

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Face of Resistance: Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Fight for Freedom.* By Aung Zaw. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2013. Softcover: 140pp.**

Deceptively thin, *The Face of Resistance* has a depth that packs a punch and leaves the reader pondering on the difficult road ahead for democratic transition in Myanmar. The back cover indicates as much to the potential reader, with its statement that “despite international accolades, Burma is far from free”.

The author, Aung Zaw, founder and editor-in-chief of *The Irrawaddy*, tells the story of the decades-long struggle for political change in Myanmar that parallels his own political awakening and rise to activism. Aung Zaw chose an apt title for his book, as this struggle for democracy that started with the student led protests of 1988 did not have a face until Aung San Suu Kyi stepped forward and delivered her debut speech on 26 August 1988. Since then, Suu Kyi has been the main face of resistance, representing and unifying different groups in and outside the country, and continues to be so even after her “transformation” into a politician and parliamentarian. Aung Zaw leaves the reader to consider whether the face of resistance will continue to be effective — or change — in the aftermath of elections scheduled for 2015, the victory of which he assesses as being in the hands of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

In his well-known, engaging style, Aung Zaw traces the path — and the lives of key participants journeying along this path — of democratic resistance to military rule. His factual narrative moves at a brisk pace that nevertheless leaves the reader wanting (and seeking) more information. Intentional, maybe? If so, Aung Zaw has succeeded in inciting greater interest in the story of Burma/

Myanmar with all the dichotomies and grey areas that the split personality nature of the country's name implies.

The beginning and ending sections are poignant, the latter more so than the former. His almost dispassionate description of the mental and physical suffering he endured and the impact of his activism visited on his family by the junta gives a good indication of the moral fortitude of the many democracy activists of the 1988 era whose ideals never wavered in the face of harsh reality imposed by prison sentences and self-exile. Aung Zaw chooses to highlight the stories of those who stayed, serving as the country's conscience while at the same time serving out their sentences. The most prominent story is, of course, that of Suu Kyi, who became the focus of the world's attention on the plight of Myanmar and its people. The book's first chapter, "The Lady", starts the continuous thread of Suu Kyi's role and influence on Myanmar's political landscape. The aura and mystique that surround Suu Kyi is reflected in Aung Zaw's own feelings when he and his fellow students listened to her first public speech. "Curious but skeptical" (p. 2) in the beginning, Aung Zaw and the rest of the audience are left with the certainty of Suu Kyi being "instantly qualified" (p. 14) to be the face of what he termed Myanmar's second independence movement. Her steadfast emphasis on the rule of law and non-violence, her sense of justice, her principled stands, and yet her willingness to engage with the military that she saw as her father's army, are recurring themes through the book. Aung Zaw manages to convey the message that Suu Kyi was a thought leader even before the term was coined, noting that she "commands loyalty by virtue of her personal qualities and universal ideals" (p. 36). Her call for value-change instead of regime change finds an echo in the many observations made on the importance of changing mindsets in Myanmar today.

Yet the book is not just about the Lady. Aung Zaw pays tribute to all the prominent — and mostly unsung — activists and leaders of the democracy movement who constitute the body and a large part of the brains behind the face of resistance. His account of the "The Comrades" tells the story of stalwarts such as the late Win Tin (still alive when Aung Zaw wrote the book), Tin Oo, Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, and prominent social activists in Myanmar that the international community barely know of though they are widely respected — and revered, in the case of the Sitagu Sayadaw — by the Burmese. Even today, "some work under the radar" (p. 78) as Aung Zaw observes.

However, as Aung Zaw cautions, one cannot discount the key role of the military in this delicate stage of transition, as it has permeated every sector of society and the dark legacy of which influences every psyche in Myanmar. It is interesting that in the last chapter of *Face of Resistance*, entitled “The Unfinished Struggle”, Aung Zaw gives credit to the Thein Sein government for embarking on reforms that set Myanmar on its current path, but does not include a separate assessment of the military in this continuing struggle towards change. He does mention however, that without the cooperation of the military much of the efforts towards change and transition would not be possible (p. 136). This statement is sobering in its succinctness, and says much about the future of Myanmar’s democratization. Indeed, the lost generation of opposition politics, Aung Zaw observes, is due to the military’s prescient scripting of how it wanted the transition to take place (p. 60). Hope lies in the next generation of politicians who have matured in the age of social media and have less emotional preoccupation over voice and expression (than say, the elderly “uncles” in the NLD) of the past.

But is it possible for Suu Kyi to mend the deep divisions in Myanmar society? Who are the groups that make up Myanmar’s face of resistance? And how can Suu Kyi unite these disparate factions into one cohesive group to take on the current regime in the 2015 elections? These are questions highlighted on the book’s back cover blurb. The questions Aung Zaw raises in *The Face of Resistance* have no easy answers. And this is because the complex confluence (and conflation) of history, identity, ethnicity and entitlement have made the challenge of change and transition that much more difficult for Myanmar, despite the dedication of the whole body of people who have worked — and continue to work — towards this end and the faith, however nuanced, that the international community has placed in the story of change.

Drawing from Aung Zaw’s work, one thing is clear: publicity and advocacy are the stronger weapons to advance the democratic cause. *The Face of Resistance*, with its clear and critical assessment, is an important contribution to that cause.