

MYANMAR: THE COURAGE OF DEMOCRACY IN ASIA

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A testimony

1. Myanmar today: between military coup and people's revolution

There is a Country in Asia where an entire people is resisting in the name of democracy: it is Myanmar, aka Burma.

The beginning of the 21st century sees signs evoking democracy in Asia: rallies in the squares and in the streets, especially by students, as in Hong Kong and Thailand. In Myanmar it translates into civil disobedience and even armed organisation: the meaningful gesture of the right hand with three fingers, the rhythmic sound of pots, creative processions, banners with slogans, portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi, flowers offered to the military.

Another spring, this time in Asia, which bears the marks of the inextinguishable dream of freedom.

The storm hit Myanmar, swept over the garden nurtured by Aung San Suu Kyi, with the military coup of 1st February 2021. A few months earlier, on 8th November 2020, the political elections had once again enshrined the landslide victory of the NLD, the National League for Democracy, the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1991), with 82% of votes. The party backed by the military - the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) - was humiliated with only 6.4% of poll.

The Chief of the army - the Tatmadaw – Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who dreamt of becoming President of the Republic, while he was forced to retire due to age limits, imposed a military coup. He did so by adducing the excuse of electoral fraud – something used quite often in these times even in the most advanced democracies - whilst international observers had confirmed that the election had been free and fair.

The coup was staged, with the immediate arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and the President of the Republic U Win Myint, and gradually the high-ranking and local leaders of the NLD.

And the resistance of the entire people was immediately triggered.

In the early hours after the coup, doctors and nurses began the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), then they were followed by teachers, civil society, ordinary people. This vast civil disobedience movement has paralysed the country for months. At least 49 health workers were killed in the first few weeks.

For the first time, the entire people of Myanmar resisted the military, and it still continues.

World public opinion knows very little about the choice of the People of Myanmar to reject the military coup, to prevent the military forces from taking over the Country and exercising power. It knows very little about the choice of the new generations to reject the army's power over their future, at the cost of their own lives. That is the way chosen by young people, who have appreciated freedom in recent years, who are connected with the world, who dream of a better life. That is the way chosen by adults, who want a different life for their children than that of their parents and grandparents, who lived under the military regime for 60 years. That is the way decided by women, active protagonists of the resistance, some commanders of armed groups, or dedicated to the organisation of health and aid, in the streets as well as in the forest.

The arrests and killings have begun. The first to be killed in a demonstration in Naypyidaw was Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, on 9th February, two days before her twentieth birthday. More than a year and a half later, there are more than 12,000 arrests, more than 2,200 civilian casualties, according to the estimates by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

Trials, convictions and executions began together with the arrests. At least 90 death sentences, some executions. The first after 40 years. The last ones - Kyaw Min Yu, known as Ko Jimmy, Phyo Zeya Thaw, Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Zaw - were executed on 23rd July 2022, after an agonising wait.

The regime's tool is propaganda with the use of fake news. The military seeks control of the Internet, of Facebook, it is a constant challenge with the people.

Digital authoritarianism is being organised following the Chinese model.

The rebels in the forest seek connection by positioning themselves up in the trees.

The long months of military oppression give us a devastated Country. The people who resist are the enemy to fight, to terrorise, to crush for the military. Above all, civilians, women, children and the elderly die.

News arrives every day about the inhumanity of the soldiers who enter the villages, about rapes, tortures, mutilations, arsons. In the village of Taung Myint, Saw Tun Moe - the teacher of a private school who had organised the school of the National Unity Government (NUG) - was beheaded.

The Mi-35s and drones purchased by Russia - which supports the Myanmar army - bomb villages, schools, churches. People flee into the forest, there are at least 700,000 refugees. Missionary nuns are also with them.

There is a lack of food, medicines, basic staples and commodities.

Humanitarian aid is scarce, almost non-existent. It is the Burmese people, in Myanmar and abroad, who support those in need. Covid-19 is not governed, it has claimed many victims, hospitals are in the hands of the military and citizens refuse to go there. Psychic discomfort is growing. An entire generation is at risk, schools are deserted. An entire people is suffering tremendously. The economy has collapsed, working conditions have deteriorated. The Country is isolated from the world.

The people resists and with the people all the people who lead this revolution. A revolution that saw the resistance of the students in the twentieth century, always suffocated in blood. In 1920, 1988, 1996, 2007 when the monks started the Saffron Revolution all over the Country.

Today the protagonist of the revolution is the entire people of Myanmar - 55 million people.

In the Myanmar revolution, people are decisive. Aung San Suu Kyi had said it for a long time, the people are the key. People decide to fight, to help each other, to support the resistance, to be in the front row, even at the cost of their lives.

It will be important to understand why an entire people moves like this, without international help, without any international consideration.

Free from fear is the book that collects the thoughts of Aung San Suu Kyi, at the beginning of her political commitment. The key to interpretation represented by fear is decisive in the Burmese affair. Aung San Suu Kyi writes: «It is not power that corrupts, but fear. The fear of losing power corrupts those who hold it and the fear of the punishment of power corrupts those who are subjected to it”(*Liberi dalla Paura*, 2005, p.183).

Today we see well that the history of democratic Myanmar is a history of liberation from fear. This story lives on before our eyes today.

In the early hours after the coup, friends from Myanmar were asking us: are the Blue Helmets coming? We knew that no one would come.

In the days immediately following the coup, the newly elected MPs, who on 1st February 2021 had waited in vain for the convening of the Parliament, fled and formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). In April 2021, the CRPH created the National Unity Government (NUG), also made up of representatives of the civil society and of the main ethnic groups.

In September 2021, the NUG set up the People Defense Forces (PDFs): the organisation, now present everywhere, which defends the people by fighting, attacking the military. With no supply of weapons, they also manage to manufacture them at home. Support comes from ethnic armed groups, from the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs).

The National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) was also established in April 2021 - a platform for political dialogue with all organisations opposed to the regime.

By now, the NUG and PDF control at least 52% of the Country's territory, according to a recent UN report. Free zones especially in the countryside, but the PDF is also attacking the military garrisons of mid-sized cities.

There are entire liberated areas, organised on an administrative level for essential services and for jurisdiction. A democracy from below, as in Italy during the Resistance, with the partisan Republics.

The PDF groups ask us for technical assistance through training and technological tools: for the defence against attacks, for the disarming of the captured soldiers and their reconversion, for the integration of the partisans in an army renewed in democracy. Meanwhile, they form their own groups on the political level, focussed on how to resist.

The revolution is live, and looks to the future, with great determination, with great confidence. Young people say: we will win, we will change Myanmar.

A year and a half after the coup, the Tatmadaw did not win, it is unable to govern the Country, it is isolated from the rest of the world.

The game is on, the regime has got no prospects.

The people, yes, it has got them, they are its strength.

2. Unity and pluralism: towards the new Myanmar

In the history of Myanmar, after the British colonialism that used minorities to consolidate power, and the subsequent military dictatorship that crushed its desire for autonomy, the Country's identity has always been at stake between unity and pluralism. This was the very

cornerstone of the independence, obtained from Great Britain on 4th January 1948, thanks to the political action of Aung San, the Father of the Homeland. Aung San Suu Kyi's father.

In February 1947, at the Panglong Conference, he achieved the unity of the Country through dialogue with the many ethnic groups that make it up, at least 135 recognised ones.

The assassination of Aung San on 19th July 1947 interrupted the process that had just started. The military regime prevented any positive evolution, fueling conflicts from 1962 to 2010.

Today the revolution of the Burmese people and the NUG makes unity in plurality the hallmark of the entire political process.

The Union Peace Conference - 21st Century Panglong, promoted by Aung San Suu Kyi since 2016 as the first act of her government, has substantially acknowledged the unsolved problems, confirming the priority theme in the political horizon of the Country: reconciliation and peace among ethnic groups - both armed and unarmed - for the union of Myanmar. Unity and federalism, this is the commitment of Aung San Suu Kyi in continuity with the legacy of her Father.

Today the NUG intends to build the new Myanmar following the same horizon.

The revolution has taken a new step: the NUG and ethnic groups are allies in standing up to the military coup. They work for a united and federal Country, with full autonomy for the territories. This is what the NUG and the ethnic groups are debating, this is what they are planning. The choice of freedom immediately united them, the new Myanmar is already being created.

The NUG itself is made up of representatives of different ethnic groups, starting with the President, Duwa Lashi La, of the Kachin National Consultative Council, highly revered by the people.

Big news is the dialogue between the NUG and the leaders of the Muslim Rohingya minority. One of their representatives is a member of the NUG.

The turning point came when the signs appeared in the demonstrations in the streets of Yangon asking for forgiveness from the Rohingya, persecuted in 2017 by the same army battalion that was now attacking the demonstrators.

This is the axis of the new democratic, united and federal Myanmar, around which the revolution in Myanmar today revolves. It will inevitably determine the advent of a new Constitution, within a process of dialogue and national reconciliation.

Those who participate in the revolution in Myanmar today know that this path is irreversible and will lead to the victory of democracy.

That process of national reconciliation, of transfer of power by the military, of new people's sovereignty that can only be the result of a strategy that is born from within and has the support of the international community must have a place in this horizon of unity and pluralism - a destiny for Myanmar, given its configuration, its culture, its history.

Unity and pluralism for the future of Myanmar, for a stable, peaceful, developed Myanmar that gives security to the whole area of South East Asia and to the whole of Asia.

We are talking about the coming years of Myanmar which will have to be dedicated to the material, moral, social and political reconstruction of the Country.

A huge change that will involve everyone and will affect every area of life in Myanmar.

This change has already begun, in the commitment of the NUG and of those who are experiencing the people's revolution.

3. The international community: the absence of politics, the silence of the media

The story of Myanmar is unbelievable: the world seems to leave it alone. It speaks very little about it.

International politics, its instruments, its organisations, starting with the UN, seem powerless.

Outraged statements are not yet a policy.

The only essential gesture made by the other Countries of the world, except for very few, is the lack of international recognition of the regime. Some, the US, the EU, Great Britain, have decided on sanctions that affect dozens of the most important leaders of the military regime.

The UN continues to recognise Kyaw Moe Tun as the representative of Myanmar at the United Nations since 20 October 2020. He was designated by Aung San Suu Kyi and declared his opposition to the military in the days following the coup.

Diplomacy, in every location, moves carefully, avoiding relations with the military. Despite the sanctions and bans, some trade continues, while the most important multinational corporations have left the Country.

In recent months, formal and non-formal contacts with members of the NUG have intensified in various Countries.

No strategy to impose an end to the violence, the release of political prisoners, internal dialogue on the military is in sight yet.

The current UN Special Envoy, Noeleen Heyzer, has not achieved any results so far, not even following a trip to Naypyidaw. The previous Special Envoy, Christine Schraner Burgener, had in vain asked the military to be allowed to enter the Country and meet Aung San Suu Kyi.

The fact is that inhumanity grabbed the power and now holds it in Myanmar. Nobody knows how to stop it but the people and their defense groups.

A blow suffered by the mankind at the beginning of the 21st century. International politics, so capable of giving space to business, economy, finance, does not know how to move in the face of a Country in these dramatic conditions. Seventy years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Organisation, it seems that the bodies and instruments designed to ensure law and peace have become ineffective.

The systematic, total, unpunished violation of universal human rights in Myanmar is there for all to see. The UN Special Spokesperson in Geneva on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Thomas H. Andrews, often denounces this violation. UNICEF sees and does not move. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) oversees Yangon, also with a special mission in Rakhine.

Those who can, leave the Country. UNHCR helps refugees, but the Burmese crowding together along the border with Thailand are defenseless, always at risk, often forcibly repatriated.

The international politics has shown its total inability to face and solve problems like these, which decide the destiny of a Country.

The 20s of the 21st century, which come after the 20th century so full of lessons in history and humanity, give us the weakness of the international community in the defense of international law, universal human rights, freedom of peoples, as in the case of the people of Myanmar who expressed itself with free elections.

A weakness that even reveals itself in the inability to organise and send humanitarian aid to avert humanitarian disasters.

A political weakness that arises in the difficulty in promoting an international dialogue on Myanmar involving Countries in strategic relationship with it: Russia, China, ASEAN, India, Japan, South Korea, the EU , Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand. No geopolitics for the future of Asia can ignore Myanmar, can allow it to drift and become a source of permanent insecurity and instability for the whole of Asia.

Today Myanmar is a source of impoverishment for the entire Asian continent.

In the months following the coup, ASEAN - which gathers the ten Countries of South East Asia, including Myanmar - took a stand and maintained contacts with the junta. The five points on

which ASEAN had found consensus have always been ignored by the military. Behind the work of ASEAN, one could imagine China.

At the end of the Chinese Communist Party congress, we can hope for a far-sighted intervention, balancing China, interested in a stable, prosperous Myanmar, with which it shares more than 2,000 km of border.

In January 2020, Xi Jinping travelled to Naypyidaw and met Aung San Suu Kyi to celebrate the seventy years of China's great friendship with Burma.

China's dialogue with the US - which is destined to increase after the US elections in November - could address, along with other hot topics, the situation in Myanmar for its positive evolution.

A way out that frees Myanmar soon, that shortens the suffering of its people, is what can be expected from a common policy of China and the USA, which favours dialogue between all the protagonists of present-day Myanmar.

As the Myanmar tragedy unfolded, Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022.

The two situations today, in different respects, are connected. The NUG supports the resistance of the Ukrainian people. Russia supports the Myanmar military with arms trade and political relations.

The difficulty of international politics in stopping Russia's aggression against Ukraine is the same as that of Myanmar. The international media, so attentive to the Rohingya matter a few years ago, seem to have forgotten both the Rohingya and the entire people of Myanmar today.

Who cares about the Burmese people today? What role does Myanmar play in global geopolitics?

Questions that recall the condition of other Countries, other conflicts, other sufferings. We are talking about a large part of humankind, forgotten.

The immediate start of international political negotiations to promote pacification in Myanmar is part of the urgent search for a new balance in the world.

China and the USA, above all, with the intervention of ASEAN, and the possible mediation of a moral figure like Pope Francis, can be the main architects of a political dialogue, of a human concern, which has the objective of saving Myanmar.

Today Myanmar poses a challenge to the world. Its people are defending democracy alone, their own but also ours, while it is under pressure everywhere. The great lesson of Myanmar today is this: only truth, peace, dialogue, reconciliation ensure the future of a Country, ensure the future of mankind against any dictatorship.

A «Never cold blooded» revolution, peaceful, not revengeful.

It marks a new beginning, «it is the second independence», says the NUG President Duwa Lashi La.

The people's revolution will win because it has an awareness of the change in history.

4. Aung San Suu Kyi's mission in the life of Burma: the red thread of democracy

Where is Aung San Suu Kyi today?

It is said to be in a small, purpose-built facility in the Prison compound in Naypyidaw. Exposed to the harsh sun, festering insect bites, with dirty water and lousy food.

Immediately after the coup, she was detained for months in an unknown location.

She is on trial, together with the President of the Republic U Win Myint. A sham, political trial. With accusations of corruption, sedition, violation of laws and state secrets.

Up to now she has been sentenced to 26 years in prison, of which 3 with forced labour.

She is 77 years old, long years of house arrest behind her, risks and suffering - both personal and of her people. A life for democracy, a life for her Country, in profound unity with her people. A Nobel Prize Life. A life as a politician, not as an icon.

Until yesterday hailed by the West as a champion of human rights, then isolated in Western public opinion for the Rohingya affair. There is something insufficient in the reading of its history made by the West. Her political project, the suffering that accompanied it, the unity with her people say much more about her than the Western schemes. No correct analysis was heard of the power within which she was forced to move, with the military arbitrators of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs.

A word from her could provoke an early coup, with damage for the Rohingya and for the whole of Myanmar.

This phase painfully confirms the mission that Aung San Suu Kyi has chosen, that fate has bestowed on her: witness of freedom, champion and guardian of democracy in her Country. Like a beacon turned on in the dark decades of the dictatorship, like a wise farmer of the Myanmar garden, today again as a resistant together with all her people in the face of the uncontrolled power of the military.

Completely isolated from the world, she continues to be the point of reference, the Mother loved by her people.

Perhaps, something also reaches her from the outside world, especially the most painful news, such as the recent hangings, including that of the MP Phyo Zeya Thaw, very dear to her.

This time of her life is the time of silence, of inner meditation and, I am sure, of her vision of the future.

She remains in the hands of Min Aung Hlaing - a likely object of negotiation or exchange at any time.

No negotiations, no reconciliation process in Myanmar can take place without her. The red thread of democracy is still held in her hands. Red like the land of Burma, red like the blood of its martyrs.

It is always the time of endurance for her.

We can imagine the latest dramatic dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi and Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, with Aung San Suu Kyi's firm refusal to allow him what was not in her power to grant him. There are moments in history in which moral and political choices impose themselves as a decisive step that changes the course of history and life.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been living Burma's path of liberation for a long time. She chose to live it. In her house on Lake Inya, in August 1988, when young people motivated her by founding the NLD, in the solitude of arrests, in electoral campaigns among her people.

Today even her house does not belong to her. She lives in the most complete spoliation, without contacts, not even the clothes she wears or the prison uniform belongs to her.

She is always the great fear of the military.

Rarely do politicians choose to put their entire life at the disposal of their people.

Her life speaks volume. Her silences speak more than words.

She is the light of her people, essential today for all internal and international negotiations, for every dialogue and reconciliation.

What Aung San Suu Kyi is now experiencing is a fulfilment. I am sure that she is living it in the integrity of her spirit.

5. Burma lies in the heart of the world

If politics is far away, humanity is close.

Burma lies in the hearts of many, of those who have known it, of those who have met its people. Of those who were greeted by their smile, by the beauty of its nature, by the Buddhist spirituality that expresses its soul.

Many are close to Burma today: Burmese communities scattered across every continent, non-governmental organisations even if they are currently prevented from operating, missionary congregations, local and national institutions, friendship associations.

We started the Alliance for a Democratic Myanmar, demanding that the UN do not recognise the State Administration Council (SAC) as a legitimate government, that it keep the Myanmar crisis at the centre of its agenda, that it address its humanitarian crisis, that cease the flow of weapons to the Country.

There are many demonstrations that in many cities, at every latitude, support the revolution of the Burmese people. A recent lottery - organised by an influencer - raised more than 1,700,000 dollars thanks to the raffle of a wooden work engraved by Kim Aris, the youngest son of Aung San Suu Kyi, who works as a carpenter in London. It is his embrace with her and with all the Burmese people.

Myanmar is in the heart of Pope Francis. Several times, constantly, he reminds the world of the suffering of the Burmese people. In November 2017, when he was visiting Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi concluded her greeting with the words pronounced in Italian: «Let's continue walking together». The journey continues.

At least 300 organisations around the world have signed an appeal for the recognition of Kyaw Moe Tun as the legitimate representative of Myanmar at the UN.

The fury of the military junta cannot extinguish the culture.

In the shelter of the jungle, a Burmese storyteller, under the pseudonym Than Lwin Myint, translated *Pinocchio* by Collodi into Burmese, after having told and illustrated a new story of Pinocchio and Yamin, disseminated in Burma and Italy. Translating *Pinocchio* helped him overcome despair.

The poets write, and their voice reaches us.

Some of them were killed: Kyi Zaw Aye, Kyi Za Win, Khet Thi.

Ko Ko Thet - a Burmese poet living abroad today - imprisoned in 1996, is translating the latest generation of Burmese poets for the whole world.

Does the heritage of suffering, despair, devastation that crosses the life of a people mean something in the world? Does the resource of compassion, hope, dreams, culture, donation that is fueled by a revolution really matter?

This is already changing Myanmar, it is also changing us. The world is changing at the beginning of the 21st century.

Let's listen to the poet Khet Thi:

I don't want to be a hero

English translation by Ko Ko Thet

I don't want to be a hero,

I don't want to be a martyr,

I don't want to be a weakling,

I don't want to be a fool,

I don't want to support injustice.

If I have only a minute to live,

I want my conscience to be clean for that minute.

Albertina Soliani

She is the President of the Alcide Cervi Institute in Italy, for the memory of the Resistance.

She was a Member of the Italian Parliament for the so-called Ulivo and the Democratic Party, in the Senate of the Republic, from 2001 to 2013, and was a member of the Assembly of the Council of Europe.

From 2008 to 2013 she was President of the Parliamentary Association “Friends of Burma”.

She was Undersecretary for Public Education in the 1st Prodi Government from 1996 to 1998. She participated in women's movements, in 1995 she was part of the Italian delegation to the IV World Conference of Women organised by the UN in Beijing.

She lives in Parma.

Translated by Lara Marchesi