
Velvet Revolution Continues to Inspire International Dissidents

Velvet Revolution Continues to Inspire International Dissidents to Fight for Human Rights

25 years on from the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic (back then Czechoslovakia), Charles University was honoured to host the international conference 'For Your Freedom and Ours' highlighting the responsibility of those who have fought successfully for democracy in their countries to continue to support those nations still in the midst of their own endeavours for freedom.

The Velvet Revolution has been an inspiration to people all over the world. It was gentle and beautiful and inflicted little pain on those involved – this is what we all aspire towards. Aung San Suu Kyi By way of introduction to the conference and its panellists, moderator Šimon Pánek – director of the organisation 'People in Need' that prepared the symposium – posed the question: 'Why are we holding this conference?' 'For Your Freedom and Ours' was developed not simply to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution, but to create a forum for those others who were inspired by the actions of previous nations restoring democracy to their country to continue to fight for the same. Those people are still struggling against totalitarianism and still believe in the importance of human rights, despite not yet having seen the fruits of their endeavours. The first panel talk of the conference was entitled 'Inspirations of the Courageous "Powerless." What is particularly poignant, here at the site of a relatively painless social revolution, is that the featured panellists have endured imprisonment, harassment and in some cases even torture under the totalitarian regimes in their home nations – and that in spite of this they persist in their fight for liberty.

Burmese opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi delivered a video address in which she stated that the courage of those not in power is the courage of a whole nation when those people decide to stand up for their rights. Similarly, those who hold the power in a country must have the courage to recognise the will of the people as supreme. She maintained that democratic and free countries must support others to achieve the same, such as in Burma, where, although their struggle began earlier than in the Czech Republic, it is still ongoing and those who continue to believe in liberty are stimulated by the success of the Velvet Revolution. Aung San Suu Kyi said: *'The Velvet Revolution has been an inspiration to people all over the world. It was gentle and beautiful and inflicted little pain on those involved – this is what we all aspire towards.'*

Henryk Wujec, the co-founder of the Polish trade union 'Solidarity' in 1980 and one of those who fought in the social movement against communism, spoke first on the panel, noting that the words of Czech President Václav Havel in his essay on the 'power of the powerless' inspired many worldwide in their time of most need and continue to do so to this day. This was reiterated by the young but influential Belarusian opposition activist Zmitser Dashkevich, who received a letter from Havel while imprisoned in a solitary cell in 2011. Havel stated that his Czech contemporaries originally did not understand him – Dashkevich believes this is because Havel was a visionary with an ideal of a better future, and these visionaries are the people who continue to inspire opposition movements in communist countries.

'Hope is the last thing we have, and we cannot betray that.' This definitive statement from the third panellist of the morning, Azerbaijani media-based activist Kenan Aliyev, highlighted his belief that people living under communist regimes cannot afford to become cynical in their outlook on potential for change. Democracy will not be easy to achieve, and it is a long-process (which Aliyev states is an excuse the Azerbaijani authorities often use to avoid making real steps towards change). However, if successfully democratic countries such as the Czech Republic continue to set the example that change is possible, the Azerbaijani people – amongst other nations – will fight long-term.

The next two panels of the conference were entitled 'Moral Support and Technical Assistance to Dissidents' and 'Authoritarians Growing Smarter.' Min Ko Naing, a leading Burmese opposition activist and dissident, René de Jesús Gómez Manzano, a lawyer and dissident of Cuba, and Oleksiy Matsuka, an Ukrainian veteran investigative journalist from Donetsk, spoke on the second panel. The panellists of the last block were Svetlana Gannushkina, a mathematician and human rights activist in Russia, Alaa Shehabi, an economics lecturer and writer turned activist at the wake of the 2011 protests in Bahrain, and Jiang Shao, a 1989 Tiananmen student leader from China; all of them delivering truly inspiring addresses.

It is clear that the message motivating the organisation of this conference was one based on responsibility. The Czech Republic, and other countries which have successfully overcome obstacles to democratic freedom of human rights, are obliged to promote social and economic rights in other nations. Thanks to the experience of the Velvet Revolution, the people of the Czech Republic are aware of the need to fight for human rights and are well-suited to supporting other

regions in their endeavours to achieve liberty without violence. As Kenan Aliyev concluded, *'Democracy and dictatorship are not different islands; those who are free need to help those who are not.'*



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