

The Need for Dialogue

On 14 February 1994 Aung San Suu Kyi received her first visitors outside her immediate family during all the years of her incarceration. The following are excerpts from the conversation she held with Bill Richardson, Democrat Congressman from New Mexico, Jehan Raheem, Resident Representative of the UNDP in Rangoon, and Philip Shenon of the New York Times. To date, the only other meetings allowed her since then have been with U Rewata Dhamma, a Burmese Buddhist abbot resident in the United Kingdom, and two well-publicized meetings with leaders of the SLORC in September and October 1994

RICHARDSON: What do you see as the prospects for a national reconciliation?

ASSK: This is precisely why I've always asked for dialogue. You have to work out the terms and conditions under which national reconciliation can be brought about. If the SLORC refuses to talk, how can they bring about national reconciliation?

RICHARDSON: My view is that General Khin Nyunt should talk to you.

ASSK: I've always said he should talk to me . . .

RICHARDSON: I think the key . . . to democratic change in Burma is a dialogue between you and Khin Nyunt . . .

ASSK: I think I would rather put it as between the SLORC and the NLD, or the democratic forces, because I'm not in favour of promoting any kind of personality cult or personality politics. This is something we've got to avoid from the very beginning.

When we set up a democracy we want to see a democracy which is based on solid principles, not on any personalities. You will say, 'but this is what happens all over Asia,' but [there's] no reason why we can't change that, why we shouldn't *try* to change that . . . I'm only human and of *course* I like it when people care for me. But it's also rather worrying. I would like people to think of the democracy movement as a whole, not just as me. Just releasing me tomorrow is not going to do any good if the attitude of SLORC does not change . . . Whatever they do to me, that's between them and me. I can take it. What is more important is what they are doing to the country. And national reconciliation doesn't just mean reconciliation between two people — I don't accept that at all. It's a reconciliation between different ideas . . . What we need is a spiritual *and* intellectual reconciliation . . . I've always said that the only answer to Burma's problems is dialogue . . . I'm ready at any time, but they [SLORC] seem not terribly keen. And I wonder why.

RICHARDSON: The SLORC did say that during the period 1992-93 you rebuffed them on a dialogue.

ASSK: I must make it quite clear that they made *no moves* to have a dialogue of any kind. There were indications that they would quite like to negotiate with me on the terms under which I would leave Burma. That's not what I would call dialogue. And that's not what I would call negotiation . . .

RICHARDSON: They told me when I was here in August. . .

ASSK: I believe they told a Japanese delegation about it as well . . . [the] 92-93 period was when they allowed my family to come and when they were quite nice to me. And there were indications that they would be prepared to negotiate with me . . . on the terms under which I would leave Burma. That is the impression I got. There was never a mention of dialogue. I mentioned dialogue. I said that the only real answer was negotiation and dialogue — it was no use letting some political prisoners free and it was no use letting my family come to see me. In fact I was not keen on the idea of my family coming to see me at all because I felt that I did not want [them to come] until other prisoners had

been released. In the end I did let Michael come, basically to show that I would compromise and I would be flexible. But the SLORC has to understand that flexibility is not the same as weakness. And rigidity doesn't mean strength . . . 'give and take' means 'I give a little, I take a little; you give a little, you take a little.' It doesn't mean 'you give and I take' . . . Also, they should not think that by making my personal circumstances easier for me this would in any way induce me to give up my political convictions. I don't care if they deprive me of all my privileges . . . I was brought a renewal of the detention order in January - for another year . . . The explanation they gave says that under the law under which I was detained, the Central Committee (which I'd never heard of before and which, according to the BBC, nobody else had heard of before either) is the one which decides I'm put away . . . under house arrest without trial for one year. At the end of the year [a] Council of Ministers . . . [is] allowed to extend this for three years. Then they changed the law to make it a total of five years. And then they said it means a total of five years from the time that the Council of Ministers extends my period of detention . . . I explained to [them] that, under all existing norms of international justice, when you say . . . a *maximum* of five years, you do count it from the day on which you're put under arrest . . . I said that [they] had better not go on pushing this because it's very exhausting for [them] to go on lying to me all the time.

RICHARDSON: What message would you want me to take back to President Clinton?

ASSK: We would like a clear-cut policy on Burma. If you want to support a movement which has been attacked on all sides within the country . . . you have to be very strong and clear.

RICHARDSON: Do you think it's [US policy on Burma] been strong enough?

ASSK: I think the United States has not been very clear-cut — I think it's an expression which the Senate used? . . . I think in the resolution they asked for a more clear-cut policy on Burma and I think I endorse that. A more clear-cut policy on Burma, in favour of the movement

for democracy if you please -just to make it quite clear what I mean!
 RICHARDSON: Is there any message for the international community ... that you would like to convey?

ASSK: If I had to give one single message to the international community it would be to remind them that the success of any economic or political system is confidence. And without confidence, nothing will work. That means confidence in the government and in the people, confidence between the business sector and the government and the public sector ... It's no use setting up a National Convention if nobody has any confidence in it. It's not going to solve any problems. No economic measure which cannot win the confidence of the people [is] going to work in the long term ... I don't think that trade and other economic measures will lead to any real progress if there's no confidence. Confidence is the most important item for the success of any policy, whether it's economic or whether it's political. And of course, when you come down to it, there is a need for confidence between those who want democracy and those who don't. We've got to learn that people have different ideas, but that doesn't mean that we can't coexist. We've just got to agree to differ, for the sake of the country.

SHENON: On [the] questions of economic assistance and trade ... how should the world treat Burma? At this point?

ASSK: Of course, you are probably thinking of sanctions, aren't you? ... Well, there have always been two schools of thought about sanctions. Some would say they only harm the people; they don't harm the government against which they are directed. I don't think this controversy has ever been fully resolved and certainly I would not like anything that *harms* the people. But then ... is whatever trade [that is] going on really helping the people or is it simply helping the government to dig its heels in? This is the question that has to be asked. Of course people say, 'first, economic progress; then democratization', and I have to ask, 'which examples are you giving?' ... If you're thinking of the ASEAN countries, the pattern of the development is very, very different from that of Burma. And ... the *crucial* thing is

confidence. For example, Indonesia, which is currently the country with which people are comparing Burma: the conditions under which Suharto came into power are very, very different from the conditions under which the SLORC came into power. One of the reasons why confidence is at such a low level in Burma is precisely because of the way in which the elections have been treated. Elections were promised, elections were held, but they [led] nowhere at all. And I think the people feel cheated. A lot of people's confidence is very much shaken ... I don't think this sort of thing happened in all those other countries. There was sufficient confidence in the governments of those ASEAN countries that have made progress. Even from the economic point of view, one of the things which always struck me about Indonesia after 1965 - after Suharto took over - one of the first things he did was to cut down public expenditure and defence expenditure. Total opposite of what's happening in Burma . . .

RICHARDSON: [Japan and Singapore] told me, basically, that they felt United States policy towards Burma is too rough, that the way to get SLORC to do more in the area of human rights is to engage them, trade with them more and give them assistance . . . There are some in the United States who would like to see a carrot-and-stick policy. There's a perception ... in the United States that our policy on Burma is isolation . . .

ASSK: I'm not sure that those who are advocating constructive engagement have made themselves quite clear . . . What's the stick supposed to be? . . . The carrot is, I suppose, the economic help. What's the stick?

RICHARDSON: The stick right now is aid. And there is no aid. Burma gets no World Bank, no Asian Development Bank aid. It gets limited UN aid. It wants foreign investment - there's hardly any. It wants infrastructure. It wants more economic movement here . . . This is traditionally Japan's position on everything: the way you improve relationships anywhere is economically. You give them more aid, you give them more assistance . . . The view is that United States policy is just stick . . .

ASSK: I just want to know what the Japanese think is the stick.

SHENON: They could argue the stick is the fact that there is now no aid, there is now very little trade with Japan. The stick is in place now, would be their argument, I suppose.

ASSK: They seem to be actually advocating the removal of the stick rather than a carrot-and-stick approach. But this is why I'm not quite clear - what do they *mean* by a carrot-and-stick approach? . . . I'm just saying that you can stuff a mule to death with carrots.

RAHEEM: I think it's reform with support. Speaking for others, there is a policy that says reform needs support. There is a price to reform . . . Any time you urge a reform you support it with technical knowledge, training programmes, open opportunities for debate and discussion.

ASSK: In that case, are they talking merely of economic reform?

RAHEEM: NO, a system of reform.

ASSK: Then it's very simple. There have to be conditions. If they need conditional help I'm not arguing about it . . . But it's got to be conditions which are meaningful.

RICHARDSON: What conditions do you think are meaningful?

ASSK: Dialogue . . . Dialogue can lead to a lot of things . . . I want *to* confront them [the SLORC] across a table, and I think that's what they mean when they say I'm confrontational, because I've never asked for any other sort of confrontation at all. It seems to me very strange that they're prepared to talk to armed insurgents but not to legal political parties . . .

RICHARDSON: You would set no preconditions on talking with the SLORC?

ASSK: I don't think anyone should set conditions on talking . . . I would meet with the SLORC at any time . . . People say, 'don't be in such a hurry' . . . but time makes a difference. Look at South Africa . . . This polarization between the Inkatha and the ANC came about in the 1970s, and there have been allegations that the government forces incited a lot of the violence that took place between [them] . . . If those talks between the government and the ANC had taken place ten years earlier, things might not have been so bad . . . Look at Yugoslavia . . . There was no confidence between the various groups in Yugoslavia . . . So, you see, as long as you cannot foster confidence, time is *not* going to heal all wounds.

RICHARDSON: What would be your vision for Burma, if you were in power?

ASSK: It's not *my* vision . . . We must *not* emphasize this personality business. I'm quite happy to be a figurehead . . . [But] I'm not Burma . . . There are a lot of very, very able people in the NLD and in the country . . . I am sure there are still some very able people in the NLD . . . You say, what is my vision of Burma? Well, my vision of Burma is of a country where we can all sort out our problems by trying to understand each other and by talking to each other and by working together. Democracy is not going to solve all our problems. If people think that democracy comes today and everything's fine tomorrow, they're very much mistaken. I've always told them so: democracy is just a beginning. I subscribe to the view that democracy is not perfect but it does happen to be better than other systems. One of the best things about democracy is that practising liberal democracies always think of talking first and fighting as the last resort. Whereas in a lot of cases talking is the last resort, when they've fought themselves to exhaustion and there's nothing else they can do, then they talk. By that time, quite often it's done *so* much harm . . . 'Parliament' comes from the word [in French] 'talk', doesn't it? You *talk*, you talk about your problems, you talk about your differences. It's better to shout at each other than to kill each other. It's not that I like shouting, but it's certainly much better than shooting each other . . . All this thing about democracy the Asian way, democracy the Burmese way - really you don't need to say this, because whatever system you establish in any country it will become unique to that country. American democracy is different from British democracy. It is different from French democracy, and so on. There will always be differences, but that doesn't mean that there are not certain fundamental principles which you *have* to accept. Without these fundamental principles it's not a democracy . . . I dread to think what the 'Burmese way to democracy', which is more or less the same as the 'Burmese way to socialism' [might be like]. One doesn't want just a difference in name. One wants a difference in attitude. And *that* is my vision, of a country where people are *not* afraid to work out

their differences. You don't have to hold back from dialogue because you *think* you're going to lose face in some way, or because you *think* you're not going to be able to come to an agreement. When you go to sit down to discuss something you always go ... with the idea that some kind of agreement is possible. It may take time, it may have to be a compromise, but agreement is always possible as long as the will is there. Sincerity and goodwill are the foundations of confidence, and confidence is the foundation of *any* system that can succeed . . .

SHENON: YOU do see the opportunity for the NLD and the SLORC to reach a peaceful agreement that would lead to a democratic Burma?

ASSK: There is nothing on the side of the NLD that prevents this. It's the *SLORC* which is not taking this up. The NLD has always been prepared to talk to them . . .

SHENON: Well, assuming the dialogue begins [and] some confidence is developed in each others' words, do you see the possibility that there *could* be a democratically oriented government in Burma which *could* include a substantial component of the army? A political prospect?

ASSK: I'm not prepared to discuss it, because that's not for me to say. What I *do* want to make clear is that it's got to be a serious democracy, not a sham. That I would insist on. But of course, everybody in Burma has a role to play in the country and we've never ruled it out . . . We've just got to agree on who plays what role and how. But one group should not impose that on the country.

SHENON: But you can see a situation in which authority - influence - could be shared?

ASSK: I don't think I'm going to talk about shared influence. I want the government of Burma, the political system of Burma, to be based on confidence, and any arrangement that can win the confidence of the people will be acceptable. You could have a nominally and tokenly democratic government, but if the practical fact is such that the people have no confidence in it as a democracy, it's no use at all. You can have a country where

there's no constitution at all, such as Britain, but nevertheless it is a democracy and nobody doubts that it's a democracy, least of all its own people. They have confidence in the fact that the government's a democracy. But in fact there is no document which says, 'these groups have this sort of influence.' And you must accept that it is very difficult for me to make pronouncements on important matters on my own. It's not what I want to do. Whatever is agreed on must be agreed on through discussion and through consensus among ourselves and perhaps, eventually, compromise with other groups . . . I do know that a lot of us in the NLD were very anxious about giving the opposition a proper role, honouring it, respecting it, giving it an effective role. We didn't want a democracy in name only, because that's very bad for a democracy. I think it will keep the NLD on their toes if they have a good opposition . . . Even if there were very few of them [in opposition], we would have made sure that their voice was heard and that their views were listened to and that they were not persecuted . . . All of us in the EC of the NLD are completely agreed on this - the importance of a loyal opposition, loyal to the nation. It is a great pity that the SLORC didn't take the opportunity in 1990 to speak to the NLD and establish a system which could have been acceptable to everybody. I don't know what's happened to the NUP now, but certainly, if the NLD had been allowed to form a government at that time [after the elections] I'm sure that we would have heard a lot more of the NUP's voice than we do. We would have allowed them a very loud voice in government. ([The USDA is a different party.] This is the sort of pseudo-Golkar party, the USDA.)

SHENON: You're uncomfortable with this question of personality. The fact is, you did win the Nobel Prize -

ASSK: Well, that is only because so many Burmese suffered.

SHENON: YOU have become a symbol for many people, and many people around the world know your name where they might not know the names of other Burmese.

ASSK: Well, that's very understandable. It's very much easier to give the Nobel Prize to one person . . . [Others] must have had a

terrible time. Certainly, I wasn't beaten up ... I can read. I've got books here. I may be alone, but I can read, I can listen to the radio.

SHENON: HOW did you find out you'd won the Nobel Prize?

ASSK: On the radio. I heard it on the BBC.

SHENON: Did you have a response when you heard that?

ASSK: Well, I'd heard about it for some time. I think I heard about it first at the time when Vaclav Havel put up my name. Then, the weekend before the announcement of the prize the BBC and VOA [Voice of America] said that I was one of the front runners. So it was not altogether a surprise when the news finally came ...

RICHARDSON: I saw your award ...

ASSK: I've seen a photograph.

SHENON: When you heard it, was there a sense of satisfaction about it, or pleasure?

ASSK: [*Hesitant*] No. I actually wrote to the Nobel Committee very frankly about how I felt, and I felt tremendous humility and tremendous gratitude ... I was very grateful because the prize meant that the movement for democracy would get a lot more recognition. Of course [I felt] humility because I know that other people have suffered a lot more ... other people have died ...

RICHARDSON: What's your main message for me?

ASSK: Well, my main message is that since [you say] that [the SLORC] is refusing nothing, please keep asking ...

RICHARDSON: We [the US Government] have been very strongly for democracy [in Burma] ... The United States feels very strongly about you ... The Secretary of State last week asked Boutros-Gali to appoint a Special Envoy for dealing with the Burma issue. We're very strongly committed. I want to make it clear to you that I have asked the SLORC for your unconditional release ...

ASSK: When I joined the democracy movement I made hardly any promises ... because I don't want to make promises which I'm not able to keep. But one of the things that I did promise was that I would work for the movement for democracy until we

achieved our goal. And I *can't* go back on that promise . . . But I'm prepared to discuss ways and means of bringing about national reconciliation. One of the things that does not bother me is the question of not getting public office. I'm not hungry for public office. That is not a goal of my political work. But I suppose there are certain values which I must continue to uphold. If there's anything they [SLORC] are afraid of . . . if they're really *serious* about thinking that I have some sort of neo-colonialist bogey behind me - they've got to talk to me about that. I don't think they believe that anyway. That's just pure nonsense and I think they know it. . . . My loyalties are to Burma, but I recognize the importance of the international community. I'm not going to abuse other countries, I'm not going to abuse the international community in order to prove my patriotism. It doesn't mean that just because I love my country I hate other people. That doesn't follow at all . . . I'm not at all surprised by [the qualifications for President proposed under the new constitution]. One does not like to think that it's personal vindictiveness but, if it isn't, then what it reflects is a misunderstanding of the notion of democracy and an underestimation of the Burmese people. If they truly believe that somebody who is married to a foreigner . . . would put Burma under the foreign yoke, (i) they don't understand . . . that democracy means you're in office only so long as the people agree that you should be; and (ii) they think that the Burmese people will keep in the position of leadership somebody who doesn't have their interests at heart . . . They [the Burmese people] will only support me as long as they are confident that I have their interests at heart. And if they lose that confidence they won't support me any more. It's very simple . . .