

Personality Cults

Joshua Kurlantzick

PERFECT HOSTAGE: A LIFE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI

by Justin Wintle.

Hutchinson, 450 pp., £18.99, April, 978 0 09 179651 8

FOR THE FIRST TIME in nearly twenty years, Burma has burst into open protest against the military junta, captivating the world with its 'saffron revolution'. Across the country, monks have led massive demonstrations, joined by civil servants, prominent cultural figures and tens of thousands of ordinary people. Throngs of red-robed monks have marched through the streets of Rangoon, waving banners and religious flags. When Burma's military surrounded the city, the monks crouched in front of them, defiantly reciting odes to loving kindness, chanting prayers, and singing the national anthem. Their courage has rallied terrified citizens in the face of troops who have stormed monasteries, jailed thousands of protesters and killed at least ten and possibly hundreds more. The UN Security Council met on 26 September to consider the crisis, the day after President Bush had announced tougher US sanctions on the junta's leaders.

If much of the world was surprised by the protests, Burma hands were not: the country's political and economic crisis has deepened considerably in the past few years. When I reported from Burma in the 1990s, it was unusual to see homeless people in

the city streets. On a trip last year, I saw emaciated women sleeping rough on Rangoon's rutted pavements. I passed children sleeping inside mesh cages like those wealthy Westerners use to transport dogs. There were frequent blackouts and parts of the city were in darkness for hours at a time. With the economy stagnant, and as much as 60 per cent of the population in some parts of the country living below the poverty line, many people could not even afford rice. Things are only likely to get worse.

The junta's response to the uprising – shooting at unarmed demonstrators, defrocking monks, shutting down the press and internet servers, and accusing 'neo-colonialists' and 'political opportunists' of secretly engineering the protests – makes clear how isolated and paranoid the regime has become. Ten years ago, many Western diplomats dismissed the junta's titular leader, Senior General Than Shwe, as an uneducated thug who hadn't even finished secondary school. Surely he couldn't last at the head of the army; in-fighting would crack the regime and provide an opening for political change in the country he and his men had renamed 'Myanmar' in 1989. But the thug proved the diplomats wrong.

Than Shwe has dismissed the few generals willing to engage with the West, and has built ties with North Korea, which is now selling him arms. There were more than a thousand political prisoners in Burma's jails even before the recent demonstrations began. Apparently an admirer of Burma's ancient kings – at his daughter's wedding, supplicants bowed and scraped before her – he has created a personality cult in the state media. Over the past few years, the regime has closed the few semi-open publications in Burma and forced out even the most benign international NGOs, leading the Red Cross, normally slow to criticise governments, to blame Burma's generals for causing 'immense suffering for thousands of people'. The regime has also created its own version of the Brownshirts, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, a mass movement of young people who travel around harassing government opponents. Two years ago, reportedly on a day selected by astrologers, Than Shwe moved the seat of government from Rangoon to Naypyidaw, a small town in the jungle heart of the country, installing the generals far from their miserable and angry people. Burma has the worst HIV/Aids problem in South-East Asia; its healthcare system is ranked second worst in the world. There are as many as 650,000 internally displaced people in the east of the country as a result of government campaigns against ethnic minorities.

In the early 1960s, when the military seized power, the West took just enough interest to give tacit support to the junta, which positioned itself as a bulwark against Communism, but not enough to lavish funds on

the country, as was the case with Thailand. Over the following decades, Thailand's military leaders allowed significant trade links with the West; the Burmese junta, by contrast, became increasingly xenophobic and isolated.

For nearly twenty years, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the Burmese opposition movement and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has dominated Western coverage of the country. Other Nobel laureates, parliamentarians and Western celebrities remonstrate with the Burmese regime on her behalf. Coldplay and U2 dedicate songs to her. Yet supporting Suu Kyi, like buying RED T-shirts to fight HIV in Africa, can be a sign of political consciousness that requires little real investment. Now, with Burma facing its greatest crisis in twenty years, Westerners' commitment is being truly tested. Suu Kyi will need all the pressure Western leaders, and the wavering United Nations, can bring to bear on Burma's rulers.

Most previous books on Suu Kyi were essentially hagiographies. Justin Wintle's biography is a thorough study not only of Suu Kyi the symbol and martyr but of Suu Kyi the politician, a woman capable of transforming herself from the quiet wife of an Oxford don to a powerful political actor in one of the world's most repressive environments. By scouring secondary sources and interviews with her acquaintances and fellow activists, *Perfect Hostage* reveals Suu Kyi's weaknesses – her stubbornness, her tendency to preach – as well as her strengths. Still, Wintle tends to approve of most of Suu Kyi's decisions, although without having interviewed her, he sometimes struggles

to explain her reasons for them. It's not clear that the aims of the Burmese democracy movement have always been served by the path activists have taken since the late 1980s. The movement may now have its greatest opportunity in decades, and any lessons learned from past misjudgments will be invaluable.

Often referred to as 'The Lady' by her supporters, Suu Kyi, who was born in 1945, is the daughter of the murdered independence leader and army chief Aung San. This helps account for the Burmese people's devotion to her: why they flock to her speeches and keep small photos of her hidden in wallets or behind pieces of furniture. 'I could not,' Suu Kyi declared in a famous speech in 1988, 'as my father's daughter, remain indifferent to all that is going on.' Her lineage also helps explain her continuing respect for the military, which seems strange to outsiders who've watched the army lock her up, kill her followers and cut her telephone line when she tried to speak to her dying husband. 'I feel a strong attachment to the armed forces,' Suu Kyi said in that same address. They could be 'a force in which people can place their trust and reliance'.

Suu Kyi seems to have inherited an upright, old-fashioned integrity; when she lived in Britain, Wintle says, she would express what one contemporary described as "shocked incredulity and disapproval" at some or other transgression of her rooted moral code'. Perhaps she has too much integrity. Her father was willing to bend and shift sides, working with first the Japanese and then the British during the Second World War; some former allies of Suu Kyi

believe there have been moments when compromise from The Lady might have convinced the generals to allow a measure of power-sharing.

Burma gained independence in 1948, a year after Aung San's assassination. In the 1950s, newspapers and magazines sprang up to cater to an educated middle class. Elections were held, the economy grew by an average of 6 per cent a year, and upper-class Thais travelled to Rangoon to buy luxuries. (In the 1980s the direction of travel reversed, as many Burmese walked through minefields to reach Thailand.) Suu Kyi learned a lot from the lively conversations she heard when political leaders came to pay their respects to her mother. She also seems to have concluded that only a federal democracy would work in a nation made up of numerous ethnic groups. Suu Kyi – like nearly 70 per cent of the population, a Burman – has spoken of this need for federalisation, and constantly tries to reassure ethnic minorities.

In 1962 the 'golden years' came to an end, when a ruthless general called Ne Win seized control in a coup. At a time when Communists were advancing in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and parts of Burma, neither London nor Washington stood in his way. The Foreign Office sent junior diplomats to caddy for Ne Win when he visited England on golfing trips. Over the next three decades, Suu Kyi and her country entered the wilderness. Ne Win nationalised industries, destroyed the economy, and shut the country off, allowing foreigners in only on short visas. He closed down all the non-military centres of power and kept his own counsel,

relying on soothsayers and astrologers for policy advice.

During this period, Suu Kyi was living abroad, in India, Britain, the United States, Bhutan and Japan. In India, she saw a messy but functioning multi-ethnic democracy that had been forged after a struggle in which non-violence had been used as a strategy to oppose authoritarian rule. She began to study Buddhism and meditation, which later proved invaluable in helping her to maintain her sanity while under house arrest. While she was at Oxford, she met her husband, Michael Aris. She was not an outstanding student, Wintle finds: 'the moralist in Suu Kyi tended . . . towards assertion of what she instinctively knew,' rather than argument and exposition.

In the 1970s and 1980s she followed her husband as he built his reputation as a scholar. Then the game suddenly seemed to change. Ne Win, allegedly on the advice of his astrologer, decreed in 1987 that certain denominations of Burmese currency were no longer legal tender, and uprisings broke out in the summer of 1988 in Rangoon and across the country. Demonstrators were beaten and shot by the military; hundreds of student protesters were trapped on a bridge in Rangoon and beaten to death. Suu Kyi was in Burma at the time, caring for her dying mother, and saw the wounded and dead at the hospital. She had once told Aris that if her people needed her, she would stand by them. Drawing on interviews with several of the many activists involved in the 1988 uprising who have since fled to Thailand or the West, Wintle provides a gripping, almost day-by-day account of that hot

summer when Suu Kyi changed from a hands-off figure mediating between demonstrators and the regime to a political actor in her own right, criticising the government, lending moral support to protesters and forming a political party, the National League for Democracy.

She announced her move into public life in a famous speech at the Shwedagon pagoda, before an audience of hundreds of thousands. She then made skilful use of the media, foreign diplomats and international human rights bodies to highlight atrocities, as demonstrations spiralled into nationwide strikes, and the authorities continued to shoot protesters. Her home in Rangoon became the opposition movement's centre of operations, and she helped bridge the gap between student activists and military officers who'd defected from the regime. She did much to ensure that the movement remained committed to democracy and federalism, and did not vilify the military, which she knew would have to play a major role in any political transformation, because it has been the nation's only real institution since the 1960s. She also cannily used Burmese nationalism to her advantage, holding mass meetings to commemorate important anniversaries, both affirming her link to her father and suggesting that the democracy movement, not the army, could best uphold Burmese values and protect the nation.

Suu Kyi refused to be cowed by threats and even walked straight towards the guns of a battalion of soldiers who had been ordered to shoot her. She did not flinch; they did. Word of her face-off with the soldiers

spread. Yet the idealistic democracy movement sometimes misjudged the political climate. Though independent newspapers and pamphlets sprang up in 1988, the activists never succeeded in creating a media outlet that could reach all the Burmese people. In the face of a fierce enemy – as many as 3000 protesters were killed in 1988 alone – the democracy movement needed to maintain discipline. But this was not Suu Kyi's way. 'There was something of the fairy godmother about her,' Wintle says. 'If Suu Kyi waved her magic wand hard enough, all might yet come right.' Unlike the ANC, the Burmese did not crush dissenters in order to maintain internal discipline. Opportunistic criminals joined their ranks and so, for example, did Aung Gyi, a defector from the regime who later claimed that Communist insurgents had infiltrated the democracy movement. He might have been a double agent, or he might just have been trying to gain control; either way, he caused a lot of damage. 'I went wrong,' Suu Kyi told a friend, admitting that she'd been naive to trust him.

Deluded by power and convinced of their popularity, the junta allowed an election in 1990. They did their best to rig the result, providing their own party with vast resources and holding Suu Kyi under house arrest during the poll, but on voting day the army, amazingly, stood aside. More than 70 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballot. The National League for Democracy took 392 out of 485 seats. The military party took only ten, but the regime simply ignored the results, announcing that it was not obliged to surrender power. Here again, Wintle says,

the democracy movement could be argued to have stumbled. Instead of demanding that the military step down, the activists urged 'frank and sincere discussions', disappointing some of their supporters and significantly reducing pressure on the regime. The military dug in, jailing NLD members and even several revered monks. Burma has not held a real election since.

AFTER 1990, Wintle seems to lose interest, rushing through the next 17 years. During this time, Suu Kyi has repeatedly demonstrated both her courage and her mastery of words and images. Isolated and often locked up, she has still managed to prevent Burma from being forgotten, using such tactics as driving defiantly out of her house so that the military is forced to stop her convoy. Responding to her calls for pressure to be brought on the regime, Britain, the US and other nations have imposed tough sanctions.

Wintle makes little of the significance of the junta's increasing isolation, which has made it harder for other countries to influence what goes on in Burma. One effect of the generals' move to Naypyidaw has been to insulate their bureaucrats from the cosmopolitan former capital, where officials were more likely to mix with writers, activists and other liberals. They have also widened their network of informers, and used the USDA to pry far more deeply into the private lives of ordinary Burmese.

The international environment too has changed radically since the early 1990s. To Burma's north, China has grown into a global power, hungry for energy and coveting

Burma's offshore natural gas deposits. It has become Burma's most important foreign partner, providing loans and stonewalling the efforts of the UN Security Council to censure the regime. To the west, India fears Chinese influence and also desperately needs energy. In the 1990s, India supported democracy activists; today New Delhi welcomes Than Shwe for state visits, sells arms to the generals and refuses to condemn the junta's crackdown. To the east, Thailand has agreed commercial deals with the regime and made access harder for Burmese refugees. The Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) has welcomed Burma into its ranks, essentially giving the generals power of veto over every Asean decision. When Asean envoys visit Burma, the regime does not let them meet Suu Kyi. A sham National Convention, supposedly working on guidelines for a new constitution, has allowed the generals to preserve, for the benefit of their neighbours, the fiction that they will eventually hand power to a civilian government.

While Asian powers continue to back the Burmese junta, the generals can thumb their noses at Western sanctions. But the country's neighbours, supportive or not, cannot contain Burma's problems. From north-eastern Burma, a hub of drug production, heroin and methamphetamines flood across the border into China, bringing HIV along with them. Drugs (and Burmese migrants) swamp Thailand and India too. Last year Wen Jiabao, the Chinese prime minister, issued an unusually frank warning to the Burmese government, telling it to curtail drug trafficking. And though Beijing has

refrained from applying direct pressure such as sanctions, senior Chinese officials have expressed growing concern about the crackdown. According to Larry Jagan, formerly the BBC's Burma analyst, Chinese officials have privately urged the Burmese government to bring in economic reforms and have met exiled democracy activists, perhaps a sign that Beijing fears an economic collapse in Burma. It is a reasonable fear. Thanks to the regime's economic failures, the population now struggles to survive, or prays for deliverance. More boys are joining the monkhood because it is the only way to get food and an education, and mental illness and alcoholism are on the increase. In northern Burma, there are complaints that nearly everything in the markets comes from China, and some Chinese businesspeople fear violent retribution.

In this context, it's easy to wonder whether Aung San Suu Kyi, who 17 years ago led a united and exuberant democracy movement close to the brink of power, is still relevant. Yet she is the only rallying force left. Ordinary people still flock to her, and when she travelled the country in 2003 during a brief period of freedom, she drew crowds of thousands. But even Suu Kyi's staunchest supporters wonder whether a new approach is necessary, and with it a rethinking of sanctions. Worse, they worry that while Suu Kyi's message may triumph, her party has suffered – one reason the monks have had to take the lead. If the generals gave way today, would she be able to unite a country undone by the junta, and riddled with informers?

4 October