

The Courage of Ales Byalyatski¹

By Carl Gershman

Within broad movements for democracy and human freedom, certain individuals invariably emerge as transformational leaders. They have the ability to articulate shared aspirations; their character is such that diverse factions gladly accept their leadership; their dedication is unquestioned; and their courage inspires others to make sacrifices for the common goal of building a more just society. Often such individuals are imprisoned and persecuted by the regimes they oppose. But far from defeating them, such hardship only serves to enhance their stature and increase their influence. Within my lifetime I have seen such people emerge – leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States, Dr. Andrei Sakharov in the Soviet Union, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma. Of course, not all transformational leaders are as famous as these towering figures, or have the same impact on events and history. But they defend the same values, inspire the same hopes, and assume the burden of leadership in a similar manner -- not as a personal ambition but as a moral obligation. Their goal is to serve a cause higher than themselves, and they do so not only to uplift the people they lead but to advance the universal principle of human dignity.

In the case of Belarus, often called Europe's last dictatorship, the emblematic leader who stands in this tradition is a self-effacing human rights activist named Ales Byalyatski. Not yet 50 years old and his hair now completely white, he was active in the late 1980s, during the last years of the Soviet Union, as a dissident engaged in independent political and cultural activities. Since that time, his work has spanned the entire history of independent Belarus. He has been a "Renaissance activist" in terms of the many different ways he has served the cause of freedom: as a political dissident and cultural activist; as an academic, author and intellectual; as a political-party leader and an elected official in the Minsk city council; as an election monitor; and, above all, as an internationally respected human rights advocate. He was a founder of the first pro-democracy movement in Belarus – the Belarus Popular Front -- as well as its first human rights organization – Belarus Witness. He has headed the Assembly of Belarusian Pro-Democracy NGOs, the country's largest civil-society network. And in 1996 he founded -- and since then has led -- the Viasna Human Rights Center, the country's foremost human rights organization, which has defended thousands of victims of political repression.

All of this work has been carried out at great personal sacrifice. Since 1988, Byalyatski has been arrested more than 20 times, most recently on August 4, 2011, after which he was sentenced to four-and-a-half years of maximum-security imprisonment on the charge of tax

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evasion with respect to the funds received by Viasna to aid the victims of repression. The charge was blatantly political, since Byalyatski's real "crime" was defending human rights. But the Lukashenko regime would have been embarrassed to press such a charge, and so it concocted a legal formula to disguise its real motivation. But the strategy is too clever by half, and it has fooled no one. Byalyatski has been recognized as a political prisoner and a prisoner of conscience by the international community and human rights organizations, and he has been nominated for the third time for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Nobel Prize is an honor that Byalyatski richly deserves. Like Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Laureate from China who was imprisoned when he received the prize and who remains behind prison walls, Byalyatski is an individual of great bravery and character. Prior to his arrest, he was aware of the case against him and had the opportunity to escape abroad, but he chose not to. He has always placed principle above politics, having left the political arena in the 1990s because of its divisive nature and because he felt he could make a greater contribution as a human rights advocate. In that role, he has helped everyone in need, regardless of party or ideology. He is one of the few opposition leaders who unites rather than divides. He is respected by everyone across the political spectrum of the opposition and could emerge from jail as a unifying political leader.

His political appeal is enhanced by his patriotism. Byalyatski is the archetypal Belarusian. He has always campaigned for the country's independence and defended its language and culture, even as he has affirmed the European identity of Belarus and favors its integration into Europe as a free and democratic nation.

His appeal is also not unrelated to his modesty. Byalyatski has always been a low-key, quiet, committed activist who feels uncomfortable in the spotlight. He has no ego, doesn't strive for recognition, and cares not a whit about the trappings of success. He's modest in his speech, dress and behavior, and despite his academic background and intellectual achievement, he is very much an activist of the common man, most comfortable in jeans and on the streets, much like the late Polish activist Jacek Kuron. He has a wry wit, ever ready with a quip about the regime, the opposition, the European Union, even his own fate, as in the case of his comment that "During bad times, prison can be the best place for a human rights defender." Most importantly, and despite his daunting work and the harsh circumstances of his existence, he is always smiling and is never without hope.

With his inspiring words and ironic tone now having been muted by imprisonment, his wife Natalia has become his public voice. She has put aside her historical studies and gardens in Rakau to raise his case – and the plight of the country's other political prisoners – in Belarus and abroad. I was present just recently when she addressed the Wroclaw Global Forum and can testify to her eloquence and dignity.

Byalyatski can be compared to many famous freedom fighters – Vaclav Havel, Liu Xiaobo, and Jacek Kuron, among others. But there is a special affinity between him and a Burmese activist whom he may not even know about at all. I am thinking of Paw Oo Htun, whose *nom de guerre* Min Ko Naing means Conqueror of Kings. Like Byalyatski, Min Ko Naing was born in 1962, and he emerged in 1988 – just as Byalyatski was becoming active – as the most prominent leader of the student movement that rose up against the military dictatorship. He was arrested soon thereafter and spent most of the next two decades in prison, where he was often severely tortured. He is now out of prison as Burma’s very tentative political opening begins to unfold.

On August 28, 1988, Min Ko Naing gave the opening address at the congress called to revive the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, which had been abolished in 1962 when the military seized power in Burma. His words addressed the challenge in Burma at the time, but they resonate today when we think of Byalyatski and Belarus. Min Ko Naing spoke of the long struggle to tear down the wall of dictatorship, which was “too thick” in the beginning but was beginning to show cracks. “If we unite,” he said, “and push down the wall, it will totally crumble and fall down.” He then closed with a poem that he wrote entitled “Faith,” which contained the following stanza:

*Even if my life is sacrificed
for this unfulfilled revolution
I will not mourn for leaving this world.
instead I will be satisfied
that I was dedicated to our people.*

Byalyatski shares that dedication, which is one of the reasons why it’s only a matter of time before the wall of dictatorship in Belarus will crumble and fall down. When that time comes, he will be remembered as a quiet hero whose courage helped his country become free. Until then, he deserves – and should receive – our full solidarity.