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**Two women,
two symbols :
Aung San Suu Kyi,
Victoire Ingabire Umehoza**
by MAURO SBOLGI

*Analyses &
Studies*
World and Human Rights



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Since the original version of this document was published in 2011, things evolved differently for the two women.

After her release, Aung San Suu Kyi kept fighting for democracy. She recently was elected as member of parliament and has committed in dialogue with the military regime. By the time we are laying these lines on paper she is ending an international tour, which led her, among other capitals, to Oslo for her speech as 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

As far as Victoire Ingabire Umuhiza is concerned, her ordeal is ongoing in the 'Kigali 1930 maximum prison'. Eventually she decided to stop any collaboration with Rwandan courts given the political nature of her never ending trial. The Attorney General has requested life imprisonment. The Supreme court will soon deliver its sentence. However, she begs us "not to be afraid", and still believes that « together we shall overcome». (TRANSLATOR'S UPDATE NOTE, Brussels, Belgium, June 28, 2012)

We are really lucky, in the Western world, to live in democratic countries that protect freedom of speech and uphold this value in the world. But sometimes one cannot help but ask himself some questions.

This article looks at the parallels between two women imprisoned for expressing ideas opposing the incumbent powers: Aung San Suu Kyi and Victoire Ingabire Umuhiza. Everybody knows Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese opposition leader, Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. However few people know Victoire Ingabire Umuhiza who is already nicknamed "The Rwandan Aung San Suu Kyi" by Wikipedia.

1. WHAT THE TWO WOMEN DO SHARE

Courage

Suu Kyi and Victoire are two symbols of non violent resistance against the military dictatorships that have ravaged their particularly violent respective countries, two extreme models of courage and political heroism, even though both were fully aware that their actions would cause them huge difficulties.

Aung San Suu Kyi was born in 1945 in Burma. Her father, General Aung San, negotiated the independence of his country, acquired in 1947. He was murdered the same year. Suu Kyi grew up in India where her mother was Ambassador, and then studied in England. She is a mother of two children who live in England.

In 1988, when she was 43, she returned to Burma¹ to take care of her sick mother. At this moment a new military junta took power. With friends, she founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) in September 1988. In July 1989 she experienced the house arrest for the first time. This did not prevent her party from winning the 1990 elections with 80% of the votes. The military junta did not accept the verdict of urns and lead a violent crackdown against political opponents and ethnic minorities. But Suu Kyi hold up and practiced the non-violent resistance.

In 1995, she had the opportunity to leave the country and see her family but she knew she would be forbidden to return. Then she decided to stay in Burma. She escaped an assassination attempt on May 30, 2003 in an ambush that claimed many lives.

In total, she will spend 15 years in prison or under house arrest for grounds of subversive activities. The last sentence of 18 months of the house arrest has not been renewed. She was therefore released on November 13, 2010.

Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza was born in 1968. She left Rwanda in early 1994, before the genocide, for graduate studies in the Netherlands. She is a mother of three children, who live in the Netherlands. By 1997, she adhered to the Republican Rally for Democracy in Rwanda (RDR), an opposition movement within the Rwandan diaspora, and became its chairwoman in 2000. The RDR then participated, with other movements and individuals politically active in the diaspora, to the creation of the United Democratic Forces (UDF-Inkigi); whose party she will be elected as a chairperson in

¹ Since 1 July 1989, Burma is officially called “Myanmar” but the opposition in exile does not accept the new name.

2006 and designated as the candidate to Rwandan presidential elections on August 9, 2010.

On January 16, 2010, when she was 42, she returned back to Rwanda to register her party for the presidential elections and begin the election campaign. Her decision to return and do politics in Rwanda, pacifically, against a dictatorial regime, was taken after a mature consideration. Her main motivation was to encourage national reconciliation and restore hope to people living with fear everyday.

Upon her arrival she was faced with red tape of any kind and was demonized by a hate campaign organized by the regime. In February 2010, she suffered a physical assault in the administration offices, and then was placed under judicial investigation. On April 21, 2010, she was arrested and she spent the night in jail. The next day she was put on probation, under house arrest. On May 28, 2010, a U.S. lawyer, Peter Erlinder, who had come to her defense, was jailed as well. He will be released three weeks later, officially “for medical reasons” and deported.

Victoire was arrested again on October 14, 2010. She has not left the jail since then. Her application for bail was refused by the Rwandan justice on January 20, 2011.

The context: the military dictatorship

Burma and Rwanda are two nations lead by military dictators who do not tolerate any opposition.

In Burma:

As evidenced by Amnesty International and many others, more than 2200 opinion prisoners were – and are still – incarcerated in deplorable conditions for the same reasons as Suu Kyi.

Observers say the release of Suu Kyi should not be seen as a significant step towards democracy but only as a way to relieve some international pressure. Earlier, Suu Kyi had already been released twice in 1995 and in 2002, but was arrested again thereafter.

Her release came a week after the military regime had confirmed his power in the elections held on November 7, 2010. A new electoral law had prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from being eligible and that is why her party, the NLD, boycotted the elections. As a result, the authorities dissolved that party. Several appeals have been launched against that decision.

The Burmese military junta is responsible for numerous murders, even crimes against humanity for the systematic destruction of villages inhabited

by ethnic minorities, including the Karen people on the Thai border.

Because of huge violations of human rights, Burma has been subject to economic sanctions imposed by the Western countries. Nevertheless this country is backed by China.

In Rwanda:

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and its leader, Paul Kagame, came to power after a military invasion and violent internal conflicts that began in 1990 and culminated in the Rwandan genocide. This course was supported by major Western powers. According to the official line, many thought that the new regime would allow the democratization of the country after long years of unique party² rule.

In fact, it soon became clear that the RPF, which took power in July 1994, had no single intention of either laying the foundations of the Rule of Law or to tolerate a democratic debate on the governance of the country. In August 1995, barely a year later, after a heated debate on internal security conditions, the Prime Minister and main Hutu ministers resigned and took the road to exile. Some of them will be murdered, even while abroad. A terror regime was installed while the army was preparing to attack the refugee camps in Zaire and assist the men of Laurent Kabila who overthrew Mobutu in May 1997.

The Rwandan army was involved in armed conflicts since 1996 in Eastern Congo, conflicts that claimed at least four million deaths. Officially the “Congo wars” ended in 2003. It is now established that the Rwandan army has been active in the massacres of Hutu civilians in Congo between 1993 and 2003 and that, according to the International Law, its actions could be qualified as war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide. This is what emerged from the “Mapping Report” published on October 1, 2010 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. This report provides an inventory on “the most serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed between March 1993 and June 2003 in the territory of Democratic Republic of the Congo” (1).

The 2003 presidential elections, that acclaimed Paul Kagame to the presidency, as well as the 2008 parliamentary elections, have confirmed the totalitarian nature of the regime. The opposition is completely muzzled. Independent newspapers are banned, lawyers have been arrested, etc. As in Burma, the Rule of Law and freedom

2 Habyarimana overthrew his predecessor in 1973. He will lead the country as a unique party rule until 1991 when the multiparty system was introduced. But the war status didnot allow elections to take place.

of speech do not exist and the human rights are violated daily, as constantly evidenced by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others (2, 3). The list of personalities murdered, imprisoned or missing for political reasons since 1995 is long (4).

As no discussion on the governance of the country is possible, ministers, members of Parliament, senior officers, Hutu and Tutsi, continue to leave the country to join the ranks of the Rwandan Diaspora. Thus, just recently, in January 2011, four former members of government and senior officers were sentenced in absentia to 20 to 24 years in jail for daring to publicly criticize the president. One of them was subject of an assassination attempt in South Africa in June 2010 (5).

The courts are subject to the executive political power and the current legislation provides all facilities to incarcerate those who speak out (6). Regarding the popular justice practiced by the Gacaca responsible for processing records about participation or complicity in genocide, it is often based upon false witness, defense rights are not respected and the real accusation motives are often of a different order (recovery of land and property for instance). These people's courts were established by the regime as part of the tradition, while the tradition did not give them the criminal competence. Up to 70,000 people, that is 2% of population of working age, are in prison, under deplorable conditions, and many of them have no record since 15 years (7). That context stirs up ethnic hatred. People live in fear, impunity is pervasive. Under these conditions, despite repatriation campaigns, nearly 70,000 Rwandans are still living in refugee camps outside the national borders.

Economically, some evoke miracle considering the development of cities, particularly in Kigali. The origin of this wealth lies in the particular trade in Congo's precious and strategic minerals, sometimes illegally extracted. Yet, the situation in the up country is dramatic. The 2007 UNDP report on Rwanda noted that poverty in the country side was increasing compared to 1990 (8). The government is forcing farmers to practice corn monoculture implemented by RPF businessmen who dictate the price; in case of resistance of peasants, their other crops are uprooted. While 30% of the population live in conditions of chronic hunger and suffer dietary deficiencies, farmers are told to plant coffee for export instead of bananas to feed them. The gap in living standards between towns and up country is growing.

All these elements allow us to say that "The current situation shows many signs and conditions similar to which have led to previous conflicts that culminated in the Rwandan genocide."

That is why the "International Network for Truth and Reconciliation in Central Africa" pleads for holding a Highly Inclusive Inter-Rwandans

Dialogue (DIRHI in French). The dialogue should include all segments of the Rwandan society.

The message

Suu Kyi:

Texts and political speeches from Aung San Suu Kyi by the time she became a leader of the Burmese democracy movement have been gathered in the book “Freedom from Fear” published in 1991. Her message is based on non violent resistance, which allowed her to win the 1991 Peace Nobel Prize; she used that prize to organize the health system in Burma.

She stated among others:

“It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.”

“Almost insidious form of fear is that which masquerades as common sense or even wisdom, condemning as foolish, reckless, insignificant or futile the small daily acts of courage which help to preserve man’s self-respect and inherent human dignity.”

“Within a system which denies the existence of basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day. [...] Yet even under the most crushing state machinery, courage rises up again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilized man.”

Victoire:

She arrived in Rwanda, saying:

“I come for peace and this peace will guide my political action to eradicate injustice and to break all the chains that imprison us, I will fight... peacefully... I am not accompanied by any army because I come to you, to my parents, my brothers and sisters.”

This is a message of encouragement and solidarity sent to her people. The UDF-Inkingi party has chosen a non violent political action as its strategy to “break the fears” and overcome the totalitarian lead weight that had fallen on Rwanda (9).

She has actively participated in international meetings in preparation of the Inter-Rwandans Dialogue mentioned above, which took place in Spain with support from Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Nobel Peace Prize (1980)³.

3 This initiative is ongoing and has been the subject of a conference held in Brussels on 17 and 18 December 2010 with support from the European Union, see <http://jkanya.free.fr/DIRHI2010.pdf>.

National reconciliation is indeed the top priority of the program of UDF represented by Victoire. Which means, as core value, the establishment of the Rule of Law based on respect of fundamental human rights and political pluralism. Other core values of the political program and the social project of the UDF party are: equality and freedom, individual autonomy, solidarity, the duty of memory, popular participation, decentralization, and sustainable development.

In response to her message, Victoire has been arrested. The official reasons for the arrest are state security breach, divisionism, ideology of genocide and accusation of collaborating with armed groups in Congo based on fabricated testimonies.

The Rwandan legal arsenal makes it possible to convict of divisionism any expression of political opinion opposing the regime. The ideology of genocide, in particular, addresses every person who, without denying the genocide against the Tutsis, distances oneself from the official version of the history of the tragedy and recalls massacres of Hutu civilians by the army of General Kagame before, during and after the genocide. These two aspects of the Rwandan legal system and their application are analyzed in the report “Law and Reality” by Human Rights Watch (6).

The 2010 electoral masquerade

In both countries there has been spectacular electoral victory for the incumbent regimes.

In Burma:

The Burmese military junta won 80% seats in the legislative election held on November 7, 2010 that Aung San Suu Kyi has not been allowed to stand for. The electoral process has been strongly criticized by the United States, Europe and the United Nations. While Barack Obama said the elections had been “neither free nor democratic”, China hailed “a step forward, a change in the country ruled by the militar” (10).

In terms of facts, human rights organizations have systematically identified violence and irregularities committed to intimidate the population (11).

In Rwanda:

President Paul Kagame was elected on August 9, 2010 with a score of 93% after the opposition had been reduced to silence and its members imprisoned or murdered. Victoire’s political friends in Europe who had decided to

return to Rwanda to support and participate in the election campaign of UDF could not enter the country because their passports had been refused. Then everything was done to prevent Victoire to register her party and hold the constituent assembly. Three other UDF members: the Executive Secretary General, Sylvain Sibomana, the Treasurer, Alice Muhirwa, and local official in Kigali, Martin Ntavuka, were imprisoned and then released but sentenced to heavy fines for taking part in peaceful demonstrations to claim for their political rights (5).

Regarding the two other main opposition parties, only the PS-Imberakuri has been allowed to register, but not to participate in the presidential election. Its president, Bernard Ntaganda, was arrested on June 24, 2010 and sentenced to four years in prison on February 11, 2011. In August 2010, two other members of the leadership of that party were sentenced to two or three years in prison. As for the Democratic Green Party, the third party to express a real opposition, its Deputy President was found decapitated on July 14, 2010 (3).

During the period preceding the elections, two independent newspapers were suspended, two journalists were arrested (and were eventually convicted to long prison terms (7 and 17 years) on February 4, 2010), and a journalist Rugambage was assassinated in June 2010 (5).

The accusations of sectarianism, ideology of genocide and threatening state security were used to prevent any election, setting aside the huge number of opponents who have been intimidated, harassed or arrested and mistreated. That said, the presidential election process in Rwanda has not been subject to official criticism from Western powers, contrary to what was done for Burma.

2. WHERE SIMILARITY STOPS

The impetus of the international community

Suu Kyi:

Very quickly she has seen a worldwide success for her courage and determination. There are countless cities that have granted her honorary citizenship, universities that awarded her a title of Doctor Honoris Causa, multiple expressions of support that have been organized worldwide, politicians who have signed petitions, etc. The IDEA organization has supported her when she was in the jail, the UN has sent emissaries to meet with her, and she was given many other awards.

As regards the international media, the movie *Beyond Rangoon* (1995)

illustrates an episode from the Burmese dictatorship and peaceful actions taken by opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi. This movie had great success and is available in all video libraries in the Western world.

Victoire:

Will she benefit of the same support? Until now, even though there has been some events in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, USA and Britain in her favor, they gathered almost exclusively her compatriots.

The arrest of her counsel, American lawyer, Peter Erlinder, at the end of May 2010 has made little noise. The event was recorded by experts in human rights but the mass media have not made a great echo of it.

Nevertheless, on the international media level, the film *Hotel Rwanda* was a success and is also available in all of Western video libraries. However, this film is not devoid of political intentions on the part of the Kigali regime. It presents a fiction in the context of the first days of the genocide from a true story, the story of a Hutu who protected Tutsis in the hotel he was managing. Unfortunately, this film broadcasts a one-sided and simplistic component of the Rwandan tragedy, a Manichean vision of good and bad people in favor of the incumbent political power. Curiously, the manager of this hotel that inspired this film and was even decorated by the U.S. President G.W. Bush, is now accused by the Kigali regime to spread the ideology of genocide!

The recent visit (February 16, 2011) of the Dutch Minister of Cooperation, Ben Knapen⁴ in Kigali to meet with members of UDF and inquire about the legal situation of Victoire Ingabire Umuhoya, was made in a high discretion. Ben Knapen also met with the Minister of Justice. He expressed his surprise about sentences of 7 and 17 year imprisonment against two independent journalists on February 4. But at the same time, the minister had put on the table a draft extradition treaty with Rwanda that would enable the regime to judge the «genocide suspects» living as refugees in the Netherlands...

Is the Western world willing to remove contradictions and openly advocate in favor of a woman fighting a regime that it supports?

Geostrategic situation

Burma is in China's orbit:

The Burmese military junta is supported by China, which is opposed to a U.S. presence on its doorstep. Via the UN Security Council, China protects

⁴ <http://www.rnw.nl/africa/article/knapen-concerned-about-freedom-rights-rwanda>
<http://www.rnw.nl/afrique/article/nombreux-sujets-evoques-par-knapen-en-visite-au-Rwanda>

Burma of possible UN sanctions because of the situation of Human Rights.

As regards the trade sector, China has been providing Burma with military equipment for over 20 years. In return, Burma sells him oil and gas (12).

In addition, China participates in the construction and modernization of several Burmese ports, allowing it to access the Indian Ocean.

Rwanda is in the American orbit:

The dictatorship of President Kagame is supported by the United States and some other Western powers. In 2009 Rwanda left the ‘Francophonie’ organization to enter the Commonwealth. English became official language in the country. The country now benefits from the U.S. military assistance in training its defense forces (13).

Economically, its strategic position is clear: even though the looting of the subsoil of eastern Congo has been subject of UN reports, it is through Rwanda that pass all the minerals (gold, diamond, copper, tinstone, cobalt, coltan, ...) to be accessible to high-tech firms in the Western world (14). In addition, in the early of 2008, Rwanda signed a bilateral treaty granting the U.S. the freedom of investment in Rwanda’s economy (15).

The Rwandan genocide took place in the context of the war which allowed General Kagame to take power and that war was backed by some western countries, the United States in particular.

We know that before, during and after the genocide of Tutsis, there were massacres of Hutu civilians by Kagame’s army. In February 2008, following the murder of nine Spanish nationals and according to the law of universal jurisdiction, the Court of Madrid issued 40 international arrest warrants against Rwandan high-ranking military officers alleged to have committed genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and terrorism by order of President Kagame (16, 17).

Many analyzes converge to suggest that the trigger of the genocide, namely the assassination of President Habyarimana on April 6, 1994 was organized by Kagame himself who did not want to share power as stipulated in the Arusha Peace Agreement. In 2006 the French justice investigated on that assassination (18, 19) but no other body could or wanted to consider this fundamental aspect of the Rwandan history.

And we now know that the genocide was not “planned” by the Hutu authorities, contrary to the view publicized from the start. After 15 years of work, having made records consisting of several thousands of pages and heard hundreds of witnesses, the ICTR found that the charges of “conspiracy to commit genocide” could not be made out against the alleged main organizers (18).

All this did not have much impact. The official version of the Rwandan

history remains dominant in the media and the U.S. continues to support "the greatest criminal in function", according to the expression delivered by Filip Reyntjens, a professor at the University of Antwerp (20).

Under these conditions, can Victoire expect to receive any support via international media?

CONCLUSION

According to geostrategic interests, democracy, as well as human rights, has a different position on the International chessboard: sometimes it is a value to be protected by all means including war, sometimes it's worth to sacrifice it when other interests prevail. Recent events in the Arab world demonstrated this fact as well.

On behalf of democracy, the Western world has loudly condemned dictatorship protected by China. But are these propaganda and sensitization campaigns quite objective or do they serve strategic and economic purposes of the superpowers?

Victoire returned to Rwanda in order to witness the suffering of her people and to give them courage. Will she, in her turn, be sacrificed on behalf of Western interests? Can we accept that the interests of Western world are built on the suffering of a large range of peoples?

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