



2024

*XXIXnd Ludovic-Trarieux International-Human
Rights Prize*



" IT WAS NOT ONLY
THE SINGLE CAUSE OF A MAN
WHICH WAS TO BE DEFENDED,
BUT BEHIND THIS CAUSE,
LAW, JUSTICE,
HUMANITY "



Ywet Nu Aung was sentenced to 15 years in prison under the regime forced labor by a court controlled by the military junta for having represented National League for Democracy NLD's leaders detained after the military coup on February and for allegedly providing financial support of 300,000 kyats, or approximately \$140, to the Mandalay People's Defense Force(PDF).

Prize Winning Ceremony
of the XXIXnd Ludovic-Trarieux International-Human Rights
Prize 2024



October 18th, 2024
CAMERA DEI DEPUTATI
Sala Mappamondo
Palazzo Montecitorio



Mrs Laura BOLDINI, former President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and current President of the Standing Committee on Human Rights in the World presents the XXIXnd Ludovic-Trarieux International-Human Rights Prize in the hands of Mr. AUNG MYO MIN, Minister of Human Rights of the Burmese National Unity Government (NUG) in exile.

*Speech by Mr. Bertrand FAVREAU,
President of the Jury of the Prize*

“In the shadow of a pagoda...”



« Should we believe in fate? Burma, impossible democracy? 2008, 2024...

For us, the discovery of the truth of the “Land of a thousand pagodas” had begun precisely in the shadow of a sacred pagoda. It was at the time of our first Burmese winner of this prize. Already, under another dictatorship, which was perhaps the same.

Already, we had not been able to place the prize in the hands of the winner. Or rather, we had first presented it to him, in his absence, right here, in Rome, at the Senate on October 22, 2008, 16 years ago, almost to the day. Mrs. Emma Bonino, Vice-President of the Senate, had, like us, had to resolve to celebrate an absent winner, this lawyer from Pegu,

Aye Mynt sentenced to life imprisonment for having wanted to defend workers by brandishing the texts of the International Labor Organization. Later he was pardoned ... But no one had given up. And our late President Mario Lana had not feared to take the road to Myanmar to go and meet the prevented winner. It was in the shade of a pagoda, during a meeting that could only seem insignificant or anonymous to the crowd of indifferent passers-by, that President Lana had been able and wanted to meet him and give him, in person and free of charge, in a fraternal embrace the medal and parchment of the 13th prize, the same ones that Mrs. President Laura Boldrini agreed to give today to an absent Burmese winner.

Impossible democracy? No, it is not the obsessive Western dream that some would like to see, an ignorant or even contemptuous chimera of the deep soul of each people, that others or the same people would like to see. No one has ever wanted anything other than what the people of Burma want. And they wanted it. Because this wish expressed by the people, it came about through the people, in 2011.

Imperfect hope perhaps Incomplete experience no doubt. Insufficient renaissance, of course. It will not have lasted 10 years. But yet it is the people of Burma who have chosen themselves to live together their dream of national unity and freedom, and not a blind preference of Western observers, always ethnocentric, who imposed it or decided it. And this is so true that he decided it with his full free choice again in the 2020 elections.

What the people did not want, however, was the return of fatality, this black veil that fell again after 10 years of light, sometimes flickering, but always sparkling in the face of the blindness of darkness.

February 1, 2021: here are the old demons back and taking over the country. And these plural demons have a name. A name in the singular: the junta.

Since then, more and more mass killings, cases of torture, rapes, extrajudicial executions and arbitrary arrests by the Burmese junta army have been reported every day. Fourteen days ago, on October 4, 2024, a report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights revealed that nearly 27,400 people had been arrested since the coup, and that arrests have been on the rise since the introduction of mandatory conscription by the army in February 2024. In 2023: more than 1,600 people were sentenced to prison terms or forced labor, or even the death penalty. Credible sources tell us that since the coup, at least 1,853 people have died in custody, including 88 children and 125 women... Most of them after being subjected to abusive interrogation, ill-treatment in custody, or denial of timely medical care. Such crimes, in fact, have long been committed by the Burmese military against ethnic minority communities. Women in areas where the military has pursued a scorched earth policy have been subjected to rape, torture, and murder. The living conditions of the Rohingya have continued to deteriorate – in Rakhine State. In 2023, nearly 5,000 Rohingya have undertaken perilous boat journeys in search of refuge. Speeches are in vain and no words will convey the daily horror that strikes all these ordinary heroes that we do not even know we are. However, there are some whose repression has not succeeded in crushing the hopes of freedom in Burma.

"They shoot us in the head, but they do not know that the revolution is in the heart," wrote a Burmese poet in the face of this ordeal. This poet was called Zaw Tun, but he is only known by his pen name: Khet Thi. Barely a month after the coup d'état - it was May 9, 2021 - a hundred police and military officers surrounded his house. "They threatened to take a family member if he did not surrender," said his wife, Ma Chaw Su. To save them, he surrendered. The next day, the military asked Ma Chaw Su to come and collect her husband's body. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) is adamant that he died "after being tortured" ... His organs had been removed". The junta does not like poets whose "verses are hordes of screaming children", but it fears lawyers more, whose *raison d'être* it would like to suppress... A year later, on June 8, 2022, junta soldiers came to arrest Phyu Phyu Khaing, a 29-year-old lawyer, in Ohn Chaw village, Patheingyi township. They were in possession of a denunciation from their informants who claimed that she belonged to the groups of lawyers who opposed the military junta and that she financially supported members of the People's Defense Forces (PDF). When they discovered that she had fled before their arrival, they abducted her brother and two sisters. After four days of disappearance, on June 12 With no news from his family members, Phyu Phyu Khaing preferred to commit suicide by taking pesticides.

Ywet Nu Aung, targeted by the same denunciation and the same accusations, decided to confront these soldiers disguised as judges. For her, it would have been 15 years in prison with forced labor in Obo prison. Because, in this country, there are lawyers who strive to defend against injustice. Since 2011, they had believed in the reign of the rule of law in its universal dimension. Created in 2014, the Independent Lawyers Association of Myanmar (abbreviated ILAM) operated democratically. Several lawyers specializing in human rights had been elected to it.

The law on the Bar Council had been amended to allow - for the first time since 1989 - the organization of elections to the Myanmar Bar Council. In short, there was a bar. But the junta imposed many limitations and deprived the victims of an arbitrary accusation of their right to defend themselves during regular procedures. Moreover, it is their lawyers who are being imprisoned.

How many of them are there, in truth? No one will ever know since we cannot know and those who know will never say. Several dozen in the first few months, nearly 50 three years later, perhaps a hundred today? Lawyers, it is true, are so easy to arrest. It is not even useful to look for them or go to their homes. All you have to do is go to the hearings of the junta's courts, in particular these "special courts", closed inside the prisons, in order to speed up the processing of politically sensitive cases. Since the dark 1st of February, this is where these dozens of new lawyers have continued to go to defend people subjected to arbitrary decisions, reinforcing their combative ardour in line with the increase in arrests, despite the ban on them communicating in private or speaking with their clients before the hearings. And above all, despite the threats and arbitrary arrests that come to hit them.

Thus, these places of justice have become fatal traps where one only has to come and wait for the lawyers to be able to lock them up in turn. This often happens as soon as they arrive at the hearings where political detainees are tried. And if the client is not already detained, the cost of the net is then double. The client is arrested at the same time as his lawyer.

Since the first day, Ywet Nu Aung has been at the forefront. She defended the leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in Mandalay, notably Win Htein. It was after a hearing at Obo prison where she was defending the former chief minister of the Mandalay region, Zaw Myint Maung, that the police raided her office on the night of April 28, 2022, early in the morning of the next day. But Ywet Nu Aung is not only a circumstantial and sacrificial victim of improbable cycles or cruel twists of history. A commitment, as resolute as it is stubborn, like her now tragic destiny, had preceded this ordeal and had already given the true measure of her courage.

Ywet Nu Aung is first and foremost a lawyer in the fullness of her essence. This was her first vocation in Mandalay. It is in this capacity that she revealed herself to the eyes of the women and men of her country and beyond. She chose to lead her first battles for demanding clients: tolerance and human dignity, especially those of women in a country where so many things have always been allowed with impunity to the soldiery.

Is it not revealing that in 2017 Ywet Nu Aung defended Swe Win, the editor-in-chief of Myanmar Now, who had already had to spend seven years in prison for having disseminated documents against the previous junta. It was then necessary to accept incessant harassment from the supporters of the extremist Buddhist monk, Wirathu, so feared for his fanatical sermons against Muslims. But even more known especially that year for his apology for the murder of a lawyer. An illustrious lawyer, Ko Ni, whom we have rightly celebrated at the time, and who was cowardly assassinated as he left Rangoon airport in January 2017. However, Ko Ni was doubly famous and doubly hated by many, because he was both a great defender of human rights but also the legal advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi.

For that, Ywet Nu Aung had to endure a permanent campaign of insults and threats from the Buddhist nationalist group Ma Ba Tha. She had to accept facing the hatred of all the fanatics and intolerants who call for the eradication of the other. Without stopping, two years later, she would become the figurehead of the so-called Victoria affair, by defending the family of a very young child who had allegedly been sexually assaulted in a private primary school in Naypyitaw. The affair was certainly serious. It set the country ablaze and thousands of people demonstrated, particularly in Rangoon and Mandalay, shouting "Justice for Victoria", jeering at a police force incapable of catching the culprit but not depriving itself of the identity of the young girl and her parents, in violation of the law on the rights of the child.

Thus it was the exposure to the attacks of those who sometimes despise and castigate the protection of children, women's rights and fear the end of impunity for their actions. Then in 2021, the military returned...

But despite this, her commitment to the freedom of others has never wavered.

Like her, we refuse to believe in this fatality that would strike the ancestral Burmese empire, embedded between India and China, sandwiched between Bangladesh and Thailand for so many centuries. We know only too many countries where the lawyer who would like to exercise his mission in the fullness of his rights and duties has no other choice than prison or exile.

"I don't want to be a hero / I don't want to be a martyr / I don't want to be a coward either." These are still the words of the poet Khet Thi, who proclaimed a few days before his death that the revolution is in the heart.

The shadow of Mario Lana's pagoda still watches over us. But it is to send us a ray of light. No more than it had been previously tarnished by 50 years of dictatorship, this light will not fade. Because we know that it cannot disappear in a country where so many lawyers are determined to go to prison for it.

This is why we thank you, Mr. Minister of Human Rights of the Government of National Unity in exile, for being present among us, as if to ward off this supposed fatality to which some would like to abandon Burma.

Aung San Suu Kyi herself said: "The only real prison is fear and the only real freedom is to free yourself from fear". And she added: "You should never let your fears prevent you from doing what you know is right".

Like the poet, Ywet Nu Aung is indeed a "Heroine" against her will. Like him, she did not want to be a coward. She chose to be fair. This is probably why she invites us to see life through the prism of courage and shows us this path that allows us to become better. No fatality! At the same time, she shows us that she opens the way to the possible.

It is with pride heightened by hope that we are all here at this moment particularly honored that Mrs. Laura Boldrini has agreed to place in your hands this prize that illustrates our admiration for the fight of all Burmese people at the same time as that of this absent person, who has never been afraid to know and especially to say what is right.

Waiting for a future day perhaps... in the shadow of a pagoda..."

Bertrand Favreau



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