

## **Interview: “Without inner freedom you can achieve nothing”**

*Irrawaddy Correspondent Min Zin<sup>1</sup>*  
*2001 Interview*  
*with*  
*Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic*  
*on the Burma Crisis*

To mark the tenth anniversary of Aung San Suu Kyi receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic agreed to share his views on her accomplishments, as well as on the current situation in Burma, with *Irrawaddy* readers. In this exclusive interview, conducted via e-mail with *Irrawaddy* correspondent Min Zin, President Havel expresses his agreement with Aung San Suu Kyi's belief that the struggle for democracy needs to be "a movement very much of the spirit", and urges Burmese "to begin thinking not only about changes but also about what will come afterwards."

**QUESTION:** In 1991, you decided to give Aung San Suu Kyi a chance to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Why did you make this decision?

**ANSWER:** The world's attention was, at that time, still turned to the fall of communism and the democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe. I thought it necessary to draw attention to the fact that not all nations in the world have freed themselves from dictatorship. The main reason, though, was the fact that my friend Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi really did deserve this prize. I hold her, and her non-violent struggle for democracy, in high regard. It is people like her who should be awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, as opposed to presidents and other statesmen whose job it is, after all, to uphold peace, freedom and order.

**Q:** Some policymakers in the West are now saying that it is time to consider the "constructive engagement" approach taken by Asian countries towards Burma. What do you think of the idea of "engaging" with the Burmese military regime

**A:** I think that the position of most Western governments remains unchanged. The US Congress passed a resolution on the situation in Burma recently; also the European Union

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confirmed all its measures, which the Czech Republic joined as an associate member and candidate country. Of course, this does not a priori rule out a discussion about specific and controlled humanitarian aid, e.g. in the fight against AIDS, etc. I am inclined toward the ongoing dialogue with the government, mediated by the special envoy Razali Ismail, and the Czech Republic also supports the International Labor Organization missions.

**Q:** Political talks have been taking place between Aung San Suu Kyi and the military for more than a year now. Despite a lack of substantial progress, some are suggesting that it is time to "reward" the regime for participating in this dialogue. Do you think this is a good time to begin a partial lifting of sanctions?

**A:** Naturally, it is too early to assess the results, if any. What is relevant is how Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi herself, and other opposition democratic forces, assess the situation as to whether, from their point of view, there has really been any substantial progress. We must attentively listen to the voices of democratic representatives of all nations of Myanmar and, on that basis, from the viewpoint of all people of Burma, analyze the situation. Should there be some substantial progress and tangible results, and if some partial moderation of the measures were to support this trend, then I am inclined to consider this step. I should also add that, within the existing measures, we maintain standard and correct diplomatic relations with the Burmese government, we inform them about our opinions openly, as do other democratic countries.

**Q:** The concept of power sharing between the oppressor and the oppressed has been a very contentious issue in many countries undergoing transitions to democracy. Do you feel that power sharing can lead to genuine national reconciliation?

**A:** It is up to the people of Burma to choose what should be the path leading them toward free and democratic elections. In Czechoslovakia, after November 1989, we formed, on the basis of a consensus of the majority of political forces and as a result of the dialogue with the then ruling power-holders, a government of National Unity which led the country to free elections after a period of six months. However, I am not saying that this is some universally valid, or the only possible procedure.

**Q:** Some scholars argue that the military is the only institution in Burma capable of maintaining stability in the face of serious ethnic and social conflicts. They therefore argue that Burma should proceed slowly, rather than taking the radical step of completely dismantling military rule. Can you comment on this?

**A:** Many democratic countries have armies that play an important part in the systems of these countries, but here they are always under the supervision of elected political representatives. In our country the army is gradually regaining respect by participating in different peace missions, at present for example in the Balkans or in Afghanistan; the army is involved in public life, helps communities, deals with natural disasters, etc. The Czech army fulfills its functions, serves society and the state, to the goals of which it is subjected on the basis of principles of democratic control. What is unacceptable is when a military which partially creates social and ethnic problems by its actions argues that it is the only entity capable of solving them.

**Q:** Aung San Suu Kyi once said that in order for the Burmese democracy movement to succeed, it needed to be "a movement very much of the spirit". Do you agree that democracy can only be achieved if there is faith in the possibility of real freedom? Or do you feel that other circumstances, such as changes in the global order (e.g., economic trends), are capable of ending Burma's cycle of repression and violence?

**A:** I am convinced that without inner freedom you can achieve nothing. I agree with Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, and I admire her unfailing efforts to bring about a peaceful change in her country.

I have, many times in the past, attempted to reflect on our historical experience with the totalitarian regime and, again and again, I would come to the conclusion that, in the long run, only that can be politically successful what is, first of all—before it assumes any political shape—a good answer to elementary moral dilemmas of our time or an expression of respect for the imperatives of moral order. It is a very strong realization that politics can be meaningful only if it is preceded by conscience.

I am not saying this as a moralist who wants to preach to people and politicians or present himself as a shining example. Absolutely not. I am saying this only and exclusively as an

observer, as a man who came to see that ethical conduct brings about positive reaction in the future.

Of course, it often leads to suffering, and one can hardly say that it always bears quick and visible positive results. Certainly I do not have to explain that to you, those of you whose life of suffering in your own country brought you to exile and for those who suffered and died for freedom. Ethical conduct is effective not only to individuals that might suffer but, on the other hand, also to those who are inwardly free and are, therefore, happy; but it is especially effective for society in which a multitude of lives, which have experienced ethical conduct, merge into something that you could call good moral environment, or standard, or repeatedly renewed moral tradition, or equipment, which sooner or later, must turn to common benefit.

**Q:** Some Asian governments argue that the Asian emphasis on social duty rather than individual rights means that Western-style democracy is inconsistent with "Asian values". What are your views on this argument?

**A:** I simply believe that the desire for freedom, democracy and a dignified life is inherent to all humankind, that the idea of human rights and freedoms must be an indelible part of each meaningful social organization, both regionally and globally. To earnestly respect ourselves and our neighbors—and thus respect also their rights—I would not say that this principle is in any way contrary to traditional Asian humility, politeness and selflessness. What matters is a respect for each unique human being, and for their freedoms and inseparable rights, as well as the rule of law and the equality of all citizens before law, the principle that all power comes from the people, all of these are the ideological essence of a modern democracy, often called, with inaccuracy, Western. I do think that some values really are universal. A discussion about such values is necessary, and it is the only way to overcome differences in understanding them. Last but not least, it also depends on who actually defines these "traditional Asian values" or any other moral imperatives.

**Q:** The Burmese people have become rather passive in their desire for democracy. As an advocate of "power for the powerless", what do you feel the Burmese people can do to ensure that our country achieves democracy?

**A:** I know that the present situation is hard for many Burmese people and it is therefore difficult to advise. I believe in your freedom, just as I believed in our freedom, and very often it

was necessary to encourage the last bit of dissipating hope (meaning that Czechs are in no way a warrior nation willing to make sacrifices...) And, when Burma is free, it will also need free—and here I mean inwardly free— citizens who are capable of building new democratic structures. It is now the time to begin thinking not only about changes but also about what will come afterwards. Otherwise, the exhilaration that comes with changes will be followed by frustration.