back is up to the military intelligence corps, who still bring fear to this most beautiful of lands.

I took one last look around this magical place before tightening my *longyi* and driving away through the bright yellow gates. No frantic chase, no flying market stalls. Maybe nothing achieved other than personally. Only time will tell. 📍

*Abhaya: Burma's Fearlessness, a photographic exhibition by James Mackay, opens 24 November at Serindia Gallery, OP Garden, Soi Charoen Krung 36, Bangkok, Tel : 0 2238 6410.*