



BURMA REPORT

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Free all political prisoners, free Burma.

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<<http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/world/breakingnews/germanys-merkel-speaks-with-myanmar-opposition-leader-suu-kyi-after-new-government-sworn-in-118985039.html>>

The Canadian Press - ONLINE EDITION - Posted: 03/31/2011

Germany's Merkel speaks with Myanmar opposition leader Suu Kyi after new government sworn in

By: The Associated Press

BERLIN - German Chancellor Angela Merkel has spoken by phone with Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and underlined calls for her political party to be recognized.

Merkel's office says the two spoke on Thursday — a day after Myanmar's junta was officially disbanded following its handover of power to a new so-called civilian government.

It says Merkel voiced her esteem for the Nobel Peace Prize laureate's decades of nonviolent resistance against the military regime.

The German government says the two agreed on what they expect from the new administration.

It pointed to a U.N. Human Rights Council resolution calling for the release of all political prisoners and the full recognition of parties including Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.

Ben Rogers <brogers50@hotmail.com>, [NLDmembrsnSupportersofCRPPnNLDnDASSK] DVB: Is it a crime to write a book? - 07.04.2011

Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) - <<http://www.dvb.no/analysis/is-it-a-crime-to-write-a-book/15199>>

Is it a crime to write a book?

By BENEDICT ROGERS

Published: 7 April 2011

Benedict Rogers reads from his biography of Than Shwe at the FCCT in Bangkok



"Is it a crime to write a book?," I asked. He looked surprised, and confused. Then, feigning ignorance and naivety, I continued. "In November, Myanmar held elections. So I thought Myanmar was becoming a democracy. In a democracy, it is very normal to write books freely, and very common to write books about leaders. Some books are positive, others are critical. But the fact that you are deporting me for writing a book suggests that Myanmar is not a democracy. So, I am confused. Can you tell me, is Myanmar becoming a democracy or not?"

He hesitated. "Myanmar will be a democracy one day, but slowly, slowly. We are in transition period." OK, I said, but transition implies change. "I thought Myanmar was changing. But deporting a foreigner for writing a book suggests no change. So is that correct – no change?" He nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes yes, no change, no change.” In that case, I thought, surely talk of lifting sanctions is ill-judged. To lift sanctions now, without meaningful change, simply rewards the Generals for nothing. Now is the time for the world to get tougher, to target pressure more carefully, to provide aid for the people and to investigate crimes against humanity through a UN inquiry.

I asked if he deports many foreigners. He smiled. “Yes, many.” I asked if he thought my deportation was fair. He said he had not read my book, so he could not comment. “Do you have a copy of your book with you? I would be interested to read it.” I laughed, and said I did not, but I offered to send it to him if he gave me his address. He didn’t take me up on the offer.

If my book is a problem, I asked, “why did you give me a visa?” He looked at me. “We are also asking that question.”

He asked whether I had any plans to write more books about Burma, and I told him I had just completed another, which would be published later this year. With his pen and notebook at hand, he said: “Ah. What is the title?” I wasn’t going to help him that much, so I told him he could wait until it was published.

I told him it was a shame they were deporting me, because if they had allowed me to stay just one more day, I may have gone away with a more positive impression. Now, I would have no choice but to tell my friends that the regime in Burma was not changing at all. He looked at me impassively.

I asked if he enjoyed working for a government that treats its people so badly, and if he knew that the ethnic nationalities in Burma were particularly suffering under this regime. This drew no response.

I asked what he thought about the events in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. “I don’t like this kind of change. I think it was created by al-Qaeda. Do you think it was created by al-Qaeda?” No, I said, I did not. I acknowledged the risk of extremists taking advantage, but I said the movements in these countries were led by ordinary people who don’t like dictatorship. “But democracy gives al-Qaeda opportunities.” No, I disagree. “Democratic, open societies are a better way to challenge extremism and terrorism than dictatorship.”

Then they told me I could go through to the gate for boarding. But they still had my passport, which they had taken, along with my air tickets, the night before. I reminded them that they had my passport, and they had a few minutes of confusion over what to do. I said with a smile: “No passport, I stay in Myanmar, ok?” and we all burst out laughing.

They shook my hand and said goodbye. Looking them straight in the eye, I uttered my last words before leaving Burma: “Thank you for treating me well. I know that your government does not treat your own people well at all, but I am grateful that at least you treated me well.” I know that if I had been Burmese, I would have been treated far worse. I might not even have survived.

Within hours of my deportation, the news had reached the media. I did not seek publicity, but it had already got out. Only once the media were running the story anyway did I decide I should speak about it, in order to ensure that the story did not descend into wild rumours which could make things worse. People inside Burma also asked me to speak out, to let the world know that nothing has changed.

Four days later, I sat in a refugee camp on the Thailand-Burma border and watched Karen students graduate from a Bible School. They sang the Hallelujah chorus from Handel’s Messiah, in a bamboo church at the foot of a mountain. The contrast between such physical and spiritual beauty, the suffering that these people had endured, and the secret police I met just a few days before was hard to absorb. One young Karen gave a graduation speech titled “Rebuilding our land”. He said: “The dictators want to make our people disappear from this world.” The principal, Pastor Simon, uttered the cry of people across Burma: “We want peace, justice and freedom for all the people of Burma. We want the regime to respect and treat us as brothers and sisters, not as enemies or slaves. We want the whole world to help. We want to go home – please help us.”

In contrast, I hadn’t wanted to go home – I wanted to stay just one more day. But the fact that I was forced to leave has given me a deeper empathy with the people of Burma, and reinforced my commitment to support their struggle for freedom. One man I met told me I was “very dangerous”. But, he added, “I like what you do. Keep doing it. This regime is like a psychiatric patient, who needs electric shock treatment. You give them electric shocks.” As much as possible, I’ll go on giving them electric shocks, until the day when Burmese exiles, refugees and I can go back to Burma together.

Benedict Rogers is the East Asia Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, an international human rights organisation. He is the author of ‘Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma’s Tyrant’ (Silkworm Books, 2010).

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The Nation - <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2011/04/12/mekong/Shan-community-denounces-atrocities-against-civili-30153075.html>>

BURMA - By The Nation

Published on **April 12, 2011**

Shan community denounces atrocities against civilians

Shan human rights groups on Tuesday denounced widespread atrocities against civilians inside Burma, one day after the Thai National Security Council (NSC) talk about repatriating more than 100,000 Burmese refugees back to the trouble-plague country.

The Shan community groups "strongly denounce the current Burma Army offensive against the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) and atrocities against civilians, including shelling of Buddhist temples, gang-rape and using women as cannon fodder."

The 22-year-old ceasefire with the SSN-N came to an end effectively on March 13, 2011 when the Burmese military mobilised some 3,500 troops from over twenty battalions to launch attacks in Murg Su township, according to the report.

"Over 100,000 civilians in the conflict zone are now fearing for their lives. The Burma Army has deployed 120 mm mortars throughout the area and shelled indiscriminately at populated villages. The initial attack on March 13 involved shelling of a Buddhist temple at Wan Nam Lao, killing four novices and injuring two villagers," the report said.

"Villagers are being tortured and killed on suspicion of supporting the Shan resistance, and women targeted for sexual violence. Three women were gang-raped in separate incidents in Wan Nam Lao, including a 30-year-old woman who had given birth only one month earlier, and died after being raped by numerous troops."

"The Burma Army is also systematically rounding up women and girls from different villages, and using them as porters to walk in front of their troops to deter SSA-N attacks," the report aid.

The Shan groups urged the international community to condemn this unprovoked offensive, and increase pressure on Burma's military rulers to immediately stop their policies of military aggression in the ethnic areas.

"Northern Shan State is being plunged into war and new atrocities inflicted on our people. Now is definitely not the time to lift sanctions against the regime," said Kham Harn Fah of the Shan Human Rights Foundation.

The groups are also urging international donor countries and agencies not to cut support to refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border at a time when the conflict is intensifying in Shan State.

NSC's Secretary General Tawin Pleansri told reporters after his meeting with Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, armed forces chiefs and other security agencies at the Government House on Monday that the 100,000-plus refugees should return to Burma because Burma now has just concluded its general election and a new government is in place.

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KAREN NATIONAL UNION
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KNU Statement on New Military Government & Concerns of Ethnic Nationalities

April 4, 2011

With the 2008 Constitution in hand, which is devoid of any guarantee for the rights of the ethnic nationalities, and after stage-managing freely the 2010 elections, which did not allow for free expression of the voters, the SPDC military

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dictatorship cast its military uniform and set up itself as a new government, with a civilian façade. We do not believe that this new government, under the control of the military leaders, will be able to undertake true democratic transition and ethnic reconciliation necessary for peace and stability in the country.

Since the day the election was held, we have not seen any changes in the areas of the ethnic nationalities. On the other hand, human rights violations, such as military offensives targeting the civilian populations of the ethnic nationalities, forced labor, arbitrary arrest, detention and execution of the innocents by troops of the military dictatorship, continue to exist. The increase of military activities and human rights violations in some areas is clear evidence that there is no positive change for the ethnic nationalities under the new government.

After the election, the dictatorship troops force the ethnic nationality civilian populations daily to carry for them heavy loads of food ration and ammunition and clear landmines. The troops commandeered trucks, motor cycles and bullock carts of the public and use them for transportation, security and for clearing landmines. In addition, the arrest, torture and execution of the innocents continue to occur.

Unlawful arrest, detention, torture, execution and forced labor of the innocent civilians and the use of them as human shield in the frontline by the Burma army troops are continuing under the rule of the new government. According to the international law, they are serious human rights violations and crimes against humanity. They are a concern for us as the very security of life and survivals of the ethnic nationalities are in question.

It is evident that the military dictatorship does not want change, even when the international community, the ethnic nationalities and the great majority of the people of Burma are desirous of positive change. We, the Karen National Union (KNU), call on the military dictatorship again to institute nationwide ceasefire, as a first step, withdraw its forces from the ethnic nationality areas, cease military actions targeting the civilian populations and start dialogue for the resolution of political problems by political means. This demand is the first step for the realization of wishes of the ethnic nationalities.

In closing, we earnestly call on the international communities, including the United Nations, to urge the military government cogently to stop its troops from forcing the civilian populations of the ethnic nationalities for manual labor, looting their properties and targeting the civilian population for military attack, and to institute nationwide ceasefire and take steps for the emergence of dialogue.

Supreme Headquarters
Karen National Union

THE BURMANET NEWS, BurmaNet News, April 2 - 4, 2011, Mon, 04. Apr 2011, newsletter covering Burma, "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org>

The Australian - <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/departing-strongman-of-burma-than-shwe-unlikely-to-fully-relinquish-power/story-e6frg6so-1226033586103>>

Departing strongman of Burma Than Shwe unlikely to fully relinquish power — Elizabeth Hughes April 05, 2011

Bangkok – After presiding over nearly two decades of asphyxiating military rule, Than Shwe has retired as leader of Burma's military junta.

The army strongman has shed his title of Senior General and will now be known as the civilian U Than Shwe - but few believe he will relinquish his influence over national affairs.

Ma Khin Omar, of the Thai-based Forum for Democracy in Burma, said Than Shwe's continuing grip on power was obvious, regardless of any formalities regarding his retirement.

"It's good that he leaves," she said. "But the reality on the ground is that he isn't leaving."

Ms Ma noted that Than Shwe's replacement as commander-in-chief of the Burmese army, General Min Aung Hlaing, was 54 and considerably junior to Than Shwe in army rank. "He won't interfere," she said. "That's the plan; that's the game." Burma's civilian President, Thein Sein, will be in charge of a new 11-member National Defence and Security Council intended to oversee Burma's military affairs. Than Shwe will not sit on the council, but Mr Thein Sein is seen as a loyal henchman, and analysts believe Than Shwe will continue to manipulate defence strategy.

And if Than Shwe sees that influence as insufficient, there is a military reservist law, introduced before last year's widely condemned elections, that ensures officers can return to the army with the same rank within five years.

The law is thought to be an insurance policy for Than Shwe, allowing him to easily return to power if he sees the need.

With untold wealth accrued from his years in power, the 78-year-old may feel he has earned the right to relax.

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But Aung Naing Oo, a former Burmese student leader and now an exiled political analyst living in Thailand, said observers were not sure how far he would step back from the levers of power. "Things are quite murky at the moment," he said. Best known for its appalling economic mismanagement and blanket human rights abuses, the "State Peace and Development Council" military junta was formally dissolved last week. Power was transferred to a new, nominally civilian government, and the democratic opposition holds a handful of seats in the strictly-controlled parliament.

But many of Than Shwe's generals simply shed their uniforms to contest last year's elections and many retain their powerful government portfolios.

THE BURMANET NEWS - April 20, 2011 Issue #4182, "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org>, newsletter covering Burma, www.burmanet.org

The Irrawaddy - [Newsletter, April 20, 2011- news@irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org). <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=21139>

Suu Kyi must return to her strength – Editorial

When Aung San Suu Kyi emerged from her home last week to greet well-wishers during Burma's New Year water festival, revelers chanted "Happy New Year Aunty Suu" and "Long live Daw Aung San Suu Kyi." Hundreds stopped their cars and got out to shake her hand.

Despite all the attention and accolades she receives from international heavyweights, and the undeniable importance of garnering worldwide support for her cause, it is the people of Burma that form Suu Kyi's base.

Her primary strength lies not in the people she must cater to for international pressure on Snr-Gen Than Shwe (who despite having officially "retired" continues to pull the strings of the new government) and the rest of the junta leaders, but rather in the people she represents and whose hopes and aspirations she inspires.

Suu Kyi's top priority right now should be to reunite and reinvigorate the disparate groups that make up Burma's opposition movement and inspire the country's oppressed masses to once again actively participate in the cause of freedom and democracy.

The reason for this is simple: If Burma's pro-democracy and human rights movement continues to splinter and bicker, and if the people become further disillusioned with the lack of tangible progress, then all the international support in the world will be without meaning.

We all must recognize that the task she faces is daunting and probably the most difficult challenge she has faced yet—which speaks volumes given her years under house arrest and two decades battling the regime.

In 1988, when she first stood at the base of Shwedagon Pagoda and spoke to the people of Burma, she was throwing inspirational gasoline on an already raging bonfire of anger and protest. People believed and had hope that things could change. They were ready and willing to rise up, and she provided leadership and moral guidance.

Today, however, the situation is much different. Suu Kyi must bring together the branches of an opposition movement that have been broken and scattered by the political storms, and reignite the fading embers of passion in her core supporters who have become cynical about the possibility of real change in the foreseeable future.

In order to do so, there are several initial steps she can take inside Burma.

First, she must continue her calls for reconciliation at every level and do everything in her power to work towards that goal. She has already taken the bold move—in the face of heavy criticism—of meeting opposition and ethnic leaders who were once NLD party members and/or supporters but decided to defect to contest in the 2010 election.

We think this is a step in the right direction, because she is the one person who has the clout to deflect the inevitable pot shots that will be thrown from both sides at anyone who works towards unity in the opposition movement.

In addition, Suu Kyi must heed the critics who warn that "the enemy is within" her own camp, not only with the junta. The NLD is no longer the same party that faced down the military in 1988 and won the election in 1990 by a landslide. It has become an aging and sluggish organization that many observers feel is out of touch with its younger generation of supporters.

In short, while respecting the contribution and experience of the NLD's top hierarchy, Suu Kyi must take the lead in reforming her own party. Until this happens, the party will not legitimately be able to help reform the country.

To make progress in this direction, Suu Kyi must surround herself with a mostly new team of good, wise and dedicated advisors. She must inject new blood into her own party—bringing into the fold and promoting to prominence those who can advise her on issues such as foreign relations, health, education, ethnic conflicts, human rights, trade and investment and military affairs.

Only then will she be able to form a new opposition strategy that reflects the current political, economic and social

environment in a way that inspires her supporters to become active in the cause.

In addition, Suu Kyi must delegate responsibility to the new members of her team in order to develop the next generation of opposition leaders that are capable of doing political battle with the generals.

Much has been said of her unwillingness to ask the aging NLD leaders to step aside, which in large part stems from Burmese culture rather than lack of will. But for these same cultural reasons, the NLD elders must themselves recognize that the party and the opposition movement need them to put personal feelings aside, move into an advisory role and let a new generation of leaders emerge from their shadow.

In addition, Suu Kyi and her team must increase their efforts to reconcile with approachable members of the newly installed military-dominated government. While it may not be possible to change the hardened hearts and narrow minds of the top generals, there are government servants and military personnel who admire her and listen to her voice for change.

If Suu Kyi can convince those inside the new government that have some power but lie outside the upper echelon that they have much to gain in a free and democratic Burma and much to lose if the country continues on its oppressive road to ruin, then she will have taken maybe the most important step towards true national reconciliation and real change—for the first time there will be people both inside and outside government pulling on the same oar.

Last but definitely not least, despite the security concerns it is perhaps time for Suu Kyi to begin to test the waters of her supposed “freedom.”

Upon her release, Suu Kyi said she wanted to listen to the people. She has done so—meeting with many of her supporters, young pro-democracy leaders, politicians, local NGO representatives and members of civil society groups—but most of these discussions have been behind closed doors and all have been in Rangoon.

With the new government having just been sworn in and the regime wanting to maintain the facade of increased respectability it has developed with some in the international community, Suu Kyi might now be able to spend more time on the streets with her supporters and venture outside the former capital to campaign for reconciliation.

Becoming more visible inside Burma, as opposed to in the international media, could actually do more than anything to bolster Suu Kyi's international standing.

Many of the diplomats and others in the world community whom she has met since her release don't really know Suu Kyi and Burma. They weren't around in the late 1980s when she rallied the masses at the Shwedagon Pagoda, in the early 1990s when she gave weekend speeches at the gate of her lakeside home that drew thousands of people, or later when she risked her life in places like Depayin to meet supporters throughout the country.

As a result, the opinions of Suu Kyi voiced by the myriad international visitors she has received have been mixed—she and the senior NLD are well aware that some of the behind-the-scenes comments by diplomats who spoke and posed for pictures with her have been lukewarm.

But to truly understand and appreciate both Suu Kyi and those she represents, these new international friends, as well as the skeptics, need to see her out there playing to her strength—the people of Burma.



More people are realising that if they want change, they've got to go about it themselves' ... Aung San Suu Kyi

Wunna Thein Saw <phoewunna@yahoo.com.sg>, [NLDmembersnSupportersofCRPPnNLDnDASSK] Saturday interview: Aung San Suu Kyi Datum: Fri, 22. Apr 2011

The Guardian, Saturday 16 April 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/16/interview-aung-san-suu-kyi-polly-toynbee>>

Saturday interview: Aung San Suu Kyi - By Polly Toynbee

Burma's tireless political campaigner talks about rebuilding the National League for Democracy, the revolutionary power of social media and her love of The Grateful Dead

'More people are realising that if they want change, they've got to go about it themselves' ... Aung San Suu Kyi

The high fence is back, separating her house from the lake it stands beside – but this time it has been erected by her own people to protect her, not to lock her in. How free is [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), five months after her 15 years of house arrest ended? Not very; or free as a bird, depending on how you ask the question.

Fragile yet strong as iron, the yellow and white roses in her hair belie her steely resolution. She had not been well when we visited her this week. Though she steps into the room with bright smiles, warmth and grace, her ramrod-straight deportment disguises painful spondylosis of the spine. Andrew Comben, director of the Brighton festival, and I as its chair, have come to film an interview, as she is guest director of this year's event in May. Since she dare not travel abroad, knowing the generals who have run [Burma](#) since 1962 would never let her return, we shall show this film of her instead. Her visitors will be followed, so it takes some subterfuge, ducking and diving in and out of taxis, a ferry over the river and sidling out through hotel back doors to avoid confiscation of our film.

Approached some months ago while still under house arrest, we wondered if she might think the idea of guest directing an arts festival absurdly frivolous or irrelevant to her country's struggle for democracy. But not at all. She accepted with delight: despite 15 of the last 21 years spent in solitary isolation, she has an ebullient enjoyment of many things. Arts matter, she says. "If you can make people understand why freedom is so important through the arts, that would be a big help." Exploring her artistic tastes, pleasures and memories has been revealing and moving. And surprising – of which more later.

As a surge for freedom storms across the Middle East, will it ripple on through dictatorships everywhere, including Burma? "Human beings want to be free and however long they may agree to stay locked up, to stay oppressed, there will come a time when they say 'That's it.' Suddenly they find themselves doing something that they never would have thought they would be doing, simply because of the human instinct that makes them turn their face towards freedom." Is that time now? "More people, especially young people, are realising that if they want change, they've got to go about it themselves – they can't depend on a particular person, ie me, to do all the work. They are less easy to fool than they used to be, they now know what's going on all over the world."

The Middle East is never mentioned in Burma's state newspapers, organs that make Soviet-era Pravda look like Wikileaks. The New Light of Myanmar carries front and back page warnings – "Anarchy begets anarchy. Riots beget riots, not democracy. Wipe out those inciting unrest and violence" – and attacks on the BBC and Voice of America: "Do not allow ourselves to be swayed by killer broadcasts designed to cause troubles." She laughs at it, calling the paper "The New Blight of Myanmar". Is the regime rattled? "People know what's going on because of the communications revolution. So people are becoming more aware of their own potential, and this has to be encouraged."

What might the trigger be? A 1988 uprising was sparked by the government abolishing existing bank notes overnight, so everyone lost their savings. The 2007 protests, joined by the monks, began with soaring rice prices. "Once the army starts shooting, most uprisings are put down pretty quickly. But how long the people will remain quiet after something like that is another matter." People look to her, and now she is free the National League for Democracy has a new impetus, though organising is extraordinarily difficult with all its leaders among the country's 2,200 political prisoners: 65-year sentences were handed out to students. "Fear, fear, fear" is everywhere, she says.

Except inside her. In 2003 they tried to assassinate Aung San Suu Kyi when her convoy was set upon by government-organised thugs and 70 of her people murdered: beaten up and thrown into jail, she was put under house arrest until this year. Her people want her heavily guarded, but she refuses. She shrugs, and says if the regime wants her dead, there's little to be done. How free is she now? If she steps outside she is mobbed by thousands of admirers wherever she goes. She went shopping once with her son, but had to be rescued from the crush of well-wishers. "Luckily, I don't like shopping!" – and indeed shopping in Burma holds few enticements. Once the second richest nation in south-east Asia, despite rich resources it is now the poorest, as well as least free nation after North Korea. Is she free to travel the country? Unlikely, she thinks. She hasn't yet ventured out of Rangoon: "So far I haven't tried to go anywhere they wouldn't wish me to, but I must start testing the waters again." Her work detains her between the party's office and her home, her erstwhile prison.

Her long years in detention were so exceptional because they were partly voluntary. Most prisoners have no choice, but every day she could have walked free, headed for the airport and flown away, her captors glad to be rid of her for ever. Every day for 15 years she had to make that hard decision to stay, alone and isolated without her two sons, even as her beloved husband was dying of cancer in Britain, cruelly forbidden from visiting her. But if you suggest exceptional fortitude, she always refers to the other Burmese political prisoners kept in far harsher conditions, half-starved, their

health broken. "I don't think I was the only one who volunteered. A lot of our people could have chosen not to go to prison if they had given up working for the movement for democracy." The generals' respect for her war-hero father, who died fighting for Burma's independence when she was just two, kept her incarcerated in her own home. This Nobel Peace Prize laureate was protected, too, by world opinion. "This word 'free'," she says of herself and the other prisoners, "we all think that we are freer than the people outside because we don't have to compromise with our conscience. We are doing what we believe in. We are not locked in by the bars of guilt. So I think this is what made us choose imprisonment rather than to stay – in quotes – 'free'. For us, that is how our lives are."

In the last five months she has revived the National League for Democracy, starting new humanitarian services, digging wells, opening clinics and schools with scarce money. Scrupulously, they take not a penny from foreign campaigners, only from Burmese donors. She laughs as she says that if they begin to dig a well, the government rushes in to dig a better one, "So that does a lot of good!" But it's hard to convene meetings with regional organisers without funds, hard to find out what's happening anywhere. She has just learned of mutinies in army bases from the BBC World Service, a lifeline when information is so hard to come by. She is relieved the BBC's Burma service has been saved from British government cuts, "puzzled" at the decision to cut the Chinese service. After 70 years, the BBC's last Mandarin programmes for China have just been broadcast.

Pressure from the outside world makes more impact than people realise, she says. That's why the generals felt obliged to shape a new constitution, though it leaves the same military cadre running the country in civilian clothes. Sham elections held just before her release were declared "deeply flawed" by the UN. Her party did not stand, since conditions included repudiating all its political prisoners and swearing support for a constitution that lets the army take over at any time. But it has been enough to allow neo-liberal Western economists to call for compromise and the lifting of sanctions, accusing her of stubbornness. "They say if we build up trade, it will bring democracy. They say what you need is a middle class, that will bring democracy." As in China? She mocks the idea. "But the IMF say the mess in the economy is due to mismanagement and not sanctions." She heats up with controlled anger at pusillanimous NGOs: "They invite civil servants to 'capacity building' training. But the problem with civil servants' capacity is they won't do anything unless bribed." Burma is ranked 176th out of 180 countries for corruption. "I talk to business people and they say (what prevents enterprise) is that everything falls into the cronies' hands."

Her message is that democracy and transparency are the only answer – but the NGOs steer clear of politics, which makes her burn with indignation. She quotes Graham Greene, "He wrote, 'Sometimes, if you are human, you have to take sides.' They say we are not ready to compromise. I don't know what they mean. Our minds are not inflexible, but perhaps our knees are inflexible. We are not down on our knees!" Her message is that politics is everything, nothing is apolitical. With crystal clear precision, she enunciates in capital letters, "I AM A POLITICIAN. That's a dirty word, but I write it on forms as my profession. I AM A POLITICIAN!" We talk about the universal contempt for politics, as voting declines in the West. "Just ask them if they would like to emigrate to a totalitarian state," she says. But does she worry that when freedom comes, people quickly forget as the everyday business of governing falls short of expectations? "I've always tried to explain democracy is not perfect. But it gives you a chance to shape your own destiny."

Despite everything, politics is not her whole life, as she talks of what the arts have meant to her. You might expect her to choose Beethoven: "For many people he does represent not just the greatness of music, but the greatness of thought behind it. I've often wished in these last few years under detention that I were a composer, because then I would be able to express what I felt through music, which is somehow so much more universal than words." So the festival starts with Fidelio, the prisoner's opera. In detention she played the piano daily. She talks of her devotion to TS Eliot when she was at Oxford reading politics and economics, so the festival is producing the Four Quartets, accompanied by a Beethoven string quartet. She mocks the awful poetry she was taught at school in colonial Burma, reciting "At Flores in the Azores, where Sir Richard Grenville lay" with a laugh. But here's a surprise. You might not expect her recently acquired taste for the Grateful Dead's Standing on the Moon. "Have you ever listened to it? I like it very much. My son taught me to like it. And Bob Marley. Well, I do like 'Get up, Stand up for your rights'. We need more music like that." So the festival has brought her Lee Scratch, one of Bob Marley's mentors.

Before we go, she stops to fold an origami lotus flower to send to the festival, to join the thousands to be floated on the lake in Queen's Park to mark Burma's many political prisoners. Deftly her fingers fold it back and forth, and she smiles as she recalls doing origami with her young sons. There she is, the iconic beacon of freedom, worldwide symbol of fortitude and endurance, laughing and folding. As ever, with good humour and grace, she wears her heroism lightly.

Aung San Suu Kyi is Guest Director of Brighton Festival 2011. Brighton Festival takes place on 7-29 May. See brightonfestival.org (01273 709709) Perry

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