

Please use your liberty to promote ours

For four decades, many people in Burma have been opposing a military dictatorship, which is internationally renowned for its human rights abuses.

Ko Aung

My name is Ko Aung and I am a political refugee who has been forced to leave my country, Burma, which has been in a “nightmare state” for more than four decades. Since 1962, a military dictatorship, supported by foreign investment, has brutally oppressed the Burmese people and ethnic minorities.

Since 1962, each generation of students has been fighting for freedom and democracy in the country. We would like to restore the dignity of the human person and to meet peoples’ hunger for justice, freedom and equality. I was involved in the students’ movement in 1988 as one of the leaders of the All Burma Federation of Students Union (ABFSU). At the time I was in my final year of studying industrial chemistry.

On the 8th of August 1988 – 8-8-88 – millions of people took to the streets and demonstrated against the military government all over the country. This was a significant achievement for the students’ movement. During this general uprising, three presidents were forced to resign.

In the uprisings that took place in 1988, between 5,000 and 10,000 peaceful demonstrators were killed by the military regime and about 20,000 students fled to neighbouring countries, such as Thailand. I was arrested on 22nd September 1988 for protesting against the military regime, interrogated in several military intelligence centres over six months before being sentenced to seven years hard labour of which I served almost six years before being released. During this time, I continued to fight for rights within prison and was punished with leg irons three times and kept in solitary confinement for a total of three years.

I cannot tell you all I have experienced during my interrogation, the beatings, tortures and inhuman treatment because it is too painful. I would like to tell you, however, about the worst torture I experienced. The place where it took place is called Yea Kyi Aing, one of most infamous military intelligence centres in the country. One night, I was blindfolded and chained and taken from my cell by the military intelligence officers to a shed. By this time, I was really scared every time they came to my cell, even if they came only to feed me. Once inside the shed, they took off my blindfold and told me to get into a circular pond about eight foot in diameter and six foot deep. The pond was full of maggots breeding on human shit. I had to climb down the brick steps into the pool up to my neck. When I got about three steps down, I began to feel and smell the liquid. Although I could not see anything because there were no lights at all, I knew it was the maggot pond. I was so scared I refused to go in any further, but they forced me to. The whole night I shouted and screamed. I said, “I am a student, please don’t treat me like this”. I don’t know how many times I shouted to them.

In the morning, I saw the maggots: different sizes, different colours, some tiny, others half an inch long. They began crawling up my face, mouth, nose, eyes and ears. My body itched and shuddered and cringed with crawling maggots. Every now and then, I tried to brush them off my face.

The pond was covered by a wire mat, which a military intelligence officer opened to give me food and drink while he interrogated me. But I had lost all appetite and could not eat anything.

After three days or so of this horrific experience – I don't remember how long exactly – I became weak and delirious. My mind went blank. I woke up in hospital, under guard and chained hand and foot to the bed. I think I must have answered their questions about my political activities and other ABFSU members because the military intelligence officers showed me a confession I had signed. After almost a month of these tortures, after they had succeeded in forcing a confession out of me, I was taken to the Insein Jail, known as “the darkest hellhole in Burma”.

Soon after my arrival in this prison, I and other student political prisoners started to demand our rights. We went on hunger strike on 1st May 1990. We refused to do “poun san”¹ as it destroys human dignity. We demanded to be allowed to read newspapers and other literature. We demanded an end to the beatings of all prisoners. We asked for better food in the prison (for example, a regular supply of meat). Just one hour after we had started our hunger strike, we were taken out of the block and forced to stand in the sun. A number of other political prisoners joined us, and we became 40 altogether.

When the prison governor arrived some time later, he told us to crouch down and said we were breaking prison rules. He told us to call off our strike, but we refused. Then the guards put hoods over our head, and fixed eighteen-inch leg irons between our ankles and attached chains to the irons so that we could hardly walk. Finally, they beat us and put us in solitary confinement.

Prisoners were taken out of solitary twice a day and beaten, once in the morning and once in the evening. We were not allowed to bathe. Three days later, when we were still on hunger strike, the guards told us to give up or they would not give us drinking water. We said, “ We will go on until we get our demands.” They broke the water pot in front of us. We were all kept in leg irons and beaten badly.

In the end, after nine days, we had to give up and agree to eat. But we were so weak and dehydrated that when we were released we were taken to the prison hospital where our injuries were treated. I had lost the proper use of my legs and suffered excruciating pains as I walked. One of the student prisoners was permanently crippled. He has since died in Insein Jail as a result of the ongoing beatings.

Someone once asked me, “How did you survive during those terrible times?” I replied that my beliefs and ambitions sustained me, as did my respect for, and sense of duty to work for, all those who had given their lives for freedom and democracy. A lot of students died in front of me. I remember carrying many dying students to the hospital. That gave me strength. In those difficult days, I tried to use all sorts of ways to keep myself physically and mentally strong.

In my country, students, ordinary people and ethnic minorities are still denied even the most basic rights. I believe that if we, as ordinary people, stand up, we can attain the freedom and rights, which are rightfully ours. Please help in our struggle for freedom and rights. As our leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has said, “Please use your liberty to promote ours.”

Ko Aung is a former political prisoner in Burma who now has full refugee status in Britain.

¹ “Poun san” refers to the regulations in Burmese prisons, which include different physical positions that prisoners have to adopt at various times. The main position is sitting cross-legged with arms straightened out and both fists on knees, holding the body absolutely vertical with the face downward. This position is for the counting of prisoners and for inspection by prison officials.