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## The political twilight of the Burmese Nobel Prize laureate

### Her father's daughter

In order to understand Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>1</sup>, as well as the choices she has made in her personal and political lives, it is necessary to first present her father, Aung San, and to describe the relevant historical and political background.

Until the 1820s Burma<sup>2</sup> was a “hermit kingdom” (Tinker 1967: 388), ruled by patrimonial and despotic monarchs who based their rule on hierarchical and interdependent patronage networks and legitimised it through Buddhism (Liebermann 1984: 20-185; Thant Myint-U 2001: 12-79). Pre-colonial Burma (more specifically the Konbaung Dynasty, also known as the Third Burmese Empire) was destroyed by British colonial conquest over the course of three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824-1826, 1852, 1885), which ended in a triple victory for the British Empire (Góralczyk 2011: 104-129; Lubina 2014b: 63-109), Lubina 2014b: 63-109). In place of the pre-colonial Burmese version of “oriental despotism” (Wittfogel 2004), the British built a functional, modern state, although one without a legitimising element (Furnivall 1956: 23-185), which was treated by the Burmese as an occupying force (Aung-Thwin 1985: 245). The British were also accused of inciting hostilities, which

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<sup>1</sup> Burmese names are entirely personal and have no family name element (Mi Mi Khaing 1958). Although written as separate syllables they are best understood as indivisible wholes. Therefore, the entire name is used for each reference.

<sup>2</sup> The official English name of the country previously known as Burma was changed to Myanmar in 1989 by the military government. This change has not been universally accepted outside the country. In this article the name Burma is used following the original version which used the Polish equivalent ‘Birma’ in accordance with the Commission on Standardization of Geographical Names Outside the Republic of Poland (*Protokół* 2012: 2). In addition, Burma is more commonly used by the subject of this article (*What’s...* 2016).

are still ongoing, between the ethnic Burmese, Bamars (or Burmans) and the other ethnic groups and tribes living in the country (there are over 100; officially the total number of ethnic groups is 135 and relations between the Burmese centre and the non-Burmese periphery remain very complicated (Lubina 2014a: 37-101).

Opposition to the colonial government led the Burmese national liberation movement to attempt to combine pre-colonial political traditions with the fashionable European-isms arriving in Burma, such as nationalism, socialism, communism, and fascism among many others (von der Mehden 1963: 80; Webb 2007: 46). However, British colonialism collapsed in Burma as a result of external factors, such as the initial defeat (1942) in the Asian theatre of World War II (the severe defeat effectively undermined the image of an invincible Empire and even subsequent victory was unable to rebuild it), and above all, a post-war economic crisis in the United Kingdom and a new, unfavourable international situation for the British (the decolonisation of India). After the loss of India, the weakened British lost interest in Burma and agreed to its independence, which took place on 4 January 1948.

In Burma itself, the single person who contributed more than any other to independence was Aung San, a pre-war student activist and popular nationalist politician (Maung Maung 1962: 3-48). In his youth he first supported socialism then communism (he was a co-founder of the Communist Party of Burma) and then fascism (he collaborated with Japan at the beginning of the war; his armed bands supported the Japanese invasion in 1942). He spent most of World War II as a pro-Japanese collaborator (he built the modern Burmese army, the *Tatmadaw*, on Japanese models). Then, in the face of impending Japanese defeat in 1945, he and his army went over to the side of the British and helped them recapture Burma from Japanese hands. After the war, with important arguments in hand (loyal armed troops and the mass support of the population), he was no longer the Burmese Quisling to the British (Charney 2009: 68), but rather a serious partner for political talks. Taking advantage of the weakness of Great Britain and its waning desire to maintain colonial Burma, Aung San negotiated Burmese independence, which he did not live to see since he was assassinated on 19 July 1947 in an attack carried out by political opponents (Kin Oung 1993: 12-56). In Burma itself, he became a national hero and an undisputed role model. His premature death gave him a legendary, semi-mythical status and all subsequent disasters of post-colonial Burma were explained by the refrain that if Aung San had been alive, things would have been different (Thant Myint-U 2020: 40-41).

## The pre-political life of Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San died young (he was just 32 at the time of his death), leaving behind a wife and three children. His wife, Khin Kyi, as the widow of a national hero, was initially politically active (she was, for example, a minister in the government of U Nu, supported his election campaign in 1960, and then became ambassador to India). She retired from politics in the mid-1960s due to disagreements with the political course of General Ne Win's military junta (Lubina 2015: 109-110). The eldest son, Aung San Oo, did not follow in his father's political footsteps. He was educated in the United Kingdom, became an engineer, then settled in California and became an American citizen. The younger son, Aung San Lin, drowned in childhood (not long after Aung San's death). Only the daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi (born 19 June 1945), followed in her father's footsteps, but she did so spectacularly. She was strongly influenced by her father's legacy, and above all by the formative role of her mother (Kyaw Zwa Moe 2013; Zöllner, Ebbighausen 2018: 60-62). Aung San Suu Kyi's childhood and early youth were spent under the rule of Prime Minister U Nu (ruling, intermittently, in the years 1948-1958 and 1960-1962), attempting, in conditions of centrifugal movements (a communist rebellion and ethnic minority uprisings) to combine the Burmese-Buddhist tradition with the modernisation of the country (Tinker 1967: 67-140; Butwell 1969: 123-197). The flawed democracy of U Nu was ended, in instalments, by General Ne Win, who led two coups d'état (1958, 1962) and introduced a socialist-autarkic military dictatorship that brought Burma to ruin (Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 192-215). Aung San Suu Kyi was no longer in Burma at that time. In 1960, she had followed her mother to India, where she completed her secondary education. She then studied at the University of Oxford. After graduation, she worked in the administrative offices at the United Nations (headed then by the Burmese U Thant), and in 1972 she married the British Tibetologist Michael Aris with whom she had two sons. To the Burmese nationalist generals this was an unacceptable betrayal of Aung San's heritage (Pasternak Slater 1991/2010: 292-301; Lubina 2015: 125-126). She took care of her sons' upbringing and attempted to build an academic career herself (with mixed results). Then, in 1988, her mother suffered a stroke.

## The second national liberation

Aung San Suu Kyi returned to her homeland to take care of her mother and ended up in the middle of a revolution. For over six months (March-Sep-

tember 1988) mass demonstrations against the military dictatorship had been taking place in Burma. Initially, these were partially successful (they did lead to the resignation of General Ne Win). Ultimately, however, they were bloodily suppressed (with over 3000 victims) by the new military junta (Lintner 1990: 87-147). Although unsuccessful, the “8888 revolution”, as it is called in Burma, (as it peaked on August 8, 1988) propelled Aung San Suu Kyi onto the grand political stage.

Almost immediately, she became the strongest rival of the military, which wished to maintain power. In her second chronological appearance and public political debut, speaking, as did her father before her, in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda, one of Burma’s most sacred site, she established the discourse by declaring that the protests were a fight for a “second national liberation” (with the first being her father’s struggle against the colonialists, Aung San Suu Kyi 1991/2010: 192-199), which deprived the army of legitimacy. Until that point, the *Tatmadaw* presented itself as a continuation of Aung San’s work, but then his daughter destroyed this legitimising foundation (Steinberg 2001: 75). In Burmese-Buddhist conditions of “karmic qualifications” (Harriden 2012: 210–211), legitimacy is personalised (Steinberg 2010: 39-51; Houtman 1999: 65-214; Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 174; Walton 2012: 103). This meant that Aung San Suu Kyi instantly became Aung San’s rightful heir, which made the generals usurpers. Additionally, she offered an attractive reinterpretation of the old refrain that if her father had not died, everything would be fine, Burma would be a land of milk and honey and not a ruined country. The new interpretation was that she would finish his work and fix what had been broken by the usurpers from the military (Thant Myint-U 2020:40-41). This updated version caught on, and Aung San Suu Kyi immediately won the hearts and minds of the Burmese people (including a large number of ethnic minorities).

The army, however, seeing that it was losing the fight for Aung San’s legacy, decided to erase him from history and public spaces, removing his portraits from offices, banknotes, newspapers, and history textbooks (Houtman 1999: 15-39). His place was taken by pre-colonial Burmese kings, most notably Anawrahta, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya, the founders of the Three Burmese Empires, which had an additional undertone suggesting the military was continuing their legacy. The generals, nationalists to the core, would have gladly created a Fourth Burmese Empire, the best example of which was the change of the capital from post-colonial, post-British Rangoon (renamed in English Yangon in 1989) to Naypyidaw, built from scratch, whose name can be translated as “Royal Capital” (Preecharush 2009, 49-146). A conscious reference to mon-

archist models, however, remained a secondary means of legitimisation. The first was a simple and clear narrative addressed to their own ranks, above all, the army. The *Tatmadaw* created its own ideology, portraying itself as the protector of Burma and Buddhism, without which the country would fall apart, and religion would be endangered (Taylor 2009: 487-506). For the army, whose commanders dealt primarily with warfare, and only secondarily with politics (Callahan 2004: 190-229), the message was clear, and it accomplished its purpose. The loyalty of the cadres was maintained, and this was crucial for the continued exercise of dictatorial power.

### **Might is right**

The politically weaker, although charismatic, Aung San Suu Kyi tried to balance the army's structural advantage with the help of two main factors. The first of these was popular support. Both Bamars and minority groups saw in her an opportunity to remove the hated military from power. Consistently calling for the replacement of the "praetorian" system (Egreteau, Jagan 2013: 21) with representative democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi became an existential threat to the entire military "new class", that is the ruling nomenclatura. This led to the military establishment resorting to brutal methods in their attempt to discredit her, from a smear campaign to three separate house arrests (1989-1995, 2000-2002, 2003-2010) and separation from her husband and sons. As her husband was dying of cancer in 1999, the junta refused his request for a visa to Burma, wanting to force her to leave the country and say goodbye to her political hopes. Aung San Suu Kyi faced a dilemma similar to those of ancient tragedies: family or politics. She chose the latter, which her husband understood (while her elder son did not). The brutal and ruthless actions of the generals not only failed to achieve their political goal, which was to disgrace Aung San Suu Kyi in the eyes of the nation, but had rather the opposite effect in that they brought her general social admiration. Massive popular support remained her trump card in the game against the generals. Aung San's daughter sought to remove the generals from power by imitating Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent actions. She called back to the idealistic vision of value-based politics, trying to combine it eclectically with native, Burmese-Buddhist elements (Walton 2017; Lubina 2018: 191-376). A clear sign of her actions was the slogan "right is might".

The generals believed the opposite, that might is right. In 1988, they violently suppressed demonstrations (Lintner 1990: 131-147), they then arrest-

ed Aung San Suu Kyi. They annulled the results of the elections they had lost in 1990 – whether these were general elections or elections to the constituent assembly, as the generals claimed, not without legal grounds (Tonkin 2007: 33-54) is secondary to the fact that their result was annulled by the military. They then applied intense repressive measures to society, which was forced to “live in silence” (Fink 2009: 46-226). The effect of this was over two decades of the “dark period” (Góralczyk 2011: 225-250), the further collapse of the state, the appropriation of public goods by the military nomenklatura and social stagnation resulting from the lack of hope for changing the country’s disastrous situation.

### Sanctions

A second card that Aung San Suu Kyi could play was support from abroad, specifically from the West. Having lived for almost thirty years outside Burma (mainly in the UK and the US), she had a deep understanding of Western cultural codes and was thus able to present her struggle in such a way as to gain support. This, combined with her tragic family history, had effects that exceeded even the wildest expectations of Aung San Suu Kyi herself, who from the very beginning wanted to include foreign countries in the political duel with the generals. It brought her immense popularity around the world and resulted in numerous awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize. In the West, Aung San Suu Kyi became an icon of the struggle for ideals, a “modern Joan of Arc”, “another Gandhi” and even a part of pop culture (Zöllner 2012: 277-359; Lintner 2012: 73-103; Clements 2008: 15-25; Lubina 2020: 56-61). She won the hearts of the world when in 1989, during the election campaign, she walked alone in front of a platoon of soldiers aiming their weapons at her, as immortalised by the pop group U2 in the international hit “Walk on”. This cult of celebrity surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi (Zöllner 2012: 195–229, 277–359; Brooten 2005: 134–156) translated into significant political support given by Western countries. It was through the prism of the Nobel Prize laureate that Burma was viewed, and it was Aung San Suu Kyi who monopolised the image of Burma in the West (Steinberg 2010: 35-59; Thant Myint-U 2009: 332-343). Personally, she benefited from this. If not for the support of the West, it would have been easier for the generals to attempt to marginalise her politically. However, her personal political interests did not always go hand in hand with the good of the majority of society, which is most evident in the issue of international sanctions that Western countries, following Aung San

Suu Kyi's suggestions (Clements 2008: 216-218), imposed on Burma under the generals.

Although the US led the way in sanctions, the EU was not far behind. In 1997, the EU suspended preferential trade with Burma. In the following years, the EU introduced an arms embargo, a visa ban for members of the establishment, their families and businessmen, and after 2007, all imports of minerals and precious stones, and new investments in Burma were banned (existing investments, including French ones in the energy sector which brought extreme profits for companies such as Total were not mentioned). Some member states at the time, including the United Kingdom, extended significant support to the opposition, which, it is worth noting, led to the withdrawal of Premier Oil from Burma in 2002. This was the first time that an important company in this industry withdrew from Burma as a result of pressure. Norway followed suit. By contrast, other countries, such as Germany, tried to get along with the regime, building a solid position over the years, which later paid off. In addition, the EU did not allow Burma to participate in EU-ASEAN meetings, which resulted in postponements and long bargaining over finding a diplomatic *modus vivendi*. The pressure from the US and the EU to suspend development programs for the region if Burma, in accordance with the principle of rotation, were to hold the presidency of ASEAN in 2006, caused Burma to resign from the presidency "at its own request".

Western sanctions were based on the belief that they would eventually force the regime to change. It remains debatable whether this was political idealism or a concession by Western decision-makers to a high-profile pro-democracy lobby (Taylor 2009: 425-433; Steinberg 2001: 302). The fact, however, is that the sanctions did not crush the regime. This happened both because of the hermetic nature of the junta, uninterested in contact with the outside world, and above all because of leaky sanctions, which were imposed only by Western countries and not by Burma's Asian neighbours. This made it impossible to force political concessions on the generals since without China, Thailand, Singapore, and India sanctions became ineffective (Thant Myint-U 2009: 340-342). The price was paid by an increasingly poorer society, weakening against the army (Fink, 2009: 46-226). The years 1988-2011 were marked by phases of cyclical arrests and releases of Aung San Suu Kyi, ineffective attempts at negotiations between the government and the opposition, alternations between liberalisation and intensifying social repression by the regime, condemnations from the West and the growing dominance of China (Góralczyk 2011: 225-250). The regime continued, supported by its Asian neighbours; Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest or isolated, the country stood still, and society was impoverished.

## Unexpected reforms

It seemed that this situation would last indefinitely, but the military unexpectedly (from an external point of view) introduced political changes in 2010-2015. The groundwork for these was laid by the 2008 constitution, which is the world's most pro-military constitution since in no other country are there as many formally guaranteed privileges for the armed forces as in Burma, and even Uganda, which is second in this respect, is very far behind (Patel, Goodman, Snider 2014). It guaranteed the army the role of the guardian of the state and the arbiter of political disputes, which is how the *Tatmadaw* saw itself (Egreteau 2016: 3-26; Maung Aung Myoe 2014: 233-249; Jones 2014: 784). The second reason for the transformation was a generational change in the army itself, where younger, more reform-minded military personnel came to the fore, supported by reformers from the outside called the "Third Force" (Egreteau 2016: 3-13; Croissant, Kamerling 2013: 105-125; Ganesan 2013: 254; Bünthe 2014: 757-758; Ye Htut 2019: 20-64). This was combined with fears of the growing role of China and the desire to change Burma's status as an outcast in Southeast Asia. These factors, together with disappointment regarding the ineffectiveness of sanctions, created an opportunity to build bridges between the generals and the West (Egreteau 2016:3-26; Thant Myint-U 2020:162). Spectacular political reforms quickly helped Burma to pull itself out of isolation. The United States, the EU, Canada, Australia, and others suspended sanctions (2012), while Burma went from an isolated state to one of the most politically interesting countries in the world. The country was flooded with investments, grants, loans, and other support (Yueh 2013). This huge influx of foreign capital was compared to a "gold rush" (Osnos 2012), causing rapid economic growth and a developmental leap. As it turned out later, the decade 2011-2021 (especially the years 2011-2015) was overall the best since the 1950s, and economically the best for over a century. Burma made a spectacular comeback, quickly regaining lost time, connecting to a rapidly developing Asia and participating in the digital revolution.

But what was clearly good for the country was not so obvious for Aung San Suu Kyi. After being released from her third house arrest in November 2010, she faced the most difficult choice in her political life. She could continue her tough stance, demanding the reinstatement of the 1990 election results and rejecting the 2008 constitution, the foundation that gave her legendary status in Burma and the world (continuing to hold this position would perpetuate Aung San Suu Kyi's legend but would also lead to political marginalisation in the new, changed conditions). She could also accept a compromise on the ar-

my's terms, agreeing to the military constitution and participating in political life built on the rules enshrined therein (de facto agreeing to be co-opted into the military establishment). The Nobel laureate reluctantly chose the second option, hoping to change the system from within (Lubina 2015: 473-502). Initially, this worked well. Her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won the 1 April 2012 by-election (taking 43 of the 44 available seats), and in November 2015, the NLD outclassed its rivals by winning the general election and taking an impressive 79% of the parliamentary seats available (elections in Burma are held for only 75% of the total parliamentary seats; 25% are reserved for the military). The *Tatmadaw* accepted the election results and handed over almost all power (except for the armed forces ministries, which belong to the army according to the constitution) to Aung San Suu Kyi, which was the first peaceful change of power in Burma in 55 years.

### Above the president

The army, however, did not agree to everything. Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's intense domestic and international lobbying, the *Tatmadaw* did not allow the constitution to be changed (the basic law guarantees the army a minority that can block constitutional changes) in a way that would allow her to become president (Burma is formally a presidential republic). Article 59(f) blocks this possibility for the Aung San Suu Kyi because her children have foreign citizenship (Constitution, 2008). This provision was deliberately inserted into the act to exclude her candidacy. She attempted to force a change, but seeing the hard resistance of the army, she backed down and tried subterfuge, bypassing the constitutional restrictions through an ordinary law, creating for herself the office of State Counsellor, which reduced the importance of the president (appointed by Aung San Suu Kyi) to a representative role. During the election campaign, Aung San Suu Kyi already declared that she would be "above the president" (Mydans 2015) and she kept her word. Aung San Suu Kyi assumed as much power as she could, including the entire civil administration minus the three ministries of the armed forces, interior, defence and borderland, becoming, along with the "State Counsellor", the minister of foreign affairs and a minister in the president's office (originally she had two additional portfolios, energy and education, which she later gave up, Wai Moe, Paddock 2016). Aung San Suu Kyi did not become foreign minister out of any special interest in foreign policy issues (her term of office turned out to be very restrained in terms of international relations), but in order to become a member of the National

Defence and Security Council (NDSC), a body with the power to introduce a state of emergency, which was dominated by the army. Not trusting the military, she preferred to be careful. In addition, she chaired more than 30 different bodies, committees, commissions, and the like. She oversaw almost every case personally, a style of exercising power that has been referred to as micro-management (Selth 2017a: 1-21).

The first six months of Aung San Suu Kyi's government were marked by hopes associated with her in the US and Europe. On this wave of optimism, Barack Obama lifted the remaining American sanctions on Burma (Dunant, 2017) at her personal request. Thus, history came full circle, as Aung San Suu Kyi contributed to the introduction of the sanctions, and she also led to their cancellation. However, the enthusiasm of the Western world soon cooled. This was connected with a brutal crackdown by the army against the unrecognised Muslim Rohingya minority in Burma. Treated in a manner similar to Blacks in South Africa during apartheid (Amnesty International, 2017), the Rohingya had been persecuted since at least the late 1970s. The latest wave of repression against them began in 2012 (Lubina 2019: 19-73). It was intensified by the attacks of the newest Rohingya guerrilla organisation, ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army), which attempted to use terrorist methods (attacks on civilians) to force the army to stop its repression (Thant Myint-U, 2020). This action backfired: the *Tatmadaw* applied collective responsibility twice, expelling first 70,000 in October 2016, and then over 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to Bangladesh. This torpedoed the peace process under the auspices of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, supported by Aung San Suu Kyi. Another ARSA attack took place a day after the publication of the Annan Commission's compromise report (Mratt Kyaw Thu, Slow 2017), and after the brutal crackdown by the Burmese army, the plan became political fiction. Modelled on the colonial methods of fighting guerrillas in British Malaya and French Algeria, the "four cuts" strategy, previously used by the Burmese army against other guerrillas and characterised by not distinguishing armed guerrillas and civilians (Smith 1999: 259-262), eliminated ARSA, but at the same time drove more than 700,000 people to Bangladesh. In the process, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and possibly even genocide were committed (the UN now recognises this as "ethnic cleansing with genocidal intent", UNHRC Report, 2018). In Burmese society, there was a revanchist mood worthy of the post-September 11, 2001 atmosphere in the US. The ruthless crackdown on the Rohingya was met with full public support, in extreme contrast to the reaction of the West and the Middle East, which expressed forceful condemnation (Thant Myint-U 2020: 241; Dunant 2017). From then until the 1 February 2021

coup d'état, the Rohingya issue became the most important topic in the world regarding Burma.

The attention of Western public opinion, however, focused not on the criminal generals, but on Aung San Suu Kyi, who headed the government, but did not control the army. This was mainly due to the recognition factor (individual Burmese generals were unknown to the public) and a media mechanism referred to as “man bites dog” (Zöllner 2012: 195–229; Zöllner, Ebbighausen 2018). When criminal generals murder minorities in a Global South country, they do not arouse particular interest, just as the public is not interested in the story of a man bitten by a dog. However, when a massacre takes place in a country formally governed by a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, who was also hailed as “the conscience of her country and a heroine for humanity” (Bercow 2012) and a “living symbol (...) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (*Iconic...* 2009), then that is a media topic. This is why international criticism was focused on Aung San Suu Kyi and not on the generals directly responsible. The West demanded that she stop the crimes or at least condemn them. The first task was one that she could not achieve, and she did not want to comply with the latter, because knowing the social mood, she would deprive herself of the most important weapon in the fight against the generals, that is social support. Aung San Suu Kyi, who had sacrificed her family and fifteen years of freedom to gain power and “finish her father’s work”, was not now going to expose herself to the generals waiting just for her to lose public support because she could then be removed from power by a coup or wait for elections that she would lose. Aung San Suu Kyi understood the game of the generals wanting to implicate her in the Rohingya crisis and chose first to remain silent and then to defend Burma’s image on the international stage. This cold political calculation was completely misunderstood by Western activists who were now viciously attacking Aung San Suu Kyi. In their view, their erstwhile heroine became a traitor to the democratic cause and a fallen icon. Aung San Suu Kyi’s spectacular fall from her pedestal in the West can only be matched by her previous political deification (Selth 2017b: 11-23). First, the West created an idealised image of Aung San Suu Kyi that had little to do with reality, and then this image was destroyed.

The European Union joined this political wave by sharply criticising Aung San Suu Kyi. At the same time, the EU remained torn between wanting to “bear witness” and knowing that the sanctions had already failed once, hurting the Burmese people more than helping them. Out of this split came the failure to remove Burma’s Most Favoured Trade status. As a result, criticism of the EU remained almost exclusively rhetorical, not to say theatrical, the best example

of which was Aung San Suu Kyi's suspension from the "community of Sakharov Prize winners" in September 2020 (the prize itself was not withdrawn).

The massed criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi in the West led to backlash from Burmese society, which stood firmly behind its leader. Her mediocre rule was forgotten, the mechanism of rallying around the flag was activated and when the West raised its hand against "mother Suu", society resisted criticism from outsiders. A majority of Burmese society treats Aung San Suu Kyi as the political mother of the nation. Interestingly, this is a bottom-up and not a top-down cult of the kind usually found in autocracies. Aung San Suu Kyi naturally made clever use of it politically, including personally defending the country against charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2019, even though she did not have to do so as she could have simply sent lawyers there. Instead, she made the trial a political show. This support came in handy during the next elections, won by Aung San Suu Kyi in a landslide in November 2020, with her removal from the Sakharov community taking place during the election campaign, which contributed to her victory.

Nevertheless, the Rohingya crisis, while helping Aung San Suu Kyi internally, was a political failure for her. Up to that point, she held the two most important cards in her game with the generals: social support, and support from abroad. Now she only had the first. The crisis has also overshadowed any objective analysis of her rule. The Nobel laureate failed to end the civil war, did not remove the army from its privileges and did not make Burma a second Singapore. However, Burma continued modernisation, reintegration with the world and technological revolution, thanks to which its government, although average, did not spoil the fruits of the 2015-2020 reforms.

### **A coup and twilight**

Carried by social optimism and a good, considering local conditions, fight against Covid-19, Aung San Suu Kyi won the general election again in 2020, with a better result than she had obtained five years earlier, winning 83% of the available seats in parliament. Unfortunately, this time she was unable to come to an understanding with the army, which, dissatisfied with the electoral result, carried out the fourth coup d'état in the country's history on 1 February 2021, once more putting Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and leading the country to its most powerful crisis since 1988. The coup was followed by prolonged mass demonstrations, bloodily suppressed by the regime (at the time this article was being written, the death toll had exceeded 600). The US, EU and

UK have all reimposed sanctions on Burma. The EU sanctions were initially very limited, as they were imposed on 11 generals personally, which, given the general disinterest in international affairs by the Burmese generals, would not affect the political situation within the country. However, the EU has a major weapon in its hands, namely the EBA (“Everything But Arms”) initiative, part of the Generalised System of Preferences, which means that the world’s least developed countries, including Burma, can export their products (except arms) to the EU duty free. The removal of Burma from this initiative will hit the generals’ regime (though not knock it down), but the consequences will also fall on the ordinary people. Therefore, there is an ongoing debate in the Union on how to impose only pointed sanctions on Burma that would weaken the generals without harming the citizens. Given the structure of the Burmese economy, dominated by military conglomerates and minor military-related companies, finding a satisfactory solution is extremely complicated.

Asian countries had no such dilemmas. Burma’s closer and more distant neighbours took a wait-and-see position while the UN, due to Chinese and Russian vetoes, again failed to play a significant role in the dramatic events in Burma. In some respects, the situation returned to the starting point from before the Burmese reforms in 2011 whereas the bloody pacification of the protests was destroying the gains of the “golden decade” of 2011-2021. Burma is on the edge again, and the possible scenarios for the development of the situation are bad: either a successful pacification as in 1988 or a self-destructive civil war similar to the one in Syria. The only chance is the hope of a split in the ranks of the army along the lines of the Philippine revolution of 1986, but this is much less likely than the above-mentioned unfortunate scenarios.

Regardless of the outcome of the political confrontation, the coup is likely to mean Aung San Suu Kyi’s political decline. The junta again placed her under house arrest, and also raised further absurd charges against her (including corruption), with the very clear goal of removing her from the political stage. If convicted, 78-year-old Aung San Suu Kyi will not be able to run in the next election under conditions dictated by the military electoral commission. Although originally set to take place by August 2023 they have been delayed indefinitely. She will most likely spend the rest of her life locked up or be released again when the political scene is taken over by army-approved parties. Only the victory of protests can restore Aung San Suu Kyi’s hopes, but the chances of winning the “spring revolution” in Burma are not great.

The coup d’état will improve her record in the West. Many of the activists who vehemently criticised her will fall silent or change their tone. However, there is no chance for a fundamental reconstruction of her image: devastated

by the Rohingya crisis, it is now beyond repair. For the Western world, Aung San Suu Kyi will remain the person who had been “outsmarted after making a pact with the devil” (Beake 2021).

The perception in Burma is completely different. There, the legend of Aung San Suu Kyi continues to thrive and the coup will not change that, quite the contrary, it will strengthen it. The previous (extremely beneficial for her) narrative of herself as the selfless continuator of her father’s work leading Burma to greatness (Mon Mon Myat 2019) has not been questioned, despite her five-year (rather average) term in office. However, now that the generals have placed Aung San Suu Kyi in custody again, the legend will be revived, fuelled by the widespread delusion that if only the military would let her rule, Burma would become a land of milk and honey. For the myth of Aung San Suu Kyi, the coup is actually beneficial.

For her, however, the coup d’état remains tragic. Aung San Suu Kyi has always been interested in power. She sacrificed her family, fifteen years of freedom and the fate of a million foreign Muslims for it, not for a myth. If Aung San Suu Kyi was interested in political myths, it was only to use them pragmatically in her political struggle. Now her chances of regaining power are slim. Only the myth will remain.

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**Key words:** Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar, Burma, military junta, coup d'état

#### ABSTRACT

*Against the background of the dramatic events unfolding in Myanmar/Burma where the military had been pacifying mass peaceful protests, the political career of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, the political leader of Myanmar/Burma in 2016-2021 and previously one of the world's most famous political prisoners, is nearing its end. Once the darling of the Western world, then mercilessly criticised by former supporters, Aung San Suu Kyi remains an ambiguous figure who evokes strong emotions both domestically and internationally. As such Aung San Suu Kyi represents a fascinating case study in leadership studies. Using the agency-centred explanation in political studies, this article tries to answer the questions related to the political career of Aung San Suu Kyi. These include: What allowed her to take power and what factors contributed to her political fall? What caused her political decline? Why did Suu Kyi enjoy the Western support and why did she lose it? How can her governance be assessed?*

