

The Struggle for Human Rights in Myanmar

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The non-violent participation of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and Buddhist monks in resistance efforts to advocate for the welfare of Myanmar's people has played an important role in educating the world about human rights violations in the country. In 2007, the monks' peaceful yet determined protests in the city of Yangon were ruthlessly put down by the military forces of Myanmar (also known as Burma), one of the most politically isolated countries worldwide. The government engaged in brutal retaliation against citizens in response to the peaceful protests. This violence was publicized by the international media. Faced with international condemnation, Myanmar's junta released Aung San Suu Kyi from over a decade of house arrest and began to take steps towards democracy.

Myanmar offers an excellent case study for classroom teachers to educate their students about the challenges of resolving human rights abuses and moving a nation towards greater freedom.

Heroism of Buddhist Monks

Myanmar, one of Asia's poorest nations, is struggling to make the transition from a military junta to a democratic state. It is a Buddhist society, in which monks are highly revered. In 2007, after Myanmar's

junta, notoriously brutal and oppressive, raised the price of fuel, monks took to the streets in protest. Since freedom of speech was not a basic right, the monks risked great persecution by demonstrating. The junta rounded up as many as 4,000 monks and relocated them to isolated regions of the country. While the Myanmar government claimed that 10 people were killed in the protests, reports from international human rights groups indicate the number was higher.¹

A United Nations human rights envoy estimated that at least 31 were killed, with several dozen missing.²

Aung San Suu Kyi

Human rights violations in Myanmar have been widely reported by groups such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.³ International leaders such as Hillary Clinton, the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued strong statements condemning the treatment of Myanmar's democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi (whose party won general elections in 1990), and that of other political prisoners in confinement.⁴ In 2010, Suu Kyi was released after 15 years of house arrest by the ruling military junta; by 2012, Suu Kyi had won a seat in parliamentary elections.⁵ Approximately one fourth of the parliament consists of members nominated by the military; the nation's president, Thein Sein, is a former army officer, who was appointed prime minister by the junta in 2007 and served in that position until 2011.

Although the new government has taken steps to bring greater freedoms to the country, and international sanctions have eased, accusations of human rights violations against the Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority, persist.⁶ As Myanmar moves toward a more open society, the newly elected government must find a

Websites

Amnesty International www.amnestyusa.org/

UN News Centre www.un.org/news/

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Plain Language Version,"

www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/plain.asp



Members of the Free Burma Coalition-Philippines hold posters and pictures of Aung San Suu Kyi as they demonstrate in front of the Myanmar embassy in Manila, September 24, 2010. The protesters were commemorating the third anniversary of the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, when barefoot, shaven-headed monks led protests against rising fuel prices, in 2007, which snowballed into the biggest challenge to military rule in nearly two decades.

TEACHING STRATEGIES: Role-Playing Exercise

Once students have organized and examined human rights violations in Myanmar, they can take the information gleaned from their data gathering and analysis and use it to put the government of Myanmar on trial to determine the extent and scope of human rights violations. Through this role-playing exercise, students will develop a formal decision of what steps should be taken by the international community to redress the violations against the people of Myanmar. Students step into the roles of Aung San Suu Kyi, monks, citizens, and lawyers representing Myanmar in order to put the military on trial for human rights violations. This activity provides students with an opportunity to imagine the struggles of people living in this nation. Below is a list of roles and responsibilities for each of the participants:

1. Suu Kyi and Monks—research and develop a solid argument for protesting human rights violations in your nation. Be prepared to provide information about why you chose to risk your life in order to protest human rights violations and what the consequences of your decision were.
2. Citizens of Myanmar—research the history and present situation of Myanmar. Be prepared to explain the

hardships you face as a citizen in your country and give accounts of human rights violations you believe have occurred.

3. Lawyers for Myanmar—research and gather information in order to defend your government’s position on these controversial accusations. Be prepared to argue for the decisions your government has made regarding actions taken against citizens and provide a rationale for any human rights violations you believe are justified or that you believe your country has been falsely accused of.
4. Jurors—research the history and present situation in Myanmar. Be prepared to ask the lawyers questions when further clarification is needed or if contradictory statements are made about the status of human rights violations.

Once the trial has taken place and all parties have had a chance to act out their roles, the jurors deliberate and reach a decision about which human rights violations have occurred and the extent to which Myanmar should be held responsible.

RAFT Writing Prompts

After the conclusion of the lesson, teachers may assign a writing extension using the RAFT model. RAFT (role, audience, format, topic) writing activities allow students to apply knowledge gained after role-playing activities as a formal or informal writing assignment. Fresh in their minds, students use their writing skills and their imagination to create a writing assignment in response to how they felt as participants in the role-playing activity. Writing from the role of Suu Kyi, a monk, or an average Myanmar citizen allows students to develop further insight and multiple perspectives of what living in a repressive country is like. The writing assignment could take the form of a letter to the United Nations, a pamphlet educating others about human rights violations, a letter to the editor of an international newspaper or an undercover report meant to be smuggled out of the country to friends or family. Verbs to use to prompt writing could include: clarify, plead, expose, uncover, proclaim, implicate or incriminate. Examples of RAFT writing prompts for this assignment could include the following:

1. As a citizen of Myanmar, write a letter to the United Nations exposing human rights violations in your country.
2. As a Myanmar monk, write a report to an international newspaper exposing human rights violations in your country.

way to provide political and economic freedoms to all its citizens, including ethnic minorities.

Teaching Strategies

While human rights violations and international responsibility are difficult concepts to broach in the social studies classroom, there are a number of strategies and resources that can assist. Teaching strategies provided in this lesson plan allow students to analyze the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and apply the ideas presented in the document to both historical and present-day violations in Myanmar.⁷ Through the use of a role-playing teaching strategy and guided debriefing questions, students are able to act out the roles of monks and repressed peoples to try and get a sense of the severity of conditions in Myanmar. RAFT writing strategies (see the sidebar with class activities) further facilitate reflections by students on the topic, so that they can meaningfully develop an understanding of the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Internet provides a plethora of websites that track the historical development of oppression in Myanmar. Websites provide students and teachers with access to articles in their databases in addition to timelines and detailed profiles of nations. In tandem with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights document, students and teachers develop a sophisticated picture of how events have unfolded in Myanmar and which human rights violations have occurred. 🌐

Notes

1. BBC World News, “Burmese Monks ‘To Be Sent Away,’” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7022437.stm> (Oct. 1, 2007).
2. BBC World News, “Burma Toll at Least 31, UN Says,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7133239.stm> (Dec. 7, 2007).
3. BBC World News, “Timeline: Burma,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1300082.stm> (accessed September 9, 2012); Anup Shah, “Myanmar (Formerly Burma) and Human Rights,” *Global Issues* (September 06, 2001), www.globalissues.org/article/147/myanmar-formerly-burma-and-human-rights.
4. CNN World News, “Myanmar Junta Returns Suu Kyi to House Arrest,” (August 18, 2009), www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/08/11/myanmar.suuky/index.html.

Debriefing Questions

1. Why is it important that the international community put pressure on countries accused of human rights violations?
2. What strategies should the international community use to insure humane treatment everywhere?
3. If you were a citizen of Myanmar, how would you want the international community to help your people?

5. BBC World News, “Celebrations as Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi Released” (Nov. 14, 2010) www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11751619; Thomas Fuller, “Party Claims Victory of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar,” *The New York Times* (April 1, 2012), www.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/world/asia/myanmar-elections.html?pagewanted=all.
6. CNN, “U.N. Envoy Warns of ‘Serious’ Human Rights Situation in Myanmar,” (August 5, 2012) www.cnn.com/2012/08/05/world/asia/myanmar-human-rights/index.html?iref=allsearch.
7. United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” (New York, NY: 1948), www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/.

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