

A model democrat in Burma

Aung San Suu Kyi is the dissident
tailor-made for Western luvvies

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Had she been so inclined, when Aung San Suu Kyi got her release papers from Burma's junta last weekend, she could have left the dilapidated family home in which the generals incarcerated her for 15 of the past 21 years, and headed out for a stroll, as people like to do in the Rangoon dusk.

Turning right from her lakeside gaol-residence on University Avenue, it's a short distance past the US Embassy and Rangoon University to busy Hledan Junction where, thanks to Burma's chronic absence of jobs and diversions, the idle mill, gossip and grumble because there's little else to do. The sudden arrival here on foot of a storied opposition icon would certainly have piqued curiosity, excitement and fear in equal measure. Would they have joined her? That would have been revealing at many levels.

From here, it's just a few kilometers south along the Prome Road to People's Park by the shimmering Shwedagon pagoda, the holiest place in Burmese Buddhism. It was here in 1988 where, just as her independence hero father 42 years earlier had condemned his British colonial oppressors, Suu Kyi launched her inevitable political career, addressing 500,000 people who dared stare down a twitchy military, which would massacre many of them anyway a month later. Had she walked again to Shwedagon last Saturday, who knows what would have transpired.

As Mao put it, revolutions are no dinner party. A Rangoon walk could have exposed the extent of 'The Lady's' popularity where it actually matters: in Burma, rather than the smart and earnest salons of faraway Hampstead or Paddington where luvvie supporters are intoxicated as much by her unapologetic Anglophilia — her Oxford vowels well-rounded but no less Burmese and Buddhist to their ears — as her evident integrity, the world's most implacable prisoner of conscience.

Suu Kyi radiates calm but is tough and charismatic, and beautiful too: *The Perfect Hostage*, as writer Justin Wintle titled his biography of her. Buoyed by her release, the BBC's Andrew Marr described her as 'effortlessly elegant', as if she was a chic boutique hotel, or something he'd fancied at the Conran Shop. Australia's ABC told her it was 'lovely to talk to you'. To a generation

of Westerners wearied by cynicism and lost hope, the gamine Suu Kyi is the designer dissident who hasn't (yet) disappointed, as did the late and comely but corrupt Benazir.

Suu Kyi is a gift for Western leaders too, right and left. David Cameron said Suu Kyi 'inspires' him, while Barack Obama gushed that she's another of his heroes, alongside Mandela and Gandhi. It virtually goes without saying that Carla Bruni-Sarkozy also called her. Suu Kyi's stardust allows the West to reiterate liberal credentials without having to actually anything about it, like tossing out bad guys and building new nations in their place. Or be impertinent to the booming Chinas and Indias that prop up Burma's very bad guys who abuse her, lest important business opportunities — and votes — be lost in these most testing eco-

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nomie times. Demands for 'free and fair' elections and sanctions might sound tough to Western ears, but in unelected Asian ones, they simply mean the Thais, the Chinese and Singapore Inc that float the junta don't have pesky Western companies competing for comfy deals.

Had Suu Kyi walked on Saturday, it might also have revealed how strong the Burmese stomach is for the long haul ahead for democracy there. From 1962, Burma endured 30 years of dictator Ne Win's wacky 'Way to Socialism', but the Wall never fell for these people. The Stasi are still in business here, only nastier.

Indeed, it's remarkable how little opportunity there is for anyone outside the military. Start a business with any sort of prospects and it won't be long before the rentier brass shows up for a share. Impervious to censure and sanction, the regime faces no meaningful opposition, no credible government-in-waiting. The opposition is the cover of *Time* magazine, or page one of the *Guardian*, and neither matter in the political blocking and tackling, inasmuch as there is any. The Tatmadaw doesn't care if Suu Kyi is the dissident darling of Western chattering classes, or that her portrait adorns the side of the European Parliament: nei-

ther has stopped 'Myanmar' attending the annual Asia-Europe summits. But now that she can, they're hoping Suu Kyi will accept those long-open invitations to finally collect her 1991 Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, and address that Europarliament in Strasbourg. Government-in-exile? Fine — that's never bothered the Vietnamese, the junta's best friends in ASEAN. The generals hope she'll leave Burma and never return.

Mao also said that political power grows from the barrel of a gun. A Suu Kyi walk could have exposed the level of sincerity and tolerance of the generals who had just released her. This was a walk that could've been, well, not so much Suu Kyi's Mandela moment as, more appropriately for the region, her Aquino one, the determined Suu Kyi as Cory to the junta's Marcos. It's also argued that had this woman regarded by many as a *bodhisatta*, an 'enlightened being' devoted to the enlightenment of all, provocatively walked toward Shwedagon, collecting Burmese behind her, she'd have recklessly exposed them to a massacre. Burma's military tyrants are no respecters of Buddhism's first precept, to abstain from taking life. In raping a country of 50 million, nothing spooks the junta quite like a crowd. Last Saturday could equally have been Burma's Tiananmen moment — yet another one.

Suu Kyi critics argue that for all her moral lustre, she's not so skilful a politician. Who knows whether, in the inevitable blizzard of emotions and advice prompted by her release, or in the seven years she's had alone to consider how this day might go if it ever came, such a walk had even occurred to her? Or that, at 65, she considered the consequences and decided against it, contemplating a more pragmatic role as de facto Mother of the Nation, her moral authority deployed not as a veto but in consultation with the generals, to advise them what can be delivered together.

Last Saturday was as likely a Hundred Flowers moment, when the regime was seen to be relaxing but instead cynically allowing her more devoted supporters to reveal themselves for military spooks to photograph, their faces and sympathies noted for later attention. In the event, Suu Kyi didn't venture out but chose to stand on a box to be visible over her front fence, tie some signature jasmine into her hair and radiate goodness. After seven years of being locked away, the best message she mustered for the 1,000-strong crowd was, 'Don't give up hope.'

A revolution missed? We'll never know, but a secure 300km away inland, in their dusty and strategically-dispersed fortress capital, I reckon the generals congratulated themselves that after seven years she didn't feel inclined to stretch her legs.

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