Thinn T. Oo

**Defeat to Victory**

June 9th, 1988  12:00 Noon

It was a beautiful sunny day. The whole campus was crowded with students who were busy with their daily schedules. Some were talking at the corridors, some in the labs, some in the classrooms, some at the cafeteria having lunch and chatting with friends, and some were playing at the gym. It was the routine activities of Rangoon Art & Science University, (R. A. S. U.). I was also having lunch at the cafeteria with friends and listening to music from the radio. Suddenly, the announcer from the radio interrupted the music and announced special news. The government declared that all the 25, 50, and 100 kyats notes of Burmese currency were no longer in use in the whole country. All the students from the cafeteria were surprised by the announcement and looking at each other with unbelievable faces. All surrounded near the cafeteria radio and got silent. Some were checking their purses to make sure they have those kinds of notes. And the whole cafeteria became noisy by talking each other about the announcement. All of the faces looked angry, worried and shocked. In Burma, the majority of the students depend on their parents for the financial aid, not like in U.S. Parents send tuition fees, hostel fees, and monthly allowance in cash because of that lie, all students in the whole country got very angry and intolerant.
because there is no reliable banking system. In Burma, restaurants are eat-first, pay-later system. So students could not pay even for their lunches.

The Burmese government was a military regime. They got the power from the democratic government in 1962 by force. Under their rules, all human rights were prohibited. There was no freedom of speech, writing or press. Students criticized the government policy via the student union. So the government declared the student union as an illegal organization and destroyed the student union building by dynamite in 1963. Many students were killed and arrested. Since then, there was a big conflict between the government and students. After twenty-five years under the military government, the country was ranked as the least developing country, when previously it had been a rich and beautiful country. But the leader of the government General Ne Win became the one of the richest men in the world and a dictator. He is well known as the only government ruled the country by astrology. He loved number 9, and he used it in his all government policy. He changed all the Burmese currency into related with 9-number. So Burma is the only country that has currency notes of 15, 45 & 90. The announcement of the cancellation of currency was not for the sake of the country but for his own fortune, according to his fortune-teller and his astronomy. Because of the government’s latest announcement, the whole country had a very hard time, even the rich people. But all the people did not know what to do.
I got a secret message to attend the student union meeting at 6:00 PM after class. Since 1963, the student union had become an underground organization. The union distributed fliers, pamphlets, poems and articles to organized students and to people against the government. I was one of the organizers of the union. At that meeting, the union decided to hold a demonstration peacefully and openly against the government.

The students from Rangoon Institute of Technology (R. I. T.) started a peaceful demonstration against the government inside their campus. All other university and college students tried to join with them. In the evening, the military government shut down all communications & transportations between the colleges and universities. The R. I. T. campus was surrounded by soldiers and ordered to break up the demonstration, but the students carried on. About 5:00 PM, the government opened fire and arrested several students. In that event, many students were arrested, injured, and one of the student leaders, Phone Maw, was killed. But the government covered the real news and broadcasted a make-up story. In their story, one of the drunken students created a problem with local residents and got fighting and was killed. Because of that lie, all students in the whole country got very angry and intolerant.
That was a main impetus that led to general strike. On the other hands, the arrested students were tortured and raped inside the prison. The union continued peaceful demonstrations and asked for the release of the arrested students, to broadcast the truth, to investigate the crimes inside the prison, to rebuild the union building and to accept the student union organization. The whole country supported the students, especially the writers, poets, artists, lawyers and doctors. One of the famous cartoonist’s satire cartoons alerted the whole country to have a general strike on an exact date. That cartoon was overlooked by the government censor board and appeared in one of the famous magazines.

8-8-88  08:00 A.M

The whole country started a general strike on, 8:00 AM. All the government administration systems were shut down by the strike. It was the biggest event of the country in the last 25 years. Everybody came out off the roads and participated. All organizations participated in the general strike, even elderly people. The rich people supported and donated funds, food and water, medicine, and whatever was necessary. The whole country was very united. The General Ne Win ordered his army to shoot the demonstrators. After ordering to shoot the demonstrators, he resigned and transferred the power to General Sein Lwin.
General Sein Lwin had a bad reputation of killing many students in 1963. He ruled the country by Marshall laws and ordered curfew: people had to be off the street between 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM. After seven days, he got fired. It was one of the shortest presidencies in Burma. He shut down all the education systems. At that time, the whole country was uprising under the leadership of Aung Sun Su Kyi who was the daughter of General Aung San, the national hero assassinated in 1947.

After General Sein Lwin, the next president was Maung Maung. He also lasted 22 days. Then General Saw Maung became the president and started killing and broke up all the demonstration.

On the first day of General Saw Maung's presidency, his army shot the demonstrators who were on a hunger strike inside the compound of the Rangoon General Hospital. At that time, my husband and I were helping the weak and injured demonstrators who needed medical attention because my husband was a final year medical student and one of the leaders of the medical student’s union. About 9:00 AM in the morning, three army trucks suddenly parked in front of the hospital. Soldiers came out of the vehicles and surrounded the hospital compound. Their guns were pointing at the demonstrators. The leader of the soldiers announced with an amplifier to break up the hunger strike or they would shoot. The student leaders and people requested not to shoot. Doctors, nurses and medical staff also requested and warned the soldiers not to shoot inside the hospital compound.
according to Geneva Convention. Red Cross organization members also waved their flags and requested. But unfortunately the soldiers seemed not to understand what we were requesting about. Actually, they were not Burmese. They were of different ethnic backgrounds. Most of the soldiers in the country were uneducated. They could not read and write very well, and they had very limited knowledge. What they were trained to do was to obey the orders strictly. The military government took this advantage. Soldiers were told that outsiders had invaded the country and were trying to break up the nation, and they were wearing white shirts, green skirts, red bandanas on their head and some were wearing masks. White shirt and green skirt are our country national school uniform. Students covered their face with mask not to be recognized by military intelligence. At about 9:30 AM, despite people requesting them not to shoot, they opened fire. The whole hospital compound was chaotic. The smell of gunpowder, blood, and smoke were everywhere. People were shouting and running in all directions. Under the general Saw Maung government, thousands of people were killed and arrested. Thousands of students and people left the country and entered the jungles between Thailand and Burma’s border. The government continued to arrest the demonstrators, their supporters, followers, and family members. They suppressed the whole country. The whole country was in trouble. I also faced with a big change in my life. My education was ended. Some of my friends were killed, some
were arrested, some were lost, and others were in the jungle. My family was interrogated all the time.

The military government promised to hold an election in the following year and allowed to form political parties. My husband joined with National League for Democracy party (N.L.D) that was led by Aung San Su Kyi.

5-27-1990

The first election for a democratic government was hold in the whole country. The N.L.D party won over 90% of the landscape of the country. But the military government did not transfer the power to the winning party and arrested the leaders of the party including Aung San Su Kyi. The United Nation and other world’s leaders criticized the military government and some countries took economic sanction. So, the military government tried to break up the N.L.D party and started arresting, torturing the party members within five years. My husband become endangered and left the country to avoid the arrest and torture. Since then, my husband and I were separated for five years. My life was upside down. My career to be a lawyer was destroyed. My life was a nightmare. It was a very hard time in my life. My husband traveled around the world: Thailand, Singapore, Japan, U.K, and finally U.S. He realized the United States was the only country in the world that fully practiced the human rights, so he decided to settle in the State and apply for political asylum. After the U.S. government
granted him asylum, we had the hope to reunion again. A few months later, the Immigration and Naturalization Service issued a visa for us. My daughter and I came to the United States. Now our family has reunited here, and we are trying to begin our lives again.

02-11-2002

After living in the U.S. one year and having a taste of the democracy and human rights, I feel sorry for my people who cannot get the human rights, who were killed for democracy, and who were arrested and tortured by their government. My desire to get democracy for my country is stronger than before, and I am devoted to doing everything to support my country as much as possible.