

Min Ko Naing



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Min Ko Naing". The signature is stylized and fluid.

Democracy Advocate

Min Ko Naing is a leading democracy activist and dissident from Myanmar. He spent most of the years imprisoned by the state for his opposition activities. The New York Times has described as Burma's most influential opposition figure after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In 2012, he was announced the winner of an award from the US National Endowment for Democracy. He is the founder and leader of The Generation Peace & Open Society.



Min Ko Naing and the Democratic Future of Burma

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For over fifty years, the Burmese people have struggled to break free from repressive rule. Their continuing and growing frustration would eventually boil over into mass demonstrations against their military rulers. Time again and again, whether it was in 1988 or the monk-led Saffron Revolution of 2007, the people of Burma would rise up peacefully to show their dissatisfaction only to be met with brutal violence by the military as it attempted to quell these popular uprisings. This frustration grew even stronger in Burma's ethnic areas where both armed groups and nascent civil society organizations began to push for varying forms of self-rule, autonomy, and federalism.

Although Aung San Suu Kyi, President Thein Sein, Speaker of the House Shwe Mann, a change in U.S. policy, and numerous other factors are often credited with bringing about significant political change in Burma over the past year, one element has been consistently left out of these discussions - the role of the Burmese people in sustaining and driving the demand for reform.

The calls for change from the people of Burma continually and consistently increased the pressure on the military to reform. Through political organizing and civic activism, human rights documentation, and efforts at inter-ethnic cooperation, the democracy movement provided evidence to both the domestic population and the international community of the ongoing repression of the military as well as the enduring thirst for freedom of the Burmese people. And, with every mass arrest, office raid, and long prison sentence, the resilience of the democracy movement only grew stronger.

No one person personifies this more than Min Ko Naing, a former political prisoner and one of the most influential opposition leaders in the country. He was the chairman of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) and a leader of the pro-democracy protests in 1988 and the protests that he initiated in 2007 eventually led to the Saffron Revolution. Min Ko Naing spent much of the last 20 years imprisoned by the state for his activities, and was released on January 13, 2012 in a mass presidential amnesty.

Upon his release, he immediately returned to campaigning for democracy and peace in the country. He and his colleagues established the 88 Generation (Peace and Open Society), which has become one of the leading civil society organizations in Burma.

Although now more willing to cooperate with the new government, Min Ko Naing also continues to raise his voice when he feels it is necessary. In September 2012, the National Endowment for Democracy presented its annual Democracy Award to the democracy movement in Burma for its courage, dedication to the principles of democracy and human rights, and long-term commitment to bring about a democratic future for the people of Burma. Standing in solidarity with his colleagues who had yet to be permitted to travel, Min Ko Naing, one of the award's recipients, chose to postpone his first trip to the U.S. until all his colleagues had received their own passports.

Furthermore, on March 20, deadly anti-Muslim riots broke out across the country after a dispute in a gold store in Meikhtila in central Burma spiraled out of control. In the violence that ensued, 43 people were killed, 13,000 people were displaced, numerous mosques were destroyed, and entire neighborhoods were burned to the ground. Even today, thousands of Muslims are living in make-shift camps because they fear returning to the neighborhoods they lived in for generations.

But even as the government and others watched as the violence spread, on the night that the fighting erupted, Min Ko Naing risked his life and went to Meikhtila to plead for calm. While it took President Thein Sein eight days to appear on national television to try to quiet the situation, Min Ko Naing had already been on the ground, aiding victims and attempting to persuade everyone to put down their arms.

As Burma's democrats use the new political openness to help level the political playing field and build a nascent civil society, they are fortunate that they will be led by people like Min Ko Naing. Although the spirit of the movement is still strong and its reach nationwide, the capacity of the organizations and individuals that make up the prodemocracy movement has been severely limited by years of harassment, repression, and imprisonment.

It will be the focus of these democrats to expand a vibrant, independent civil society that can begin to serve as a check on the still overwhelming power of the government and transition from working in a highly authoritarian environment to a freer but still tenuous situation. During this transition, it will be the people of Burma, led by individuals like Min Ko Naing, not one individual or policy that will determine the democratic future of the country.