

Business
Economics

Meeting Aung San Suu Kyi Was Worth Getting Blacklisted For



Photographer: Tomohiro Ohsumi/Bloomberg

By Sheridan Prasso

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"Don't turn around," my backseat companion ordered in her Oxford-English accent as we raced through the streets of Yangon in a white Toyota Corolla. We were being followed by internal security

agents, and if I looked behind me, they could take my picture for their files of enemies of the state, she told me. I would never be allowed into Myanmar again.

My companion was Aung San Suu Kyi, the year was 1998, and we were speeding to her compound on University Avenue, so that she could give her first interview to Western media after being under house arrest for years.

It was a crucial time because a U.S. government delegation had visited the country and wanted to recommend easing U.S. sanctions as a reward for releasing her from house arrest. She strongly disagreed, saying that the only ones getting rich from foreign investment were the illegitimate military leaders who had refused to honor results of 1990 elections won by Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy.

Following the publication of the interview, sanctions were strengthened, not relaxed. Yet it turns out that prohibiting Western companies from doing business in Myanmar ultimately did little to prod the regime into change. The country for decades remained – like Cuba, North Korea and other holdouts to economic modernization – an economic backwater.



Sheridan Prasso (right) with Aung San Suu Kyi in 1998.

Throughout that time, Suu Kyi remained determined to achieve the goal she reached today, and ultimately it wasn't the sanctions so much as the person herself who brought about the change. The

refined, graceful, elegant woman I met 17 years ago kept the love and support of a nation that the junta couldn't suppress.

Suu Kyi's unwavering dedication to the cause of democracy, and her unrelenting stance against anything but free elections in which her party could participate – the issue that won her a Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 and which she continued for another two decades – ultimately left the military leaders with little choice. While some critics called her intransigent, the army's inability to suppress her popularity played a role in political change.

Her resolve and dedication to politics were clear when I met her in her sitting room overlooking Inya Lake. I had come to interview her, but in her isolation she was eager for news of the outside world. Even back in 1998, while Bill Clinton was still U.S. president, she asked me if Hillary was planning to hold the office someday. It was in keeping with South and Southeast Asian political traditions that women from powerful families often follow in the political footsteps of ruling husbands and fathers.

Her determination was undimmed, despite the hint of sorrow that comes from extreme personal sacrifice – her freedom, and the chance to see her college-sweetheart husband, British historian Michael Aris, who had been diagnosed with a cancer that would kill him a year later. Suu Kyi was permitted to leave Myanmar, but would not have been allowed to return. Aris was repeatedly denied a visa to visit her, despite interventions from then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Pope John Paul II and the U.S. government.

After her house arrest in 1989, they were only able to see each other a handful of times. Their two children are British passport holders, a fact used by the military when they rewrote the constitution in 2008 to ensure she is barred from becoming president.

We talked for hours, even though a condition of her release from six years of house arrest was that she didn't speak to foreign journalists. I transcribed the interview while still in the compound, hid it in my underwear, and stepped out to be arrested and deported on the next flight to Bangkok. I've never been allowed back.

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No less important to Myanmar's change is a man who has yet to achieve global status as the genuine reformer he is: Thein Sein. His decision in 2011 to begin a rapprochement with the West, open up the country to the political process culminating in Nov. 8 elections and thus ensure his military-based government's all-but-inevitable loss of power will be judged by history as remarkable. If not for his government's treatment of the Rohingya minority people, he would be a clear candidate for a Nobel Peace Prize himself. He may well be anyway.

Why Thein Sein acted can be debated, but it seems clear that moving Myanmar away from China's dominating orbit played a big role. China was literally sucking resources from the country and getting away with it by having no counterbalancing influences from the West. To staunch the bleeding, Thein Sein unilaterally cancelled a Chinese project in 2011 that would have dammed the country's Irrawaddy River for a hydropower plant, threatening to wipe out the country's migratory fish while returning 90 percent of its electricity to China. Relations have been rocky since.

Now, with the victory of the NLD in the elections and Suu Kyi's ability to preside over a new government, even if informally, the country is on a path toward development and even more change. Normal relations with the West, especially the U.S., can be fully restored. Sanctions can be further lifted, allowing free trade and investment for the first time in decades.

There's much to do, and I would love to see it. Perhaps now, after many years on the military's blacklist, I'll be able to go back.
