

FRANZISKA BLUM, *Teaching Democracy. The Program and Practice of Aung San Suu Kyi's Concept of People's Education*. Berlin: regiospectra, 2011. 112 pages, €18.90. ISBN 978-3-940132-27-7

In the general election held in Myanmar in November 2015, the political party of Aung San Suu Kyi – Nobel laureate and icon of democracy in Myanmar and beyond – won by a landslide. It was a much clearer victory than expected by many analysts. She could not become president, since this was prohibited by a provision in the constitution, but by creating the tailor-made new position of State Counsellor, she managed to become the de-facto political leader of Myanmar.

This development was spectacular, concluding a transition process that had begun already in 1988, when Aung San Suu Kyi somehow accidentally became a prominent figure of the pro-democracy movement, which won the elections in 1990, even then with a great majority. In those days, Myanmar was perceived as part of the Third Wave of Democratisation (Samuel Huntington) – a worldwide trend which reached its climax in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the countries of the socialist bloc, as well as South Africa and many more countries adopted liberal democratic systems. However, in contrast to the worldwide trend, the Myanmar military, by placing Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, managed to maintain a firm grip on power.

This is why the delayed political victory of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2015 is no less important than the end of the authoritarian socialist one-party systems or the end of Apartheid in South Africa. It fulfils Suu Kyi's life mission and places her on a par with charismatic leaders such as Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi, who shaped the development of their countries with their political visions: Nelson Mandela, by taking up the idea of *Ubuntu* (African Humanism) and inspiring the idea of a Rainbow Nation, and Gandhi with his concept of non-violence and *Swaraj* (Self-Governance).

Unlike these leaders, however, Aung San Suu Kyi is not connected with any specific political vision or political programme. Although “democracy” – vaguely defined – has been a buzzword in the political discourse in Myanmar for several decades, the exact political vision of the icon of democracy remains largely unknown. This is why Franziska Blum's publication of Suu Kyi's speeches on democracy, some of which were delivered over the fence of her house at University Avenue in Yangon during the time of her house arrest, is so important and revealing. Much as Nelson Mandela's political persuasions, his vision of human dignity were shaped by his decades in prison, the house arrest of Suu Kyi, and her political activities during the time of military authoritarianism, surely helped to shape her strategy and vision.

We owe our access to Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches to a coincidence. During a conference at the centre of Myanmar studies in DeKalb, Illinois, Hans-Bernd Zöllner, historian and, until recently, one of the few and most active proponents of Myanmar studies in Germany, came across a collection of her speeches attached to a book published in Japan. These speeches were then translated by

Ko Ko Thett, a translator of Burmese literature with training in political science, who happened to be among the audience when the speeches were given, before being exiled to Finland. These speeches laid the foundation for the present book by Franziska Blum, which was submitted as a thesis in Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Passau and consists of an introduction, interpretation and edition of the speeches. This entire endeavour deserves recognition for providing access to these historical documents to a Western audience for the first time.

Beyond that, the publication is also a historical document in its own right. The manner in which these documents came to light reveals much about the deplorable state of Myanmar studies in the years just before the opening of the country in 2011. Lacking representation at the university level, Myanmar studies in Germany were reduced to the private initiative of a few committed scholars. Only with the surge in interest following the political opening in 2011 did new resources finally become available.

When we read the book today, five years after publication, it reveals another shade of historic meaning. The opening of Myanmar, the belated establishment of a new democracy after years of military dominance, is acclaimed as one of the big successes of US-American foreign policy under President Barack Obama. However, at the very same time, democracy seems to be under pressure globally and we are witnessing the re-establishment of authoritarian regimes. It looks as if, in the foreseeable future, Myanmar – having finally, belatedly joined the Third Wave of Democracy – may be the last country to be counted like this. What's more, with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, the once central and most important guarantor of liberal democracy is in danger of sliding into an authoritarian direction itself.

According to Franziska Blum's analysis, the main message of Aung San Suu Kyi is that democratisation depends on political education. This is a noble message – but rather than being a vision, I would argue that it reveals a lack of concepts. In development cooperation programmes, too, the call for better education is a one-size-fits-all solution whenever a problem proves to be too difficult to be tackled directly. In the case of political education, this appeal is particularly unsatisfactory, since it is meaningless unless we talk about the content of the education programme as well.

Certainly, no one is in a position to blame Aung San Suu Kyi for this lack of concepts during her time under house arrest. The democratic awakening had collapsed; the military was firmly in power. Under these circumstances, her perseverance – sometimes deemed stubbornness – was her greatest achievement. Against the background of the worldwide crisis of democracy, however, we cannot afford not to have a clearer vision.

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