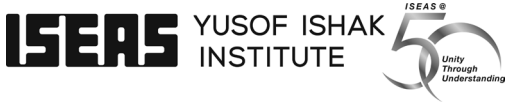
The Other Ladies of Myanmar



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The Other Ladies of Myanmar

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To the Ds, and the other letters in my life
who make my words

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Preface

When I first started thinking about this book in 2015, it was a few months after the first openly contested elections in Myanmar in decades.

After years of oppression and brutality, the political party of democracy hero Aung San Suu Kyi had swept to power, and hope was everywhere.

In the run up to the vote, it had been the word on everyone's lips as I travelled across the country for my work as a journalist. On the night of the election, it rippled through the singing, dancing crowds on the streets of the country's biggest city, Yangon. And it dominated headlines for days afterwards, nationally and globally: the beginnings of hope, freedom and democracy for a people who had lived crushed under military rule for nearly fifty years.

Much of that hope centred on one remarkable woman: Aung San Suu Kyi herself.

She had been a lightning rod for Burmese hope since 1988, when her trip back to her homeland to care for her sick mother coincided with a national democratic uprising that Suu Kyi — the daughter of Burmese independence hero General Aung San — ended up leading.

The 1988 uprising was brutally suppressed, and the military regained control once more. But Suu Kyi did not give up, despite the fact that her efforts to bring freedom to her country saw her incarcerated in some form or another for the majority of the next twenty years.

Her sacrifices, her courage, and her commitment to peaceful protest in the face of oppression made her an icon both at home and abroad. In 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In Myanmar, she became known as "The Lady", an honorific nickname that gives an indication of her place in the popular imagination of her country.

So it is no surprise that hope was the order of the day on 8 November 2015, as voting slip after voting slip came in backing her party, the National League for Democracy. But now, as I sit down to write this preface two years on, the story is altogether more complicated.

Of course, for anyone to live up to this kind of hope would be near impossible. And for many Burmese people, Suu Kyi is still as much of a hero as she ever was. It is also fair to say that Myanmar is almost unrecognizable from the country it was during the dark days of the military junta, when it was an international pariah cut off from the world, its people living in fear — although the credit for beginning this transformation process has to go to the military-backed civilian government that took over in 2011 (elections were held in 2010 but parliament convened in 2011).

Many challenges remain in Myanmar, from the economy to the environment. But Suu Kyi's approach to these challenges is not the reason why so many — outside Myanmar at least — feel that their hope in her has all but died.

Instead, it is her apparent abandonment of the values she was once believed to embody in the case of one particular group of Burmese citizens, the Rohingya. An unimaginably horrific campaign of violence, meted out by the still-powerful Burmese army against this group in recent months, has seen around 700,000 flee, as the world wakes up to the fact that Suu Kyi's government is looking the other way while at least ethnic cleansing, and possibly even genocide, takes place in Myanmar.

And it is worse than just looking away: the government has actively denied reports of atrocities, denied access to observers and aid, and even called some Rohingya "terrorists" (there are insurgent groups within the community).

This approach has played well in Myanmar, where many are united over the belief that the Rohingya are dangerous illegal immigrants. Others in the country say Suu Kyi is on a knife-edge, effectively sacrificing the few for the many in the face of the army's thirst for blood (or the fear that the generals could once more take total control of Myanmar).

But for a human rights icon to so blatantly ignore the human rights of an entire ethnic group has poisoned the hope the world had in Suu

Kyi. However the current crisis is resolved, the story of Myanmar will never be the fairy-tale democratic transition that many (perhaps naively) thought it could be.

When I set out to write this book, I listened to the Burmese people I met, and I too had hope in Suu Kyi. But her struggle was so widely covered, her story so completely known, that I didn't feel I could add anything to that particular story of hope.

Instead, ironically, I also listened to Suu Kyi herself. In the days before the election, at a baking hot rally in Yangon that I attended, she told the heaving crowd that democracy was about hope and belief in the people themselves.

"That's why I'm not afraid at all," she told tens of thousands of her supporters. "Because I believe in you."

It was inspiring, and I was inspired, and I started thinking about all the other people in Myanmar who had been working for this moment for their whole lives, and in whose hands Suu Kyi herself believed a democratic future rested.

So I decided to write about these other people in Myanmar who would shape their country in the coming years. Specifically, I decided to write about the women — the "Other Ladies" of the title — partly because of my own journalistic interest in women's rights, but also because I felt that their voices had been the least heard in the story of Myanmar thus far.

Their voices are what you are about to read. I hope you enjoy hearing them.

Acknowledgements

My greatest thanks go to the twelve wonderful women who opened their lives to me so warmly and graciously, and allowed me to tell their stories. Then also to my friend Thal Nyein Thu (Grace), who helped inspire the book (she's quite the lady herself), as well as always being there to help with translation. Thanks are also due to all of the translators I worked with, as well as the organizations who helped me reach the women I spoke to; a particular shout-out to the Tavoy Women's Union, who took this quite literally and gave me a backy on their motorbikes into the jungle to meet Htin Htin Htay. And finally to the International Women's Media Foundation, who funded the research.

Introduction

I have a fantastic old Burmese cookbook on my bookshelves, which proudly informs me that there is no need for feminism in Myanmar.

Great stuff, I think. Things must be totally equal here. So, why's that, then? Ah. Hang on.

There is no need for feminism, I learn, "because it is every Burmese woman's sole aim to become a wife."

The situation for women in Myanmar is actually even more complicated, and multifaceted, than this suggests. Take the country's 2008 constitution. While article 348 proclaims: "The Union shall not discriminate any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth", elsewhere, some government jobs are described as being "naturally suitable for men only".

While Aung San Suu Kyi is currently the country's de facto leader, she first rose to prominence thanks to her famous father, the country's independence hero General Aung San.

While the country is 80th out of 159 countries in the United Nations' most recent gender equality index, it is higher than many of its neighbours: Cambodia (112), Laos (106), and even India (125).

And looking at the situation in the past does not clear things up much, either. There is an amazing article in *The Atlantic* from 1958 by Mya Sein, former head of the Burma Women's Council. It recounts how she was surprised by how fiercely the British colonialists fought back against attempts by the more emancipated Burmese women to get some female representation in the Legislature in 1927.

The backward Brits didn't hold out, though; the first Burmese woman was elected in 1929. But some would argue the situation since then has gone backwards. As the country unravelled in the hands of the generals

in the latter half of the twentieth century, women's rights took a similar nosedive.

As such, there are still effectively no laws protecting women from domestic violence, and rape is routinely used as a weapon of war in regional ethnic conflicts. In some rural areas, women have no inheritance rights, no sexual education, and no access to contraception.

But things are changing. As I have already explained, while the election of Suu Kyi has not been a silver bullet, Myanmar is undoubtedly in the process of developing, transforming, and opening up to the world.

As such, the situation for its women has come under increased scrutiny, both from outside the country but also from the women within it.

Some of these clued-up Burmese gender campaigners are featured in this book, but it is not exclusively about them, because they do not represent the majority of women in this largely rural and extremely poor society. Instead, I have tried to speak to and write about women who represent different elements of Myanmar, and whose stories offer insights into some of the challenges both women and men are facing across the country as it develops and changes.

That means the women I have spoken to include a farmer and a refugee as well as a pop star and a nun. Their stories illuminate different areas of Burmese life, whether that is religious life, cultural life, or something else entirely — and sometimes, life or death.

In short, this book aims to tell the fascinating and fluctuating story of Myanmar and the changes it is currently experiencing through the voices of its women.

From the artist who defied the junta to hand out sanitary towels to guests at her exhibition, to the pop star who gets called a whore for wearing short skirts; from the young Muslim campaigner who has already spent a quarter of her life in prison, to the refugee who learned how to give her sisters the contraceptive implant in a refugee camp; these are the voices of The Other Ladies of Myanmar.

Timeline

This book is about Myanmar's present and its future, but the past is important, too.

With that in mind, here is a short orientation paragraph and a brief timeline of key events in the country's recent history that are either mentioned in this book, or are relevant to *The Other Ladies of Myanmar*.

First some basics: Myanmar, also known as Burma (see the note at the end of this section) is a country in Southeast Asia housing around 53 million people. Its population is made up of more than 100 ethnic groups, although its majority religion is Buddhism. It is bordered by Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand.

1885: Colonial takeover

In 1885, the United Kingdom completed its takeover of the Burmese kingdom, and exiled its royal family.

1947: War, Burmese independence and tragedy

The beginning of the end for British rule in Burma. Following the Second World War, in which Burma became a battleground between the Japanese and the Allies, calls for Burmese independence grew.

Aung San Suu Kyi's father, General Aung San, orchestrated the country's freedom from colonial rule, followed by the drive to unite many of Burma's different ethnicities in the new union via the Panglong agreement.

Tragically, after winning a landslide election in April 1947, Aung San and six of his colleagues were assassinated in a council chamber in Yangon (then known as Rangoon).

1948: Officially free — but fighting

On 4 January 1948, Burma officially got its independence. But without charismatic Aung San, the country slid into political instability, civil war and conflict — between the new Burmese army and the Communists as well as with a number of ethnic groups.

1962: The military coup d'état

By 1962, the fearsome Burmese army (known as the Tatmadaw) tired of doing what it was told by the civilian government, and seized power in a coup.

General Ne Win immediately embarked on the Burmese Way to Socialism, a disastrous programme that wrecked the country's economy and isolated it from the world.

1988: The 8888 uprising

Protests against the increasingly brutal regime took place throughout the following decades. But the 1988 demonstrations, which ignited a generation and spread across the country, were the largest, and forced the resignation of Ne Win (after he warned the army would "shoot to kill" if more protests took place — which it did).

Meanwhile, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar. She had been living in England but came back to care for her sick mother. She joined the protests and ultimately, via her first public speech in Yangon to half a million people, became the symbol of freedom and democracy for a nation.

But despite Ne Win's resignation, little changed; the generals reorganized and renamed the ruling party, becoming the fearsome State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

1990: The ignored elections

After huge international and national pressure, the junta arranged the first "free" elections in Myanmar for thirty years in May 1990. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in the poll, and so the regime promptly ignored it.

In 1992, General Than Shwe took over as leader of SLORC and became effectively the country's second dictatorial leader.

Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest shortly after the election (other NLD figures were also imprisoned), and would spend fifteen of the next twenty-one years there, advocating for non-violent protest and democracy but unable to see her sons or even her sick husband, who died of cancer in England in 1999. In 1991 she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle.

2007: The Saffron Revolution

Monks, highly respected figures in Myanmar, backed major protests against fuel price rises and the wider regime. But things ended in the now-familiar way: horrifying violence, a brutal crackdown by the regime, and little other change for ordinary Burmese people. At least this time the world was watching, as reporters managed to smuggle out tapes.

2008: Cyclone Nargis

The devastating effects of this huge tropical storm — which slammed into the Irrawaddy Delta region on 2 May 2008 — were exacerbated by the military regime's refusal to let foreign aid enter the country in the aftermath.

Hundreds of thousands died and 700,000 homes were destroyed. The aid ban was eventually lifted, but by then many more had died. The total death toll is unknown but the UN estimates that up to 2.4 million people were affected in some way by Myanmar's worst ever natural disaster.

2010: All change? The path to democracy

More "free" elections for Myanmar took place in November 2010, and this time the NLD were effectively barred from taking part. Unsurprisingly, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won amid reports of vote-rigging.

But there were positives. While the generals remained at the elbows of the USDP, the government was now at least nominally civilian. Led by President Thein Sein (himself a former general), it embarked on a series

of reforms which surprised many — not least allowing the release of Suu Kyi from house arrest later that month (her party was even allowed to compete in 2012 by-elections, in which The Lady won a seat).

Over the next few years, some political prisoners were freed, censorship was slightly relaxed, and a peace treaty with at least some ethnic combatants was signed. The changes were enough for some international sanctions to be lifted — and hope for a better future began to flower in Myanmar.

2015 Landmark elections and hopes for the future

That hope bore shining fruit in November 2015, when Suu Kyi's NLD party won a landslide victory in national elections that were considerably closer to actually being free and fair than many had hoped — albeit still not perfect.

Inevitably, the real world has since been a bit more complicated: the military still controls 25 per cent of the seats in parliament, and the constitution blocked Suu Kyi from becoming president (instead, her ally Win Myint (as of March 2018) is in the seat and she is in the newly created "state counsellor" role).

But there are wider concerns. A new wave of violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority has been dismissed by Suu Kyi, despite international condemnation that the army's treatment may amount to ethnic cleansing or even genocide; curbs on freedom of speech and convictions for defamation have crept up; ethnic conflicts continue; and there have been no real reforms aimed at tackling the crippling poverty that most Burmese still face — indeed, a vague economic plan means foreign investment is likely to fall.

It cannot all be blamed on Suu Kyi, still lovingly known as "The Lady" in Myanmar; but whether that fruit of hope that seemed so ripe in 2015 will be harvested, or whether it withers on the vine, is effectively in her hands.

Burma or Myanmar?

Finally, a note on the name of the country.

What's in a name? In Burma/Myanmar, at least until recently, a lot. Burma was renamed as Myanmar by the military junta in 1989, who said they were rejecting the old colonial name of "Burma" and seizing the country back for its people.

While historians generally reject this interpretation anyway — most agree that the words are basically very similar in Burmese, with Myanmar the more literary or historical form, and Burma the more colloquial — it caused the international community serious confusion.

Aung San Suu Kyi stuck with Burma, saying that to do anything else would be to give the new name, and hence the military regime, legitimacy. Allies like the United States and United Kingdom did the same, but the UN went with Myanmar. Even today, it is confusing. For example, while you land in Yangon International Airport, your luggage tags are stamped "RGN" for Rangoon, the city's Myanmar/Burma equivalents.

Nowadays though, with the wider changes and challenges in the country, the issues is less fraught. Many Burmese use Myanmar, or the two names interchangeably, and diplomats — including Suu Kyi herself — are more open to compromise.

As such, I will mainly use "Myanmar" but Burma also slips in, particularly when I am speaking about historical events or indeed if the women themselves use Burma.