

A Woman of Courage

by Janet Jagan - June 9, 2007

I have often wondered about the man who is soon to become Britain's new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. He has been in the shadows of the flamboyant Tony Blair for ages, but, as time has shown, the British people and the British Labour Party have had enough of Blair and have asked him to depart. Thus, for all his flash and engaging personality, Tony Blair has lost the confidence of those who put him in charge of the UK government.

No doubt his constant support of the Iraq war and his reputation as Bush's "poodle" destroyed whatever qualities that at first had endeared him to the majority of Britons. Former Labour Leader Lord Kinnock described Mr Blair's close association with George Bush as a tragedy. Now the two leaders are sinking into the depths of the morass they created.

A man cannot be judged alone by what he writes, but this can give an insight to the character of the writer. On the eve of Gordon Brown's take over of the Prime Minister's office, he has written a book entitled "Courage: Eight Portraits". One of the eight persons of courage described by Gordon Brown is reviewed in the April 27-May 3, 2007 issue of the British newspaper the Guardian, carrying the headline "A Woman of Courage." It's all about a tiny Burmese woman, Aung San Suu Kyi, opposition leader to Burma's military regime. In this column, I have written about her on three occasions. Like Gordon Brown, I am a great admirer of this outstanding freedom-fighter, probably the most remarkable and courageous woman living in this present world.

Let me quote a paragraph from Gordon Brown's book which gives a good picture of Suu Kyi and tells us something about the writer himself:

"The more I read, the more I wondered at Suu Kyi's great courage, lonely and sustained; it had shaped her life and resulted in her becoming the world's most renowned female prisoner of conscience. Facing one of the most tyrannous regimes in the world, she had demonstrated that courage by living under house arrest for most of the past two decades, far apart from the husband she loved and from her beloved children.

To understand Suu Kyi's courage, we need to understand her devotion to duty – and in particular the influence of her father Aung San who secured Burmese independence from the British in 1948 but who did not live to see that independence come into force – and secondly, and most important of all, the strength of her underlying belief in democracy and human rights. Her courage has shown itself not in the fearlessness of impetuous confrontation, but in strength of character rooted in passionately held beliefs."

Just recently, this Burmese heroine was sentenced by the military government to another year of house arrest. There were worldwide protests, including a resolution from the United Nations (and I cried when I heard that through what I call "sheer stupidity" the Guyana government abstained when the vote was taken!). It was while under house arrest that Suu Kyi had to make a cruel decision, a decision that almost tore her apart. Her husband and two sons were in England and at that time her husband, an academic,

Michael Arls, developed terminal cancer. She sought permission to visit him in England and was informed that if she left she could not return to Burma. She felt she could not take the easy path, leaving her comrades and colleagues forever.

Her husband died without the two seeing each other.

As Gordon Brown put it: "For me, Suu Kyi defines the meaning of courage ... (she) represents the power not of the powerfulls but of the powerless: a woman, a prisoner of conscience up against a state with one of the worst human rights violation records in the world..."

Unlike some former political leaders who have sought refuge in England, Suu Kyi refused to take the easy way out. Only last week, the Thailand government ruled that its deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra could not be involved in politics for five years and dissolved his Party. He and a few other deposed leaders, including Pakistan's former Prime Minister Bhutto, are safely in exile while the Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi refuses to do so. This is the rare behaviour of a genuine person of courage. She and her band of freedom fighters deserve the full support of all those who believe in freedom and democracy.

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