Sakharov Prize at 20: For democracy - against oppression

A belief in democracy and universal human rights can be a two-edged sword. Defenders often face discrimination, intimidation and even physical attack. Several laureates symbolise the appeal against oppression, religious fundamentalism or work in labour camps.

Anatoli Marchenko

Commitment to the defence of human rights and democracy can be a question of life or death. Soviet dissident Anatoli Marchenko was a Ukrainian origin worker-turned-human rights activist. As a result he spent 20 years in prison and labour camps, whose cruel conditions he later described in his books. One way in which he highlighted human rights problems in the then Soviet Union was through hunger strikes. The one in 1986 proved fateful. In prison, he refused food for three months, while calling for the release of all political prisoners in USSR. He died at the age of 48. He is the only person to be awarded the Sakharov Prize posthumously – in 1988.

Alexander Dubček

The first of two Alexanders to win the Sakharov Prize, Alexander Dubček brought about change when he had power and influence following elevation within the system to First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist party. The Slovak politician became the face of reform movement in Czechoslovakia in 1968. His goal was to modify the standard Soviet model of socialism and to create “socialism with human face”. Parliament awarded Dubček the Sakharov Prize just after the Velvet revolution in 1989.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Burmese political party the National League for Democracy won the general election in 1990. Instead of its most prominent member Aung San Suu Kyi becoming prime minister, she was jailed by the ruling military junta to silence her call for democracy. Since then Suu Kyi has spent more than 13 years under house arrest. Imagine: no travelling, no communication with the outside world and separation from her children and estrangement from her husband, who died in England while she was still in Burma. The European Parliament awarded her courage and commitment to the values of democracy and peace in 1990.

Taslima Nasreen

"Anyone who does not fight daily for their freedom and their life does not deserve either." Taslima Nasreen quoted Goethe's words when she accepted the Sakharov Prize in 1994. She has dedicated her life to stopping the oppression of women and religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh. She has written many articles, attracting fero-
cious criticism and death threats from religious fundamentalists. After many years under threat, Ms Nasreen asked the European Parliament for help. The EP called on the Bangladeshi government to ensure her safety, through a resolution. She remained in danger, however, and was forced to leave her country in 1999. She now lives in exile in India.

Wei Jingsheng

Cruel conditions in prison were also day-to-day experiences for the 1996 winner Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng. Although initially a supporter of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, he later became disillusioned and turned to support of democracy and human rights. In 1978 he put a poster on the “Wall of democracy” in Beijing where he asked for the democratisation of China. After this and other activities he was accused of plotting to overthrow the government and sent to prison for 15 years. He enjoyed freedom for only for two years after his release in 1993 because he continued to criticize the lack of democracy and ended up behind bars again. Due to his deteriorating health and strong international pressure, the Chinese government released him in 1997. He now lives in the US.

Oswaldo Payá

Can you win over a dictatorship using legal means? Oswaldo José Payá Sardiñas would say yes. This Cuban activist hasn't created an army of rebels to fight Fidel Castro's regime. Instead he keeps pushing to reform the system legally. Throughout the 1990s he twice tried to run as a candidate to the Cuban parliament. Despite the negative response from government, he co-founded the “Varela” project, which aimed to ensure freedom of expression, free pluralist elections and the release of all political prisoners. Some 25,000 Cubans signed up to these demands. Despite the support, Havana not only ignored the call for a referendum but in March 2003 sentenced two thirds of the activists (75 people) to long term imprisonment. He received the prize in 2002.

Hauwa Ibrahim

Amputation of a hand as a punishment for theft? Stoning to death for adultery? Such practices seem to belong to the Middle Ages. Well, not in Northern Nigeria where an extreme form of Islamic Sharia law is still applied. Hauwa Ibrahim is one of the few women lawyers fighting for human rights and against religious fundamentalism in the country. Through her work, she has defended several cases involving the death penalty or cruel punishment. She is also a keen supporter of education, which she sees a way of empowering women and the best defence for those facing the greatest deprivation. Hauwa Ibrahim received the Sakharov Prize in 2005.

Aliaksandr Milinkevich

Over the years, Belarus has been called the last dictatorship in Europe. The Sakharov prize winner in 2006, Aliaksandr Milinkevich has dedicated his life to turn his country into a democratic state with full respect for human rights. By becoming an official presidential candidate of the United Democratic Opposition in Belarus, Mr Milinkevich represented an alternative to the regime imposed by Aliaksandr Lukashenko. However, Mr Lukashenko won the elections in 2006. Although the EU said that the results were subject to fraud, Milinkevich managed to get the support from more than 6% of the population. Since then he has been repeatedly arrested and detained under various pretexts.

Salih Mahmoud Osman

Sudan has become synonymous with instability and suffering. Despite the constant danger, there are brave people who help the victims of the civil wars. One of them is Salih Mahmoud Osman. He provided legal and medical aid to those whose human rights were violated. He paid a high price. He was imprisoned by the Sudanese government for over seven months and members of his own family have been killed or thrown out of their homes by the militias. Nevertheless, he continued in his fight for justice and at present he is a Member of the Sudanese National Parliament. Mr Osman received the Sakharov Prize in 2007.