

Aung Myint

Twenty-one years in jail for writing and distributing a pamphlet. This was the sentence that the Burmese junta's military court handed down to Aung Myint, a Burmese poet, journalist and member of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). Currently in his fifties, Aung Myint (alias Phya Pon Ni Loan Oo) began his career in the 1980s with articles and poems for the newspaper *Botahtaung*. First arrested in 1997, while assistant editor of *Cherry* magazine, Aung spent two years in jail, only to become the head of the NLD's information department upon his release.



In September 2000 Aung Myint was rearrested by the military secret services and charged with violating the military's draconian emergency laws. His crime: to distribute a press release to media agencies and foreign embassies in Rangoon detailing Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest by the security forces as she attempted to leave the capital. His assistant in this 'crime', Kyaw Sein Oo, is also serving seven years' imprisonment for violating the state's press laws.

Surviving in Burma is no easy task for writers. *Reporters Sans Frontiers* has stated that, for many political dissidents (thirty-eight writers are currently held in Burmese prisons), a jail sentence can be lethal.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression and opinion has emphasised that 'imprisonment as a punishment for the peaceful expression of an opinion constitutes a serious violation of human rights'. Aung Myint is an Honorary Member of Sydney, Canadian, English and Perth PEN Centres. International PEN, the organisation that campaigns for the rights of journalists and writers, no matter where they work or live, considers Aung Myint and Kyaw Sein Oo to be detained in violation of Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Denise Leith