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Ko Ko Gyi [Myanmar, Activist]

Ko Ko Gyi

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Gyi, Ko Ko. Ko Ko Gyi [Myanmar, Activist]. (2014). 1-12.

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Interviewee: **KO KO GYI**
Interviewer: Sabrina Chua
Date: 10 Dec 2014
Location: Yangon, Myanmar

00:00:20
[Sabrina Chua](#)

Ko Ko Gyi, thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us here today. I'd like to start back when you were in university, as a student, you were studying International Relations. At that point in time, what did you hope to be?

00:00:35
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Frankly, I have to say (I was) just a common student. My personal expectation is what I would become? Like a diplomat, or a teacher in my own department, that's all. We didn't have any other choice. I think, at that time, if you ask any child, "Hey, what do you want to be? No one will reply, I want to be a politician." This is very natural in our country, but because of the political, social and economic situation, the time of our country pushed us to be politicians.

00:01:27
[Sabrina Chua](#)

What was the changing point for you? When did you decide, "Okay, I want to be a politician?"

00:01:33
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

My own way of thinking is – always thinking what is right, or what is wrong, even as a child. I don't want to (turn a) blind (eye to what is) in front of me... those wrongdoings. I tried to read some of the biographies of Abraham Lincoln or... and then Castro... and Bogyoke Aung San, General Aung San, our national hero. I envy those people who sacrificed for their country. General Aung San is our national hero... so we learned... and then... so very coincidental in our career, he was a student leader during his time. From the student background, just gradually... finally became a national leader. I envy so much about General Aung San.

00:02:36
[Sabrina Chua](#)

Was that what led you to lead a rally in Yangon University in 1988?

00:02:41
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

So actually in 1987, the government announced the de-monetising statement. So people were very frustrated, but they didn't know how to respond. Most of the people strived very hard for their daily earning. The Myanmar currency suddenly became worthless notes. People were very angry, but they didn't know how to respond.

Our classmates were talking about the country's situation. Even though we have plenty of natural resources... and our people, I dare say, are very talented people, they (find it) very easy to learn anything. Although such a country became a least developed country, we cannot accept such a situation.

In 1988, March, the RIT, Rangoon Institute of Technology, and civilians clashed between each other. Then the authorities shut down the universities and colleges and reopened again in June. We tried to re-organise our students to ask for the Students Union and... for the... detained students to be released. Then they shut down the universities and colleges again. We tried to re-organise the different names of the student groups to have an All Burma Federation of Student Unions.

28 August 1988, we held a student meeting at the very exact location of the Student Union building. In 1962, our historic Student Union building (was) demolished by the military government. In 1962, we tried to revitalise our Student Union at that same place. At that meeting, the student conference agreed that I be the Vice-President of the Student Union at that time. So, from then on, we tried to mobilise our people after the "Tetra 8 Movement". We called for the August 8, 1988. 8888. We called for the whole country (to join us) for the "Tetra 8 Revolution".

00:05:18
[Sabrina Chua](#)

But did you think that your pro-democracy activities would have landed you in prison?

00:05:24
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Honestly, at the very beginning we were afraid to spend our lives in prison. This is very natural. But if we cannot move forward, who else will save our country? That's why we encouraged our friends, and each other to go on.

00:05:50
[Sabrina Chua](#)

That's very brave of you. It's a huge sacrifice. Could you maybe talk to us a little bit about your time in prison? How were you treated? Did you have any contact with the outside world?

00:06:06

Ko Ko Gyi

If I retold my prison life, I would take about two decades. [Both laugh]. At the beginning I (was) scared. How to survive in the prison? I was in the solitary confinement. This was for prisoners, who have already been sentenced with the death penalty. In that cell, I was alone. I think back to some of the student leaders, who were sentenced to the death penalty - Tin Maung Oo. Tin Maung Oo was the 1974 student leader. He bravely faced the death sentence. So, I thought about the last day of Tin Maung Oo. Another one was Captain Ohn Kyaw Myint. Captain Ohn Kyaw Myint. He was sentenced for high treason under the Socialist Regime. He also bravely faced the death sentence. Then I (wondered) what I was doing for the... death sentence. Why did they put me in the cell for those death sentence prisoners? Finally, I tried to calm myself down (for) whatever I had to face.

00:07:50

Sabrina Chua

Was there a particular memory of prison that's still very strong in your mind now?

00:07:57

Ko Ko Gyi

Very coincidentally, while I was in prison, my mother passed away. I didn't know in advance. One afternoon, the prison authorities called me, "Hey, you, put on, wear your civilian clothes". This was very strange for me. (They said) "Hey, you, prepare to go out." I was surprised to go along with the authorities. At the gate of the prison, the authorities acknowledged, "Hey, did you know in advance about your mother?"

"No."

"So, today is the funeral procession of your mother."

I was suddenly shocked about the information, but I have already thought about everything that could happen (to) my family, to my property... practically I have (prepared for) such a situation. I tried to calm down, and hold the prison wall for a moment, then (told the prison official), "Okay, I'm ready to come along with you". They brought me to the cemetery, and I paid homage for the last time, to the body of my mother. At that time, very coincidentally, there were iron bars between my legs. Because of the last journey of my mother, they... bring back the iron bars. They tried to get rid of the iron bars. This is only because of my mother. Just the last deed of my mother, how much she loved the elder son - me. She just got rid of the iron bars between my legs.

00:10:29

Sabrina Chua

Did these memories, or these incidents while you were in prison... how did they affect you? Did it maybe strengthen your desire for change, or did it perhaps make you lose heart?

00:10:48

Ko Ko Gyi

As a human being (I was) sometimes frustrated. Sometimes so very lonely (when) I remember my past experiences during my student life., of my friends, of my family... but all the time, I tried to remind myself to never surrender, to try to survive physically and mentally. I always tried to exercise every day before taking my bath, or always tried to meditate in the prison. At that time, we had no chance to hold any piece of paper. This was a severe punishment. But I wanted to learn eagerly more and more. So that's why I secretly tried to take articles from The Times or Newsweek... but always hiding from one place to another.

00:11:56

Sabrina Chua

Do you have any regrets about your activities that led you to prison?

00:12:02

Ko Ko Gyi

No, I never regret. I always try to be proud of my political career. Not only for me. I always encourage the younger generation, the newcomers to the prison, "Hey, never regret. Always try to survive. You need to take care of your health, of your learning". So, if someone knows more about the language, or about some other skills, we'd try to share with each other, and in doing so we tried to survive day by day.

00:12:47

Sabrina Chua

You have said that you've paid the price for your family... like your mother, you were not there to see her on her deathbed. You have sacrificed your youth, you've sacrificed for your society, but you are satisfied with that sacrifice. You have said that before. But why? What do you think your sacrifice has achieved so far?

00:13:10

Ko Ko Gyi

The last time I was released (from) prison, (there) were some changes in our country, whether we liked it or not. The 2008 Constitution and the 2010 elected Parliament and also the government... Some of the media sectors were a little freer than before. These are some of the changes in our country. But we need to

notice that all the political powers, and economic powers are still in the hands of the old guys. It appears that there have been changes in our country, but we try to struggle for more.

00:13:57
[Sabrina Chua](#)

Do you think your time in prison has strengthened your desire for this change? This push for more reforms?

00:14:06
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Even in the prison, we tried to get information (on) what is happening outside. If we had time to discuss this with each other, we always made a discussion. If we were released, what I was going to do, what were we going to do. For some interviews with the media, and with some politicians, I criticised (them). If I were him, what would be my response? This was just practice... before.

00:14:44
[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, you were already practicing in prison for the time that you would be released?

00:14:45
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

[Laughs] In prison, yes.

00:14:49
[Sabrina Chua](#)

But your last prison sentence was sixty-five years.

00:14:52
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Sixty-five years and six months, yes.

00:14:54
[Sabrina Chua](#)

Did you think you'd ever be released?

00:14:57
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

But I have already expected that.

00:14:59

Sabrina Chua

Oh, you knew that they were going to release you before...

00:15:01

Ko Ko Gyi

In 2007, I was arrested again. At that time, the National Convention was still going on. The US (United States) and the EU (European Union) countries made sanctions (against) our country, and also the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) family had silent... secret diplomacy to ask the military government about the seven-steps roadmap... for that reason, they were trying to end the National Convention and to have a constitution by their own way and to hold elections. After the elections, mission accomplished. This is the exit strategy for the previous government. So, the de-facto government transformed to the de-jury government, constitutional government. After that they just tried to show to the international community, also to the local people that "we are changing now". A very easy way is to release the political prisoners. Since they were the constitutional government, so now this is the goodwill of the new government. So that's the first step after the election - for the constitutional government to release the political prisoners.

00:16:30

Sabrina Chua

So, you have been called the political strategist of the movement. Do you agree?

00:16:34

Ko Ko Gyi

I always do whatever I can do. Some other people call me any other names, I don't care. This is the opinion of others. But I always try to make my best.

00:16:52

Sabrina Chua

How do you see your role right now in the pro-democracy movement?

00:16:56

Ko Ko Gyi

I have proudly named myself, our "88 Generation" self, the catalyst. To change from the old substance to the new one. All the time we are thinking [about] what we can fulfill for the sake of our country.

00:17:17

Sabrina Chua

You are working very closely with the government now in terms of talks... civil military relations, things like that. But you have also been appointed on the government commission to investigate the Rakhine situation. How did you feel about that - being part of a government team, essentially the regime that put you in prison? How did you deal with that?

00:17:47

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

To have national reconciliation, we try to make ourselves ready to cooperate with everybody. Not because of our own sentiment, or our emotion. So, that's why we ...not only by myself... Our "88 Generation" is always finding common ground and ways we can cooperate with each other, not only with the government. We visited the Parliament many times, and we talked and discussed with the Union Election Commission also. So that's why we are ready to cooperate with each other, and the political parties, and the armed groups.

00:18:35

[Sabrina Chua](#)

But it must take a very strong person to put aside your feelings, your emotions. After all you spent almost twenty years in prison. That must have taken a toll on you, right? How did you manage to put all those emotions aside, and focus on reconciliation?

00:18:56

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

From the bright side, if we look to the situation, *our own sacrifices are just like investments for our future*. Not only for my personal... I didn't mean for me personally, but for the country, this is the investment.

00:19:15

[Sabrina Chua](#)

But what if your investment didn't pay off? I mean that's the risk, right?

00:19:19

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

[Laugh] Yes. *If we didn't take such a risk, our country cannot change.*

00:19:26

[Sabrina Chua](#)

You have been praised by both sides of the struggle. The opposition politicians and government officials attended your wedding in April. Why do you think you are so well-regarded by both sides?

00:19:38

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

This is partly because of my own attitude. Another part is from the different side of our country. Everybody talks about reconciliation. That's why they will find proper persons, or organisations to make an understanding between each other. That's why I repeatedly talk about the situation. If I have a good relationship with the authorities, some of my activists can misunderstand. "Hey, Ko Ko Gyi, is betraying our cause" or "He is very pleased to deal with the authorities." That's why I always try to make balance in my constituency. Whatever I deal with the authority, I will tell you. Make transparent. This is very important.

00:20:45

[Sabrina Chua](#)

How do you decide when to compromise, and when to stick to your principles?

00:20:51

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

So, there's just a kind of art. To keep my conviction, and at the same time to compromise with each other... We always try to keep our aims and objectives for the long run, but we need to (do this) step by step. Every step we should have progress. But some people are very dogmatic. "If I cannot get the whole objective, I cannot accept." If doing so we cannot make progress for every step.

00:21:34

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, what are your next steps? To form a political party, or to join a political party maybe Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD (National League for Democracy)?

00:21:43

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Easy question. But not so easy to answer. We consider deeply about the situation, so I'm just a little worried about the polarisation with each other. If so, nobody can assure our future. That's why I'm always thinking what we can make go between each other. So, I have a relationship with the government, and also the NLD, and also the Parliament, and also the ethnic group. So, make deal with each other...

00:22:21

[Sabrina Chua](#)

There's many, many different parties, how do you... Is there a constituency, or a group that you feel most close to your heart, your cause?

00:22:35

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Very clear is that my background is the activist background, it's the democratic activist background. I never give up my constituency, but at the same time I will try to deal with the other different opinions, or the different organisations.

00:22:58

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Talking about political leaders in Myanmar, it seems like imprisonment... your time in prison is like a badge of honour for political leaders. It's almost essential for building political credibility. Do you agree?

00:23:13

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Yes, as a politician, public credibility is a major resource. But (it's) not enough to show my prison certificate. For the long run, (the) public will expect how much we can perform for their daily life. As a politician, we need to make service for the public. But now we are talking about the very "literary" words like the Constitution or the PR system, electoral system or federal... Practically, we try to reach the common people, to engage in the daily life.

00:24:05

[Sabrina Chua](#)

What kind of leaders do you think Myanmar wants, and are they the same as the kind of leaders you think that Myanmar needs?

00:24:15

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

In my view. Leaders should have leadership. They have the vision, and they make their vision clear to the public. What they want their country to be for the next ten years, or the next twenty years? The leader should have the interaction between the public and the leader. The policymaking process should be a democratic one.

00:24:52

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Why? Why is democracy so important to you?

00:24:55

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Participation, and (being) responsive (to) each other. But at the same time, (at) such a transitional situation, the leaders should be strong. Strong leadership.

Strong leadership is not the same as (being a) dictator.

00:25:15

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, what do you mean by strong leaders?

00:25:17

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Decisiveness. He or she should be decisive, and take responsibility for...

00:25:24

[Sabrina Chua](#)

His actions.

00:25:25

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

His actions, yes.

00:25:26

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi once said in a meeting with SMU students, that being a good leader doesn't mean doing what is popular, but what they believe is right. Do you agree?

00:25:39

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

This is a very subtle, I think. Leaders try to have a popular support. But at the same time, he or she should not follow, all the time, the followers.

00:26:01

[Sabrina Chua](#)

How do you decide when to follow, and when not to follow?

00:26:23

[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Why those ordinary people choose a person to be a leader? They expect that he, or she may be a good... wiser than the followers. They have... he or she will have a far-sighted vision. They have already expected that (in) someone [for them] to be a leader. So, if he or she cannot fulfill their expectation, he or she cannot survive.

00:26:40
[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, what is your vision for Myanmar then?

00:26:42
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

The fundamental problems of our country are two major points. One is the democracy. Second is the ethnic equality. If we cannot solve those issues, we cannot achieve development. But at the same time, we cannot make development for our country (while) no one can assure democracy.

00:27:07
[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, it's a circle.

00:27:08
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Yes. Politics and economics cannot be separated from each other.

00:27:13
[Sabrina Chua](#)

Why is ethnic inequality so important in development?

00:27:18
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

It came along with our independence. The ethnic problems or ethnic struggles for their equal rights. The political, economic or social... still now. Now the government is trying to have a nationwide ceasefire accord. So again, and again, postpone having a ceasefire agreement. But from the ethnic side, they have experienced such a ceasefire agreement in the past years. This time they just want to make assure, not only the ceasefire agreement... after the ceasefire agreement, they just want to make sure the political dialogue, and the political process. So now, still discussing, negotiating to have a ceasefire.

00:28:18
[Sabrina Chua](#)

Thank you very much Ko Ko Gyi for speaking with us.

00:28:20
[Ko Ko Gyi](#)

Yes, thank you also.

