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Transcript

Aung San Suu Kyi and the 'New' Burma

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Chair: Isabel Hilton

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Isabel Hilton:

I'm Isabel Hilton and I have the pleasure of chairing this event today. First of all, the usual housekeeping; if you have a mobile phone please do the decent thing, otherwise when it rings we will make you answer it and we will all listen. This meeting is on the record, so we don't have to worry about defining Chatham House rules. It's part of a series on democracy and human rights, to mark Aung San Suu Kyi's winning of the Chatham House Prize this year. There are other events in the series and I believe there are notices of those events and details on how to get tickets.

It's a very timely event of course; it's a year since Burma held its elections. Aung San Suu Kyi has been freed from house arrest. And there have been a surprising, many, number of initiatives in Burma which appear to be going in a liberal direction. Nevertheless, for Burma's critics these are still met with some scepticism. Perhaps to sort out whether this scepticism is justified or not, it's a great pleasure to welcome Peter Popham. Peter, as well as being a former colleague, is a distinguished journalist and biographer of Aung San Suu Kyi, who's visited Burma many times as an undercover journalist and met Aung San Suu Kyi twice, I believe.

Peter Popham:

Twice, that's right.

Isabel Hilton:

And most recently this year.

Peter Popham:

Yes, in March.

Isabel Hilton:

The format – those of you who are familiar with these meetings – is that we'll invite Peter to speak for about half an hour and then we'll have half an hour for questions. Please welcome him.

Peter Popham:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much for coming. The subject I proposed a couple of months back was, with changes taking place in Burma what possible role could Suu Kyi have in the process and what new opportunities and risks may she be facing in the coming months. This is indeed what I intend to address, but if you'll allow me I'm going to approach it in a slightly meandering fashion, starting with her and her image and the person I came to know in the course of researching my book.

When Aung San Suu Kyi made her first speech, before a huge crowd in Rangoon on the 26 August 1988, she was an enigma, an unknown. 'Just another general's daughter', as Nita Yin Yin May, who was the information officer at the British embassy, put it at the time. In the course of that speech, woodenly delivered but explosive in content, she metamorphosed into her nation's hope. Nita continued, 'She started talking to the people, and I was overwhelmed by her speech. This was the one we were looking for. She was the true leader.'

A woman named Ma Theingi, an aristocratic painter and former diplomat's wife who was to become Suu's close companion, and whose previously unseen diaries I have been able to use in my book, was more cynical. Like Nita she was in that crowd on that day, but quote, 'Due to a bad sound system, we could hear nothing. But even if they could not hear, people instantly took her into their hearts, without question. She was fair-skinned, she was beautiful, she was articulate, and her eyes flashed as she spoke. We were glad to have a symbol, a leading light, a presence bringing hopes and dreams that her father did not have the chance to fulfil.'

Distance and ethnic difference did not seem to make any difference to the impact she had. Hundreds of miles away from Rangoon, a student, a man who was a student at the time, named Pascal [inaudible], a student from the Padaung ethnic minority famous for their giraffe-necked women, also fell under Suu's spell. 'She instantly became our leader and inspiration,' he wrote. 'In the evenings we would listen to the BBC and hope for guidance from our goddess.'

Once Suu had overcome the nerves she betrayed in that first speech, she had a straightforwardness and familiarity in her addresses to the vast crowds that came out to meet her, which people found captivating. Bertil Lintner, the veteran Swedish Burma-watcher, described to me one of those early meetings: 'She was coming to open a new NLD office, a National League for Democracy office, in a suburb on the outskirts of Rangoon,' he said. 'It was

scorching hot, April, before the rains. I went out there in a taxi, and thousands of people were waiting in the scorching sun for hours. Children, old women, people of all ages. Suddenly, you could see a white car somewhere in the distance, trailing a cloud of dust behind it. Then the car arrived, and the cheers were incredible. She got out, very relaxed, surrounded by her students and bodyguards, and was smiling at everybody, and was garlanded. And she went onstage and started talking. She talked for two or three hours, and nobody left. Not even the children left. My Burmese is fairly rudimentary, but I could understand what she was talking about. She was using very simple, down to earth words. 'You've got a head', she said, 'and you haven't got a head for nodding. You've been nodding for twenty-six years. The head is there for you to think'. That kind of thing, and people were laughing. It was a family affair.

A couple of months after that meeting that Bertil described, Suu survived an army major's attempt to shoot her down. Those early views of her as a goddess, a saviour, a Bodhisattva, or a merciful Buddha, were confirmed. She was put into detention, but her cult only grew. And as we know, in May 1990 her party, the NLD, won a landslide victory in the general elections. The regime refused to honour the result and she stayed locked up in her home.

A couple of months after that, rumours began to spread around Burma that the left breasts of Buddha images in various temples in the country had begun swelling and weeping. It was seen as a good omen for Suu, the left breast symbolizing the mother's nurture, indicating that her power would grow and that she would succeed in saving Burma from suffering. But if many Burmese had an almost mystical view of Suu from early on, it was not much different in the West. Once she had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, and given the fact that for the following four years she was completely inaccessible, still under house arrest, she entered the realm of legend. She was either a wondrous being, a generalized icon of political saintliness, or, for the sceptics, just too good to be true. But in either case, there was very little to go on, just this slim Oriental beauty who had put up with so much and whose family had put up with so much as well.

Over the long years – fifteen – in which she was completely out of sight, this two-dimensional image has become all we know of her. She's become a sort of cipher of piety and righteousness and self-sacrifice. She's immensely famous, but we hardly know her. In her lifetime she is suffering the sort of reification that normally afflicts the saintly, but only long after their death, the flattening and simplifying of her image for the purposes of propaganda, either in posters and t-shirts for the Burmese democracy movement, or as used –

rather disturbingly, in my view – to sell table lamps or Chrysler cars, it has the same effect.

It was partly to write this flatness, to try to bring some body and complexity into our understanding, that I undertook to write this biography. When I started meeting her friends and English relations, I quickly learned that the saintly stereotypes, while not utterly wrong, were far too simple. What emerged from my research was a far more complex figure. On the one hand, she was indeed very consciously moral, with high moral standards inculcated by her mother, which were thrown into relief by the decadence of Britain in the 1960s when she arrived at St Hugh's College, Oxford, to study PPE in 1964. Ann Pasternak Slater, granddaughter of the great Russian novelist, became one of her best friends at St Hugh's and captures that aspect of her very well. 'The college', Ann wrote, was 'a warren of nervous adolescent virgins and a few sexually liberated sophisticates with an atmosphere airless and prickly as a hot railway compartment.'

'In this setting,' she went on, 'Suu was delightfully antithetical, an original who was at once laughably naive and genuinely innocent. All my memories of her at the time have certain recurring elements: cleanliness, determination, curiosity, a fierce purity. How do I see her? Eyebrows furrowed under her heavy fringe, shocked incredulity and disapproval. But Ann! Everybody was on the hunt for boyfriends, many wanted affairs, sex still being a half-forbidden, half-won desideratum. Being laid-back about being laid was de rigueur. It was extremely difficult to preserve any kind of innocence in such a setting. To most of our English contemporaries, Suu's startled disapproval seemed a comic aberration. One bold girl asked her, 'But, don't you want to sleep with someone?' Back came the indignant reply: 'No! I'll never go to bed with anyone except my husband. Now, I just go to bed hugging my pillow.' It raised a storm of mostly derisive laughter.'

But Suu was neither as square nor as sexless as that nun-like characterization suggests. She was theatrical and creative. One of her best friends in Delhi remembered that her driving ambition at school was to write, and she was precociously successful, or at least productive. She wrote a comic spoof of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which she and her friends at school in India – they called them the 'gang of five' – produced at Lady Shri Ram College. As a teenager in Delhi she was undoubtedly under the thumb of her mother, Daw Khin Kyi, who made her and her brother walk round and round the garden to practice keeping their backs straight, and who insisted that she kept busy all the time with one of her lady-like accomplishments – piano, sewing, embroidery, flower-arranging, and

equitation – and whose severity terrorized Suu's friends. But once she was at Oxford she rapidly became her own woman. She gave up the childish ponytail and sported the fringe which she has worn ever since. She bought a Moulton bicycle, then the trendiest mode of transport, and as it was not practical to ride it wearing her longyi, or sarong, she took to wearing white jeans. 'The ugly duckling turned into a swan,' one of her girlfriends from Rangoon remarked of the transformation when she came home for a visit.

As one of Burma's most marriageable young women, beautiful and with a famous name, if not at all rich, there was expectation on these return visits that a suitable young Burmese man could be found for her. We know of a couple of these attempted matchmaking efforts, which came to nothing. Suu was turning out to be her own person, and not only in the matter of her looks. She fell in love for the first time at Oxford, with a Pakistani student called Tariq Hyder, who went on to become a senior Pakistani diplomat, recently retired. Some Indian friends of Suu's disliked him and disapproved of their going out together. Whether or not he was, as one of them put it, a 'sleaze-ball,' there was no doubt that it would have been a very challenging match, in both Burma and Pakistan. In the end he lost interest and turned her down, but the relationship, or at least her hopes for it, outlasted her university career.

Mr Hyder, who in his retirement is a frequent commentator in the Pakistani press, refused to talk to me for the book. It's hard to see how the relationship could ever have flourished, given the cultural and religious differences of their respective countries. But then Suu was a woman in love, with all the tenderness and optimism of youth. What is interesting to me about this episode is the proof it gives of her willpower and her independence of mind. Holding out for Mr Hyder alienated her Indian friends at Oxford and would have infuriated her mother, but Suu went her own way.

The man she eventually did marry, Michael Aris, was barely more satisfactory for her mother. In a letter to Michael's twin brother Anthony before the marriage, she mentions her family's failure to give their blessing to it. But she gives every indication of not minding much. Quote: 'I'm sure my mother and brother will get over their initial disappointment,' she wrote, 'at what they probably consider my usual waywardness.' That's a phrase that struck me – 'my usual waywardness' – because waywardness is not a concept we associate with Aung San Suu Kyi. And yet if we consider her record at Oxford and beyond we can see why it is applicable and why she would have used it light-heartedly about herself. While at Oxford she twice tried to change her degree from PPE, once to English and once, curiously, to Forestry, both times without success. She graduated with a miserable third, not because she was

not intelligent, but because as was clear from her requests to change subject, the course did not really engage her.

Then, instead of returning home and settling down with a suitable Burmese boy, she flew off in the opposite direction to shack up in Manhattan with Dora Than-E, an older woman who had been a famous singer in Burma and who now worked for the UN. In New York, she enrolled in a course in international affairs at New York University but then dropped out after just a few weeks for reasons that have never been convincingly explained. Instead she began working alongside her friend, though in a lowly capacity, at U Thant's UN.

What is celebrated about the young Suu is the way she persuaded her fiancé, Michael Aris, to agree that if duty called, in whatever imaginable form, she would return to Burma and take up her father's legacy. That is the image of her we carry. And certainly it's true, but it's only half the story. When she married, at the age of 25, two things were clear about this woman: one, that she vigorously upheld the morality her mother taught her, and was intensely proud of her father's achievement and would like, in some way as yet unclear, to prove his worthy child; and two, that she was a seeker, a tryer, with enough willpower, determination, and self-confidence to wander well off any beaten track. To drop things and turn around – to trample on Burmese taboos about marrying foreigners, for example. From her university years, she was very much her own person. Those attributes remain her most important characteristics, I would argue, today.

Freedom from Fear was the title of the book by and about her that was published during her first years in detention, and the phrase became her watchword, the key for bringing about the revolution she advocated. Quote: 'Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it, and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it,' she wrote. 'Fear – *bahiya* in Burmese – destroys all sense of right and wrong,' she went on, 'which is why it is at the root of corruption. With so close a relationship between fear and corruption, it is little wonder that in any society where fear is rife, corruption in all forms becomes deeply entrenched.' Those are the seminal words from her essay which have become famous.

But it's clear from what she did and what she did not do during her twenties that she had been practicing freeing herself from fear – fear of the university's rigid requirements, fear of her family and its expectations, fear of her fearsome mother, fear of Burmese racial prejudice – for many years before she went into politics.

It's important to bear these facts in mind because in my view they shed light on the choices before her today and what she is likely to do with them. Suu may not be a strategist or genius. She never had any involvement with politics before 1988, and her fierce moral standards make the usual shenanigans of politics particularly hard for her to accept. But she's not a victim, she's not a hapless martyr, not a puppet, not an innocent out of her depth. Her detention went on so long that an earlier biographer, Justin Wintle, decided rather cruelly in my view that what defined her were impotence and futility rather than anything more positive, hence the title of his book, *Perfect Hostage*. The past year has proved that judgment not just cruel and premature but downright wrong, and now she's at the most crucial junction of her career.

Nobody knew what to expect when Suu emerged from eight years of continuous detention on 14 November 2010, exactly one year ago today. There was just huge relief that the regime had kept its word, that she was finally free and that she looked so well. The only thing that seemed fairly sure, I myself heard it from the lips of her party's foreign affairs spokesman Nyo Ohn Myint, in Thailand after I had been turfed out of Burma days before her release, was that she was not going to go back on the road. That prediction proved true. During her first six months of freedom she never left Rangoon. When I managed to get back into the country in March of this year and visited her, she was busy meeting party leaders and members from all over the country. Instead of going to them, she got them to come to her. It was a prudent strategy, given the last time she went on the campaign trail the regime had made a very strong attempt to assassinate her, but it was not exciting and galvanizing like her earlier tours. It looked like a sign of timidity or timorousness – not qualities we have ever associated with Suu.

Now, however, it is clear that this decision to stay put in Rangoon was nothing to do with fear of what might befall her on the road, but was part of a deal struck with Burma's incoming president, Thein Sein. 'I agree not to campaign,' she must have said in effect, 'and in return you will make good things happen.' This, I should make clear, is speculation on my part because Thein Sein has never explained in so many words what's happened this year. This is my reading of her inactivity in the first six months followed by the flurry of reforming activity since then.

It has taken a while, but since parliament was convened in August, things have been happening in Burma – politically speaking – as never before: political prisoner releases; relaxation of censorship; invitations to the human rights envoy, the UN human rights envoy; changes in the electoral law to allow the NLD to become a legal party again. Most surprisingly of all there

was the suspension of a highly unpopular Chinese-sponsored dam across the river Irrawaddy because in Thein Sein's unbelievable words: 'It is against the will of the people.' The will of the people? One shook one's head in disbelief; When was that ever a factor in the Burmese junta's considerations?

So it would seem that Thein Sein is on the side of the angels, and this was a surprise. There is a lovely Burmese phrase: *bang bi chut*, which means, 'men out of trousers.' Army men wear trousers, like army men all over the world. The rest of the Burmese male and female population makes do with the longyi, the Burmese sarong. When an army man goes back into civvies, he is a *bang bi chut*, a man out of trousers. And now we have an entire government made out of *bang bi chut*, like Thein Sein himself, a long-serving general who tied on his longyi again.

While still a general he was prime minister in 2007, throughout the Saffron Revolution and its brutal putting down. As general he was head of the national convention which drafted the country's new constitution, guaranteeing the military 25 percent of seats in parliament and effectively a veto on any measures which the civilian government – or the pseudo-civilian government – might enact. There was therefore no reason to expect very much of Thein Sein, this 67-year-old former general with pebble glasses and a pacemaker, faithful underling of senior general Than Shwe, and a man who had only come to power by dint of one of the most outrageously fixed elections in recent history.

But then suddenly, a few days before parliament convened in Naypyidaw – the military's new capital – in August, he invited Suu to a one-on-one meeting with him in the capital, the first time she had ever been there. She took part, again at special invitation, in an economic seminar in the same city, photographed with the president underneath a portrait of her father, Burma's founding father Aung San, whom the regime has been trying to airbrush out of history for the past 20 years. She and the president even had dinner together.

Why was the president being so bold, with his patron Than Shwe still alive and presumably grinding his teeth in the background? One of the most interesting reasons is fear of China. For a long time, Burma-watchers commented how fortunate it was in its geopolitical position, rich in timber, oil, gas, jade, and much else, and able to play its two giant neighbours, China and India, off against each other, snub the west, and ignore its maledictions. Well, it seems that the geopolitical position is slightly more snug than the average Burmese *bang bi chut* relishes. An old Burmese saying goes, 'When China spits, Burma swims,' and there is still much truth in it.

Have sanctions had any effect? Curiously, yes, this one: forcing Burma into a relationship with China so close that it is now felt to be suffocating, with large parts of Mandalay, for example, becoming Chinatown, with the now-suspended Myitsone dam intended to send 90 percent of the energy it produces to China, and with the China trade dominating the whole economy. Thein Sein seems to have decided that the best and perhaps the only way to get out of that puddle of Chinese spit was to play the Suu card. For reasons that he seems to have understood far better than his predecessor, this would help to melt the ice with just about everybody. And it seems to be working.

Some analysts tell me confidently that the steps ahead are already well marked, that everything has already been decided. The NLD, in the wilderness since it was deregistered as a political party last year before the election, will soon reregister, allowing it to compete alongside the other parties. Then, Suu herself will stand as a candidate in a by-election, perhaps as soon as next month. At the weekend – this weekend just gone – her spokesman confirmed that this was indeed likely. If she does there is no doubt that she will win it, so then she will be in parliament. In exchange, one supposes, she would advise that at least some of the sanctions on the regime be lifted.

Meanwhile, at the summit in Bali this week, ASEAN will decide that yes, Myanmar – as Suu has never called it – has indeed done enough to deserve the rotating chair of the organization in 2014 instead of 2016. The Obama policy of engagement with the regime will be seen by the US to be paying dividends, despite the fruitless first three years. Indeed, Hillary Clinton on Saturday gave her cautious welcome to what they are doing.

So, in the new political moment, what are the opportunities for Suu and what are the perils? In a seminal essay published during her first years of detention, she wrote, 'It is his capacity for self-improvement and self-redemption which most distinguishes man from the mere brute. The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation's development. Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces that produced the iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative.' Suu has remained true to these principles throughout the past 22 years. She has plenty of human frailties, as my book makes clear. She is prone to fits of temper. She pushes herself too hard. It's alleged by some that she is too easily swayed by others, and others say that she is too stubborn. But nobody questions the sincerity of her commitment to a revolution of the spirit.

And that's why the current situation, while full of promise unimaginable even four months ago, presents her with a major challenge. How can she encourage and reward Thein Sein and the other relatively moderate, reform-minded ministers, without getting sucked into a political machine that is still at the mercy of the kleptocratic military men who have run and ruined her country for 50 years? If she does indeed stand for election as a plain MP, and turn up in the ornamental talking shop of Naypyidaw, one speck among hundreds of MPs who won the right to sit there through blatant fraud, how can that be of benefit to her or anybody else? On the other hand, if she rejects his overtures and opts to stay with her party in the wilderness, what use would that be?

I wrote in the conclusion to my book: 'Ever since she was first put under house arrest in 1989, Suu has been confined to the narrowest possible political space, as if trapped on a ledge outside the offices of power. Her room for manoeuvre has always been minimal. It has taken all her immense powers of self-control to avoid falling off. Even today' – I wrote this earlier this year, before these initiatives started – 'even today, that remains true. Her intercourse with the rulers of the country has been nonexistent, and there is very little prospect of that changing.' Turning down Thein Sein's overtures, she would risk returning to that narrow ledge, having secured very little in the way of benefit for her people.

I would conclude by saying that there are two things to be said about this on the basis of my sketch of her character presented earlier. One, that she will not be tempted into running for office out of hunger for power. She is too ascetic for that, her morality is too firm and too clear, and she has had 20 years to calm whatever passions may have raged in her breast back in 1989. Two, whatever she does decide, obviously in concord with her senior colleagues in the party, it will not be because she is innocent, a martyr, a victim, or a perfect hostage. She has the potential, which she has shown through earlier stages of her life, to be both cool and sagacious. Her willingness to go along with the regime's initiatives so far, which have cost her and the rest of the opposition nothing, is no proof that she has capitulated. If she decides that the light is not in fact worth the candle, that she has negligible chances of using the political machine to begin making the radical reforms that Burma is desperate for, she will not hesitate to remain in or return to the wilderness, whatever abuse may then be heaped on her by those desperate, for whatever reason, to see sanctions lifted.

'Burma is changing,' a journalist called Joseph Allchin wrote in the *Democratic Voice of Burma* the other day. 'But not towards a simple state of

freedom but towards greater western capitalism'. This is elite-orientated and engineered, and arguably threatens its sovereignty as much as China does. Western capital will sweep into a corruptible land with little rule of law. 'The result,' he wrote, 'will be a corrupt feeding frenzy.' That is not one of the outcomes envisaged in Suu's revolution of the spirit.

Thank you very much.