

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been awarded this year's Noble Peace Prize for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma. She is the daughter of U Aung San, a revolutionary who was the most important leader of the Burmese national independence movement and head of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. He was assassinated in 1947 when he was 32. He was then prime minister in an interim government on the eve of Burma's independence. Suu Kyi, born on June 19, 1945, was just two years old at the time of her father's death.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi left Burma in 1960 with her mother Daw Khin Kyi when she was appointed Ambassador to India. After some years of study in India, Suu Kyi went on to Oxford University to do a degree in politics, philosophy, and economics.

At Oxford she met Professor Michael Aris, an expert on Tibetan and Himalayan studies. Aris is currently visiting professor at Harvard University. At the time of her marriage to the Englishman in 1972, recalled Suu Kyi in a 1988 interview, "I made him promise that if there was ever a time I had to go back to my country he would not stand in my way. And he promised." Her homeland beckoned soon enough. After a long period of exile, she returned to Burma in April 1988 to care for her ailing mother who died later that year.

Burma at that time was in political turmoil. The people of the country were engaged in a struggle to oust the brutal military regime of General Ne Win from power. In the face of the violent protests, Ne Win was forced to step down in July 1988 after 30 years of despotic rule. But the military junta continued to unleash terror and oppression.

A military crackdown in August and September led to the massacre of 3,000 pro-democracy protesters. At the end of this round of bloodletting, General Saw Maung seized power. The military regime gave itself a new name, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC),

and promised a return to democracy which had been stifled since a 1962 coup by Ne Win.

Suu Kyi's involvement in the country's politics was gradual. "I obviously had to think about it. But my instinct was, 'This is not a time when anyone who cares can stay out.'" Suu Kyi became the leader of a non-violent democratic movement against the SLORC. As the noble committee's citation said, "Suu Kyi's struggle is one of the most extraordinary examples of civil courage in Asia in recent decades."

Demonstration of that courage was provided on more than one occasion. At great personal cost, she began to speak out against Ne Win, who continued to wield power behind the scenes. At a public meeting she stood her ground as soldiers trained their rifles at her. She soon acquired a large following. The military issued orders prohibiting gatherings of more than five people and banned criticism of the armed forces.

As secretary general of the newly formed National League for Democracy, she described her political objective as a democratic system of government in which all the regions and ethnic groups would find representation.

The SLORC carried out parliamentary elections in May 1990. The National League for Democracy led by Suu Kyi swept the polls with 392 of the 485 contested seats. The military, however, refused to abide by the results of the elections. It set extremely complicated conditions, including another round of elections, before it would redeem its pledge to restore civilian rule. League members who won seats in the elections were arrested or disqualified. Other

party members were forced to publicly renounce the leadership of Suu Kyi.

Although Suu Kyi's voice of dissent has been muzzled, she has become something of a cult figure. In an essay she wrote for a volume published in honour of her father, she provides some insights into her strength of conviction. "Fearlessness may be a gift, but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavour, courage that comes from cultivating the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one's actions, courage that could be described as 'grace under pressure'—grace renewed repeatedly in the face of harsh, unremitting pressure."

Suu Kyi has been under strict house arrest in Rangoon, now Yangon, for over two years. Her husband and two sons have not been permitted to see her since January 1990. The military authorities have tried to persuade her to return to the family fold. They have even called into question her loyalty to the country because of her marriage to a foreigner. But Suu Kyi has refused to abandon her homeland. Her conditions for leaving the country are the release of all political prisoners, the return to a civilian form of government, permission to address the people over television and radio, and to be allowed to go to the airport in a public procession.

Suu Kyi's isolation is so complete that Nobel Committee officials were unable to communicate news of the award to her. They had to rest content with a telegram to General Saw Maung, requesting that the citation be passed on to her. Nevertheless the Committee is hopeful that the prize would exert pressure on the Burmese authorities to hasten her release. □

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi A Portrait in Courage