

# Burmese Visitors Get a Taste of Democracy and Hope

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - July 25, 2014

“I was held for seven years as a political prisoner,” explained the soft-spoken 20-something woman from Burma (also known as Myanmar). “I want to understand freedom in America,” she continued with hopeful eyes and a determined voice, “so I can help people in my country.”

The conversation took place recently in Dallas. We had just met at a reception in the George W. Bush Presidential Center, which was dedicated last year and is housed in a handsome red-brick building on the campus of Southern Methodist University. We were milling about with 17 other emerging Burmese leaders—altogether 11 men and seven women—before a welcome dinner with the 43rd president of the United States and the former first lady.

Despite a loosening of restrictions in recent years, Burma’s authoritarian regime still persecutes minorities, controls broadcast media and much of print media, manages the economy, and keeps tabs on citizens like the visitors to the Bush Presidential Center who work for greater liberty and democracy in their country.

The young men and women—a third of whom had been held as political prisoners—had traveled to Texas from halfway around the world as members of the inaugural class of the Liberty and Leadership Forum, which is part of the Human Freedom Initiative at the Bush Institute, a public policy center within the presidential center. Drawn from the Burmese majority as well as several of the oppressed ethnic minorities within the country, the program participants were devoting three weeks to the intensive study of the principles of liberty, the processes of democratization, and the elements of leadership.

The dinner did not disappoint. George W. and Laura Bush graciously welcomed their brave Burmese guests and bantered easily with them. In remarks toward the end of dinner, Mr. Bush emphasized, as he had during his presidency, that while the principles of freedom are universal, the cultures and circumstances in which freedom is pursued vary from place to place and therefore priorities and pace of reform differ from country to country.

The heart of the program was classroom education. I had the honor of teaching the core curriculum, which dealt with political philosophy. Although most participants had never studied the subject, all seemed to drink in our daily three-hour morning seminars.

Several told me that while they were sure they wanted democracy and freedom, they were not so sure what democracy and freedom were—because their universities don’t teach political science, the regime controls the availability of books, and for decades Burmese politicians

and intellectuals thought that the only significant intellectual source of opposition to the military's grip on the government came from Marxism.

They students were delighted to discover the one simple idea that underlies free societies everywhere—that human beings are by nature free and equal. And they were energized by introduction to the complex of rights, interests, virtues, associations, and institutions that must be woven together—in diverse patterns for diverse societies—to achieve free and democratic self-government.

Naturally, the Burmese had many questions: about basic concepts, about the operation of the American political system, and about the application of the principles of freedom to the challenges they faced back home.

But at first, and despite my routine call for questions, they didn't ask them. Fortunately, a number of participants approached me privately early on to explain that in Burma education consists in rote memorization, and questions—even at the university level—have no place in the classroom. So I was compelled to repeatedly stress that the ultimate aim of education, certainly education in a free society, is to enable students to think for themselves, and that the beginning of thinking for oneself is to identify what is puzzling or incomplete in what has been said and to request reasons and evidence that clarify the matter.

It did not take the Burmese long to catch on. The pleasure of putting a question to the instructor and engaging in disciplined conversation in the classroom never faded from their faces.

To show that the struggle for freedom is also a crucial feature of the American experiment in self-government, we began with Martin Luther King Jr.'s, "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Students were intrigued to learn that King criticized the apathy of white Southern Christian clergy in the face of persistent radical discrimination by appealing to the Christianity he shared with them, and that he sought to defeat racial discrimination not by denouncing America but by invoking the Constitution's promise of freedom and equality for all.

We also read a beautiful essay by Nobel Peace Prize-winning Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, in which she argues for the compatibility of democracy with Buddhist political teaching. Most students were surprised to discover that religion and freedom are not inherently opposite and could be mutually supportive.

Many other fundamental features of the tradition of freedom caught the Burmese by surprise.

They were startled by the idea that arose out of discussions of John Locke and "The Federalist" that it was not democracy pure and simple for which they yearned but a liberal democracy in which government is limited through careful institutional design to prevent it from invading the people's rights.

They were unaware that economic freedom was an essential part of political freedom. But they were keen to study its assumptions and operations. And they certainly brought to Dallas an intuitive feel for it. As one student remarked, while his grandfather knew nothing of free markets, he had a dream of living in a country where he could grow the crops he wanted to grow, sell them for the price that he thought appropriate, and move about from place to place as he pleased.

They were initially baffled by an approach to teaching the principles of economic freedom that included both Adam Smith's exposition and Karl Marx's criticism because presenting both sides of an argument was beyond their experience. But they came around quickly to the idea that one deepens one's understanding by learning competing viewpoints.

And they were fascinated by a notion they encountered in Tocqueville's analysis of civil society—namely, that democracy had disadvantages that its advocates, if they wish to preserve freedom, must take into account. On the last day of class, one woman declared this the most important lesson she had learned.

Learning about freedom and about America of course cannot be confined to the classroom. Most evenings, program participants gathered in their rooms to carry on the day's discussions. In addition, the Bush Institute took them on a five-day trip to Washington that coincided with the Fourth of July weekend and included visits to the National Archives, the Supreme Court, the Capitol, and, not least, a meeting with RCP Washington Bureau Chief Carl Cannon to discuss freedom of the press. And program participants also got out and about in Dallas: They attended a rodeo, dined on Tex-Mex cuisine, went bowling, and sat in the blistering sun to watch a Texas Rangers' ballgame. (Explaining to them the rules of baseball turned out to be considerably more challenging than teaching them the intricacies of the separation of powers.)

As the program was concluding last week, I asked the soft-spoken woman with the hopeful eyes and determined voice whether she was intimidated by the authorities back home. "I have no choice but to fight for freedom," she said firmly. "Thanks to this program," she added with a gentle smile, "I understand better what I am struggling for."

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