

## Freedom Blues

By Kyaw Zwa Moe

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### Former political prisoners struggle to adjust to life on the outside

Disbelief is the reaction Zaw Win gets when he says: “The pressures of life outside jail are greater than those within.” The 36-year-old former student activist was freed in 1999 after serving more than eight years as a “guest” of the military junta, but life in the real world has proved as difficult—though in other ways—as his existence behind bars.

“Prison is awful,” he concedes. “But the only problems we had to deal with there were basically the authority and the lack of freedom.”

Disappointment hit the former political prisoner from the day of his release from Thayet prison, Magwe Division. His uncle greeted him with the words: “You spat from above and it just fell on your face. Stop the nonsense, stop what you’ve been doing.”



The words were not only a “very disturbing greeting,” said Zaw Win, “but a big insult to my political beliefs.” His anger was tempered by the recognition that his family and friends didn’t want him to end up in jail again because of his political views.

Pressure to keep silent and out of further trouble was only the start, however. The problems began to pile up—at home, in his search for employment, in his efforts to readapt to society and in his dealings with the authorities.

Zaw Win’s experience isn’t unique. Most of the thousands of political activists imprisoned after the 1988 uprising, initiated by students, have experienced difficulties readjusting to life outside prison, according to the Thailand-based advocacy group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).

The AAPP's joint secretary, Bo Kyi, can vouch personally for the organization's conclusion. He is a former political prisoner and knows the problems of readjustment first-hand. "Every part of our body has to try to adapt again to the outside environment after our release," he says.

Such subtle factors as changes of color and sound hit the released prisoner, he says. White and khaki are the colors of prison life. Freed prisoners are often unprepared for the sudden burst of color that greets them in the outside world.

Bo Kyi and Zaw Win agree that the greatest pressure comes first of all from family members, who urge the former political prisoners not to risk further imprisonment. Their concern isn't entirely selfless—the strains of maintaining contact with their jailed relatives and keeping them supplied with items to make life in prison bearable are not to be overlooked.

Zaw Win says his parents tell him they won't be able to supply him if he is imprisoned again. "It's understandable because it doesn't take a day but many years," he reasons. "For eight years, my family supported me and supplied me with everything I needed while in jail."

Years of imprisonment put further strain on family relationships. Partnerships and marriages break up, adding to the strains placed on released prisoners, many of whom seek solace in alcohol.

Zaw Win—like many others—is caught between his commitment to his family and his political calling. "On the one hand, we haven't finished our mission to restore democracy to our country. That's what I want to continue devoting my life to. But family pressure is making me turn away from politics."

The second challenge for Zaw Win was to find a job. The search lasted 18 months, handicapped by the reluctance of employers to attract the attention of the authorities by employing a former political prisoner. For many jobs, applicants have to indicate on official forms whether they are former political prisoners.

Bo Kyi found a job in a photocopying shop shortly after his release in 1993, but military intelligence pressured his employer to let him go. Zaw Win was also harassed by military intelligence officers, who regularly called at his home and questioned him about his activities. He says he often considered leaving home to escape the harassment.

Some former prisoners are literally hounded to death. Tin Tin Nyo, a young woman student activist, committed suicide in December 1993, shortly after completing a three year prison term.

Kyaw Thike, a 43-year-old former student activist, died in August 2005 after suffering severe depression and tuberculosis, conditions said to have been brought on by his inability to readjust to life outside prison. During his time in jail Kyaw Thike was tortured and suffered hand injuries.

Many former student activists whose studies were interrupted by their arrest and imprisonment have difficulty resuming academic work, although correspondence courses are open to most of them.

Blocking the professional advancement of troublesome students is nothing new in Burma, however. The previous authoritarian government exercised the same policy, according to Khun Saing, a former final year medical student who has been arrested three times since the 1970s. After his first release in 1978, he was barred from completing his degree.

“That changed my life,” said 53 year-old Khun Saing, who settled in the Thai-Burmese border area early this year. “That’s one of the factors that makes former political prisoners depressed since they can’t continue their intended career.”

In a practical effort to help released prisoners, the AAPP published a handbook in August 2005, taken from a larger publication, *Counselling Torture Survivors*, by Allan and Mia Staehr for the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, in Copenhagen. The 67-page AAPP booklet relates the experiences of former political prisoners in both Burma and South Africa and includes advice from a counselor.

Bo Kyi, who translated part of the book, said the publication would help former political prisoners, their families and society in general, confront the problems faced by released political prisoners.

Burma has some 1,200 political prisoners, he said. “We, our society, have to seriously think of their life after prison. We need to rehabilitate them so that they can contribute their efforts and talents in building the country,”

But the problem is really much larger, according to Bo Kyi. “Burma as a whole needs to be rehabilitated socially, economically, politically and spiritually.”

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**Activities to do Before Reading**

**Activity 1**

**Discussion: What does ‘freedom’ mean to you?**

The article is called ‘Freedom Blues’. What does the word freedom mean to you?

Think about these questions:

- Do you and your friends have freedom? If not, why not?
- If you had complete freedom what would you do?
- In which countries are people free to do what they want?

**Activity 2**

**Political prisoners**

- What is a political prisoner?
- Can you name any political prisoners in Burma?
- What about former political prisoners around the world?

**Activity 3**

**Title**

a) Identify the *title* and the *subtitle* of the article.

b) Can you guess what the article is about? What do you think ‘blues’ means?

## Activities to do During Reading

### Activity 4

#### Match the vocabulary

- a) Go through the article and underline the words you don't know.  
b) Here are some words from the article. Match the words with their definitions.  
Don't use a dictionary!

pressure	<i>to believe someone because of your experience</i>
temper	<i>increase in number</i>
pile up	<i>to not realize that something is important</i>
unique	<i>an illness related to feeling sad</i>
initiate	<i>caring about other people more than yourself</i>
vouch	<i>something in your life that makes you worry</i>
adapt	<i>something that makes sadness disappear</i>
subtle	<i>to help someone live a normal life again</i>
selfless	<i>a situation that is difficult but can be accepted</i>
bearable	<i>to make something less difficult</i>
overlook	<i>to change your behaviour</i>
strain	<i>something that there is only one of</i>
solace	<i>difficult to understand, not clear</i>
depression	<i>worry caused by problems in your life</i>
rehabilitate	<i>to start</i>

### Activity 5

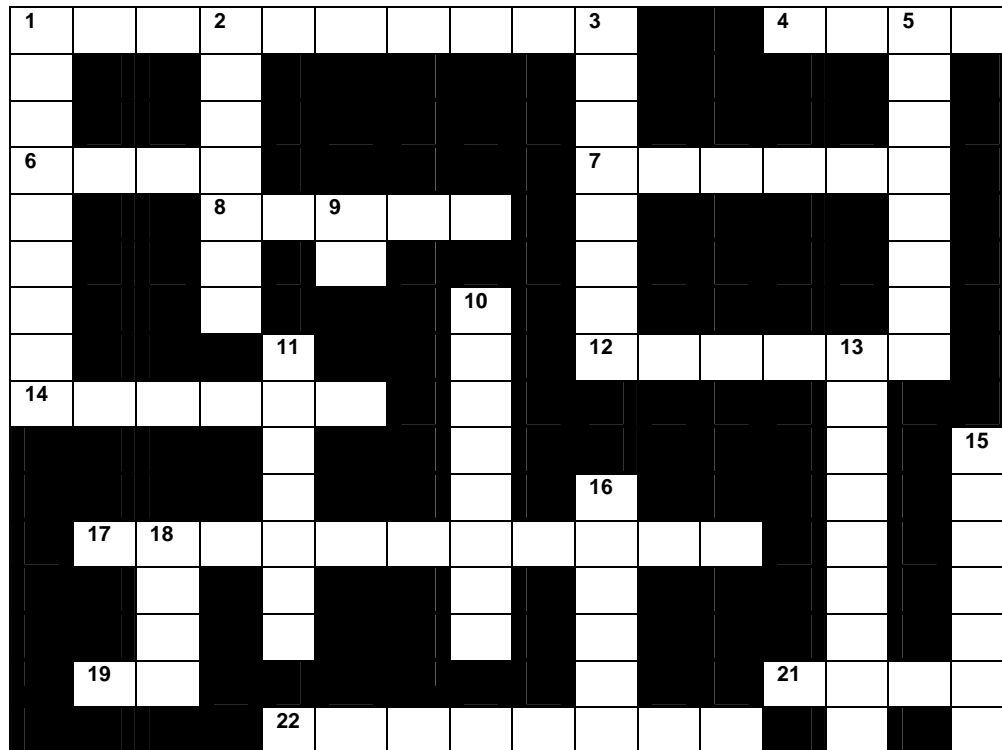
#### Main Point

- a) What is the main theme of this article?  
b) List the difficulties and pressures that former political prisoners face.  
c) What pressures do you face in your life? Are they similar or different to the pressures on former political prisoners?

**Note: You are only allowed to speak English during this exercise!!**

**Activity 6****Crossword**

The solutions to the crossword clues are all in the article.

**Across**

- 1) An illness that makes a person unhappy
- 4) An association created to help political prisoners (abbreviation)
- 6) The colour of unhappiness
- 7) Initiates
- 8) One thing \_\_\_\_\_ another
- 12) To run away
- 14) Who created the most pressure for former prisoners?
- 17) Employers don't want their attention
- 19) Personal pronoun
- 21) Prison
- 22) Khun Saing has been \_\_\_\_\_ three times

**Down**

- 1) People's reaction when Zaw Win talks about prison
- 2) To set free
- 3) "Stop the \_\_\_\_\_" says Zaw Win's Uncle
- 5) A cause of worry
- 9) A disease of the lungs (abbreviation)
- 10) Started by Burmese students in the late 1980's
- 11) Solace is looked for here
- 13) The author writes about these prisoners
- 15) Very soon
- 16) Making no noise
- 18) Family members \_\_\_\_\_ former prisoners not to risk further imprisonment

**Activity 7****True or false?**

Use the article to decide whether the following statements are true or false. Explain your choice in your own words using evidence from the text.

- 1) Zaw Win thinks there are many difficulties to deal with inside prison.
- 2) His Uncle does not support his political work.
- 3) For a long time he was very angry with his Uncle's greeting.
- 4) Prisons in Burma are very colourful.
- 5) Families find it difficult to care for their relatives when they are in prison.
- 6) Zaw Win has decided to continue his political work.
- 7) Employers do not like giving jobs to former political prisoners.
- 8) The last Burmese government made it easy for released prisoners to study.
- 9) Not being able to study can cause former prisoners to become depressed.

**Activity 8****Say it again**

The author has based this article on quotes from different political prisoners. Before writing the article she or he asked them questions. The quotes are what the prisoners said, but there are many ways to say the same thing.

Saying the same thing in a different way is called rephrasing.

*e.g. "Do you want to go to the noodle shop for dinner tonight?" asked Kyaw Moe.*

Kyaw Moe could have asked:

"Do you want to eat at the place where they sell noodles this evening?"

The following quotes are from the article, they are more difficult than the examples above, but see if you can rephrase them.

1. "The pressures of life outside jail are greater than those within"
2. "Prison is awful, but the only problems we had to deal with there were authority and lack of freedom"
3. "Stop the nonsense, stop what you have been doing"
4. "For eight years my family supported me and supplied me with everything I needed while in jail"
5. "Family pressure is making me turn away from politics"
6. "That's one of the factors that makes former political prisoners depressed"
7. "We need to rehabilitate them so that them so that they can continue their efforts and talents in rebuilding the country."

## Activities to do After Reading

### Activity 9

#### Roleplay

Imagine you are a political prisoner in a Burmese prison. Everyday you are allowed 10 minutes to talk to other prisoners.

What would you talk about? Make a list with your partners.

Prepare a roleplay of your conversation and practice it. When you are finished your teacher will ask you to present your roleplay to the class.

### Activity 10

#### Writing

Now imagine you are going to be released from prison next month after 7 years inside. Write a letter to your family telling them the good news. Think about all the things you would do on your first day of freedom. Also, try to think of the fears and problems you would have to face.