

Focus on Burma

Volume 2, 2009



Burma Center Prague

Focus on Burma – Preface

by **Christoph Amthor**

BURMESE ACTIVISM ABROAD – AN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

This year's publication *Focus on Burma* seeks to respond to a situation that has recently emerged both inside and outside Burma. The persistence of the crisis and the ineffectiveness of the small scope of measures left open by Asian and Western governments with their strong strategic and business interests have convinced many observers that the time is ripe to try something different. While the optimism of foreign players about the power of moral persuasion seems to reincarnate with each

of their new generations, the rock-solid Burmese generals obviously see no reason to change their strategy of bargaining at the front door, while at the same time crushing their people in the backyard.

Many governments have indicated their preference for any kind of stability in Burma, even at the expense of the population, to the trouble of embarking on a transformation with an uncertain outcome. Other voices, however, maintained that Burma would most likely only benefit from a reshuffling of the cards since, as they say, it cannot be worse than it is now.

Contents

Christoph Amthor: Preface	2
Conference "Burmese in Europe – Promoting Partnership for Transition in Burma"	
Burma Center Prague: Proceedings of the Conference	5
Harn Yawng hwe: Multi-Party Talks	12
Nwe Aung: Position Presented at the Conference	15
Letter from former Czech President Václav Havel	16
Burma Center Prague: Conclusive Statement	17
Change in Burma. Change for Burma.	
Bianca Son: Than Shwe Has Left the City	18
Zoya Phan: Democracy in Burma is Worth Investing in	21
Ko Ko Thett: Not out of Place	24
Maung Zarni: Trust the People	28

Following the “Saffron Revolution” in 2007 and the Cyclone Nargis the year after, international interest in the cause has given rise to expectations that the elections scheduled for 2010 can effect a change of internal power constellations and, subsequently, bring about an overall situation that is unpredictable even for the regime and thus create a framework of action for a multitude of social forces that is presently simmering under the surface but lacking a toehold.

However, the army’s retreat into a more indirect way of domination can also be seen as merely a further push towards modernization with strategic lean management by outsourcing more tasks to civilians and business cronies while keeping only key positions essential for control.

The Obama administration’s new Burma policy – building on the regime’s declarations of goodwill and luring it with investments in return for concessions – has suddenly put the Burmese exile movement in the difficult situation of deciding between loyalty to the USA as one of their main patrons on the one hand and holding the fort of unabated moral values on the other. These turbulent changes inside Burmese civil society, the increasingly flirty tone in diplomacy with Burma and the shift of American and European policies have prompted soul-searching among the Burmese exile movement, happily assisted by its critics.

The main issues under revision can be summarized as follows:

A. concerning actions and their impact

1. efficiency and relevance of past action

for change in Burma; being considered an expert and partner for international efforts for Burma

2. focus of activity: awareness raising, political lobbying, humanitarian aid or capacity building; in the diaspora or inside the country

B. concerning external relations

1. relation between the exile movement and the democracy movement inside Burma in terms of representation and legitimization and for coordination of core positions
2. relation between the exile movement and the non-active Burmese diaspora (e.g., students, labor migrants or politically indifferent or even opportunistic migrants)
3. relation between the exile movement and interested Western organizations, governments and donors (determining the movement’s role and dealing with questions of relevance and dependency)

C. concerning internal structure

1. key criteria determining a person’s position in the exile movement, in particular the importance of personal contacts and past merits and sufferings inside Burma (e.g., participation in protests and imprisonment) as legitimization and dealing with the question as to whether legitimization needs to be renewed after a certain period
2. criteria of group formation and representation: ethnic groups, women’s groups, young activists, (former) students; geographical location (e.g., Thai border, Europe)

3. internal operation: participation in and transparency of decision-making, hierarchical structures, evaluation of efforts, bottom-up communication, responsibility
4. group cohesion and identity: significance of common activities for cohesion of community (e.g., activism as an inbound message addressed to fellow combatants) vs. purely goal-oriented activities (e.g., activism as an outbound message adjusted to culture of the local host society); substituting the lost homeland with activism; negotiating life as a refugee
5. inter-group relations: competition vs. collaboration and sharing of resources

It is certainly in the own interest of the Burmese exile movement to respond timely, adequately and in a comprehensible manner to present Burma-related issues while, at the same time, abiding by a core set of original values. The movement's relevance is particularly evident when looking at its opportunity to integrate into foreign societies and thus being valuable in a future Burma as crucial link to the world outside.

A considerable share of Burma Center Prague's activities, therefore, tries to facilitate a process of deliberate evolution, although we are well aware that this process is intrinsically internal to all groups and remains at their sole discretion.

In the first part of this publication we revisit our Prague conference, held in September that tried to bring together Burmese pro-democracy activists and scholars with

European individuals for an intensified and inter-group dialogue. In the second part, we present the views of several Burmese authors living in Europe. We put the emphasis on voices, which are outspoken, which react to the latest situation and which seek to rethink established positions.

By no means do we try to present a comprehensive account of the exile movement, nor do these views suggest any universal direction to follow. Rather, we believe that the strength for democracy, both inside and outside Burma, arises from the multitude of coexistent voices as well as the ability to consider and integrate new ideas, and by developing constructive ways of voicing and reviewing criticism. In this vein we give much space to authors from outside established structures.

We see these articles as incentives to feed ongoing discussions and to spark new debates, which will continue beyond the very limited framework provided by the conference and this publication. We also want to offer a revised image to the global public and to point out the blatant neglect of investment in capacity building of Burmese proponents of democracy who are living here among us.

Its visible and impressive achievements during many decades prove that the Burmese exile movement fills a gap that no one else can fill. Now more than ever it is crucial to maintain this movement and ceaselessly demonstrate its relevance for the cause of Burma to foreign players, to the population inside Burma, and to the Burmese exile community at large. 《

Christoph Amthor is project manager and researcher at Burma Center Prague and one of its founders.

“Burmese in Europe – Promoting Partnership for Transition in Burma”

Proceedings of the Public Session of the Conference in Prague, September 15

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

During her opening remarks, **Ms. Sabe A. Soe**, Director of the Burma Center Prague, noted that this day was the International Day of Democracy. “We celebrate the values but we are sad that we aren’t enjoying this day with our countrymen inside Burma,” she explained. Two years ago the International Day of Democracy in Burma was met with demonstrations and violence, but “Burmese have shown that they haven’t given up,” she said.

She explained that the aim of the conference was to focus on greater understanding of the situation in Burma, its long-term development, and the activities of Burmese in exile in Asia as well as in Europe.

Ms. Soe read a letter the conference received from former dissident and former Czech President Václav Havel.

A reprint can be found below in this publication.

Mr. Rolf Ericsson, Deputy Head of the Embassy of Sweden, gave a welcoming speech on behalf of the EU Presidency. He explained that Burma is high on the agenda of the Swedish Presidency, EU sanctions remain in place, and that the EU is pushing for open dialogue with the regime although the oppression continues. He outlined further continuing steps for the EU:

- the EU regularly raises issues concerning Burma whenever meeting Asian partners who can influence the regime;
- the EU envoy is maintaining a dialogue with regional actors;
- the EU must continue to push for the immediate and unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi;
- and the Swedish Presidency will continue coordinating the EU position concerning the upcoming elections.

In the keynote address, His Excellency **Mr. Jiří Šitler**, Director of the Asia and Pacific Department of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Czech Ambassador to Burma, quoted from “The Czechs and Us,” an article written several years ago by Aung San Suu Kyi. “Dissident minds run along similar tracks, because their encounters with authority are of a similar nature,” she wrote. “Their intellectual competencies are always ready to question authority, whosoever that may be.” The Czech Republic has already won its struggle, Mr. Šitler said, and therefore could also contribute to Burma’s struggle. Referring to Mr. Havel, he pointed out that “even a small number of individuals can bring down the most repressive regime.” He stated the position of the Czech Republic, which urges the unconditional and

immediate release of all political detainees and prisoners, urges the regime to stop all military actions against ethnic groups and to initiate dialogue with them, and supports targeted sanctions, including financial and banking sanctions. He added that the Czech Republic supports the international arms embargo and would like to see it expanded. “We are ready to share our experience from our own transition to democracy,” he concluded, again citing Aung San Suu Kyi’s words, it’s our duty “to use our liberty to promote yours.”

A. POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

Chaired by Ms. Marie Peřinová, People in Need

Prospects for Dialogue in Burma – **Dr. Thaung Htun**, Burma Fund, Policy Think Tank of the NCGUB

Dr. Htun began by pointing out that after twenty years of time and energy spent of trying to engage the regime in dialogue, there have been few results because the regime is not interested in dialogue. The SPDC perceives taking part in any reconciliation effort as a threat to national sovereignty and unity. In terms of reconciliation with cease-fire groups, they are not ready to participate in elections without a review of the constitution, which the regime is unwilling to do.

Dr. Htun mentioned the National Reconciliation Proposal and the Shwegondaing Declaration, in which the authors recognized that the army has to be a part of any transition process. Also, ethnic groups must be taken into account, and the constitution should be taken as a flexible document that can be amended in the future.

The prospect for dialogue with the regime is very slim however. The regime is not interested in giving up any power and is enjoying diplomatic and economic benefits at the moment, including at least \$2.4 billion from the sale of gas to Thailand. The response to offers of reconciliation has been nonexistent: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is still under house arrest. The SPDC has put pressure on the Wa, Kachin and Shan to turn their armies into border guards. The costs of this stalemate are poverty, malnutrition, disease and poor education. The regional implications have been drug trafficking and cross border disputes.

However, there have been indications in the last six months that some elements within the military are open to some degree of reform. On top of this, there is an growing space for civil society within Burma.

Internationally, there are both “push” and “pull” factors that may bring the regime to the negotiating table. The “pull” factors include UNSG and the “Group of Friends”, including the UN Special Envoy to Burma. The army is generally distrustful of international diplomats, but there are options. Indonesia, for example, could potentially play a constructive role. The same applies to China: while China has been the SPDC’s ally, its main interest is in securing the Burmese/Chinese border. This is something that the regime cannot provide.

Political Change in Burma – **Mr. Nwe Aung**, NCUB Burma Office Europe

Mr. Aung began his talk by commenting on the Proposal for Reconciliation, which he described as an olive branch that the regime is unlikely to take. Nonetheless,

efforts to engage the regime will continue. Referring to Dr. Htun's discussion, he stated that he would emphasize the "push" approach over the "pull."

There is a need for a strong binding solution from the UN, but this is difficult because of China and Russia. East Timor is, however, advocating suspending Myanmar from the UN. Generally, the UNSC has a responsibility to protect, and since the SPDC is not willing to protect the Burmese people, this has become an international responsibility.

In terms of arms embargoes, it is difficult because despite EU and US arms embargoes, other countries are still selling the regime arms. The Czech government has been instrumental in advocating arms embargoes. Generally, more sanctions are needed from the EU.

The military regime is afraid of the International Criminal Court. There have been many human rights violations during the regime's tenure, and the Burma Lawyers Council and other organizations have been trying to get the generals in court. In terms of the elections, Mr. Aung pointed out that NCUB rejects both the 2008 constitution and the 2010 elections.

Relevance of Ethnic Conciliation for the Future of Burma – **Dr. Lian Sakhong**, Ethnic Nationalities Council

Dr. Sakhong began by pointing out that ethnic groups have been fighting for the past sixty years, and that this is the root of many of Burma's problems. The ethnic divisions have caused problems in Burma not strictly on ideological grounds, but have been a constant theme. U Nu promulgated state religion in 1961, General Ne

Win instituted a national language policy in 1966 and General Saw Maung changed the name of the country to Myanmar – even though some ethnic groups were never in the Myanmar Kingdom.

Armed resistance on the part of ethnic groups started as a means of self defense in response to actions such as the government's *Four Cut Strategy* in the late 1960's. Today, armed resistance has become a way of life. It is not, however, a political solution. The future of armed resistance should only be in the context of self defense.

There have been several strategies and alliances adopted by ethnic groups and things seemed to be going in a good direction. In moving forward there needs to be a tri-partite dialogue. Any solution should ideally include the creation of a democratic federal union, democratic rights, political equality and international self-determination. There should be state-building, but not nation-building and emphasis on unity in diversity as a political value.

B. SOCIAL IMPERATIVES

Chaired by Ms. Sabe Soe, BCP

In her speech, "Famine, Refugees, and Activism from the Indian Point of View," **Dr. Alana Golmei** of the Burma Centre Delhi described the social aftermath of famine, persecution, and escape upon Burmese refugees in India. Typically, refugees arrive in northeast India but after a few days they're on the move again, and remain mobile. Burmese may also try to get to border areas to pick up food donations, but accessibility of the remote jungle areas is very limited. Those who do settle in India are often identified as illegal migrants and

are forced to perform manual labor; therefore they have no land and no opportunity to grow their own food. In urban areas, such as Delhi, only 10 percent of refugees can qualify for aid. It can take 18 to 24 months for people to obtain refugee status, and applicants still have to obtain status from the Indian government before finally obtaining aid from the UNHCR, the only governmental aid agency available to Burmese. Therefore, squatters live in sub-standard housing, with up to 15 people to a room with no water or electricity. The resulting preventable diseases – malaria, diarrhea – are rampant. The school dropout rate is 50 percent.

Dr. Golmei listed four factors negatively affecting the Indian government's position on Burma: natural resources in Burma; the influence of China; India's "Go East" strategy; and insurgency groups. On the other hand, she said, pressure is mounting for greater humanitarian aid from several groups: the Indian Parliament's Forum for Democracy in Burma, civil society advocacy groups, and pro-democracy organizations. "India and Burma have always been described as good neighbors," she concluded, "but it should be as people-to-people neighbors, not just countries."

Dr. Khin Zaw Win has been working in health and humanitarian aid services and with universities engaged in capacity building ahead of the 2010 elections. In his presentation, "Change through Humanitarian Aid in Myanmar," he cited several reports on humanitarian aid programs, and described positive and negative influences on aid and the social and humanitarian situation in Burma. He explained that people, programs, and policies can be identi-

fied as either "connectors" or "dividers." Certainly, the past 60 years of civil war is a good example of a major divider. The high level of international frustration at the lack of aid or the unresponsiveness of the regime to international pressure can also ultimately function as a divider. "The major responsibility lies with the regime," he pointed out, "but we can't leave it at that." Humanitarian aid must have two purposes: to provide the assistance needed, but also to empower local communities.

Although the international rush to provide aid following a natural disaster such as the recent Cyclone Nargis can be a connector, without local empowerment the aid can be the catalyst for division, creating dependency, corruption, and disruption of the local labor market. "Deep structural crises require attention; it's a long-term process," he declared. If one is going to become an agent of change, he said, it goes without saying that one has to become a part of the change, and bear in mind whether one becomes a connector or a divider.

The concept of creating political space was the topic of the presentation by **Mr. Ko Ko Thett**, of the Asia Europe People's Forum Committee – Finland. He explained that political space is usually understood as a physical place, such as colonization of a territory. However, it's also possible to create private political space, and he cited the example of a book published by dissatisfied Burmese universities students who wrote 150 short stories about their loss of student life as the universities shut down.

He went on to compare and contrast the use of political space for both regime change and change of the political landscape. A regime may be characterized by

its authoritarian nature and strong in-group loyalty, whereas in a political landscape, authority is decentralized and there is weak in-group loyalty.

How does this play out in day-to-day politics? In a regime, antagonism results in rage which leads to assassination, violence, and civil disobedience, a feeling of “anti-everything.” There is an underground movement, and a dangerous/endangered, individual hero emerges. In a political landscape, emphasis is on institution-building, promotion of social capital, investment in education, and collaboration, accommodation, and mutual co-optation (influencing, bartering, negotiation). The masses are active and mobile, but no heroic individual emerges, resulting in a low-risk, often ineffective movement.

Powerful, private political space is available for use in the upcoming 2010 elections. People have the option of not voting, but Mr. Thett more strongly advocates that everyone vote, because that creates a win-win situation. If the elections are free and fair, everyone will benefit. But if they are not, due to the international community’s high level of scrutiny of the election process and its results, some degree of political change will inevitably result. That’s why the regime is so fearful of the elections.

Connected to the role of the private political landscape, “The Role and Participation of Women in Democratization” was described by the final speaker, **Ms. Khin Ohmar**, of the Burmese Women’s Union. Women want to be equal in democracy movements but have found very little space for themselves within the movements, she said. At times the international community has asked, “Where are the women?” and as

a result, women have discovered that they have to create their own space, creating a movement within the movement.

This means that women must engage in politics but also must free themselves from gender-based discrimination and even violence. State-sponsored violence in the form of rape, sexual harassment, and making women sexual objects filters down to the community level and ultimately even to the private household, she explained. And as more refugees flee to border regions the position of women is downgraded even further: young women are trafficked outside the country or are put to work in karaoke clubs and massage parlors, bought by elite men with power and money. Women who escape to other countries also suffer sexual violence and discrimination in their host countries because there are no laws to protect them.

So, Ms. Khin Ohmar explained, women are becoming involved in empowerment work inside the country and at its border areas, focusing on advocacy work in the regions and internationally, and are becoming active partners in political alliances with men. They are participating in the constitutional and national reconciliation processes. Long-term projects include training women to challenge the norms and traditions which have separated them from full participation and rights, and training women to become political and human rights activists.

An important point raised in open discussion following the presentations was the way different groups regard NGOs and humanitarian aid. Donors in Western countries may quickly become disillusioned when the regime’s attitude remains

entrenched; some NGOs may refuse to give aid to countries with corrupt governments; some may believe that sanctions include prohibition of all forms of aid; some groups within a country may demand that all outside aid be withdrawn while others want to invite more NGOs in.

Mr. Šitler was quick to respond that no restrictions have been imposed on aid from the Czech Republic to Burma, ie, sanctions are against military equipment, arms, visas, etc. and not on any humanitarian aid. Rather, he said, obstacles to provision of aid are imposed by the regime. He pointed out that the countries which are imposing sanctions are also among those which are the largest donors of humanitarian aid.

Dr. Khin Zaw Win explained that it's important to be cautious about pleas for reconstruction and development aid because these types of grants go into the pockets of those in the regime and their military cronies. "But the international community knows this," he added.

Further discussion emphasized the need to sensitize and train young people to prepare for the changes that must come from inside Burma. Ms. Soe pointed out the strong need for training and education of young people in exile. They work very hard but their training and qualifications are very poor. "Don't forget that we are the ones who will bring democratic values back to our country," she warned. "After all, what are we going to say democracy really is?"

C. POSSIBLE WAYS TO MEET THE CHALLENGE

Chaired by Jiří Šitler, Czech MFA

The 2010 Elections – International Perspectives – **Dr. Maung Zarni**, London School of Economics and Political Science, Centre for Global Governance

The question is: is the election the best opportunity for change, or is it a cynical attempt by the military to hold onto power in a different form? The opposition has the moral advantage regarding this issue, but it shares two similarities with the regime: it refuses to hear dissenting voices and refuses to change its ways.

Some international NGOs, as well as local NGOs in Burma, are proponents of the elections. While recognizing that the election will most likely have no effect, it is "the only game in town." Although the elections will not necessarily bring about more openness, there is a general change taking place within the army. The new generation of officers will want to refine the army's legacy, and some are critical of Than Shwe's policies.

The main opponents of elections, such as U Win Tin, maintain that the vote will simply legitimize the regime's monopoly on power while it responds with only minimal nudges towards democracy.

While Dr. Zarni does not take a strong position one way or the other, he identified several issues as being important for the future of the country. How will post-2010 politics look with regard to the following issues:

1. The junta is not totally isolated internationally. How will this change with the election?
2. Will the government become more or less militaristic?

3. Power relations – inter and intra-ethnic – are colonial in nature.
4. The officer corps supports the consolidation of the military's centralized power.
5. Burmese society – across all ethnic groups – is illiberal and maintains racist, sexist and feudal attitudes.

These issues are extremely important, and should receive more attention than more trivial political matters. More pragmatism and less moralizing by the opposition is needed in pursuit of this goal.

International Action for Change in Burma – **Ms. Zoya Phan**, Burma Campaign UK

It is important to maintain international pressure on the human rights situation in Burma, since other methods, such as protest, elections and armed struggle have already been tried, with little success. There have been many proposals for national reconciliation, but the regime refuses to talk.

International support should include targeted sanctions to cut the regime's lifeline, diplomatic pressure at high levels, legal pressure and financial support. The USA enacted sanctions in 1997, but these excluded Unocal/Chevron. In 2003, a stricter investment ban was enacted, but this didn't cover oil and gas. In 2008, gem stone imports from Burma were banned – it's too early to see if this will yield results. Bans on EU investment don't cover the biggest earner: Total.

The generals don't understand the language of diplomacy, so a soft approach will not work. The election results should be rejected internationally. The goal should be

a tripartite dialogue, and the international community should listen to democracy advocates in pursuing this.

Multi-party Talks – **Mr. Harn Yawng-hwe**, Euro Burma Office.

The presentation of Mr. Yawng-hwe can be found below in this publication.

Possible Ways to Meet the Challenge – **Dr. Naing Aung**, Forum for Democracy in Burma

Now that the regime has neglected the constitutional review dialogue, the challenges will come after 2010. The army will continue to dominate state affairs. State-sponsored human rights crimes will continue and health and education needs will not be met. There is less chance now of “above ground” opposition, which is required for change – as Václav Havel has said. The opposition should not blame each other, but should concentrate on tasks such as educating the public about the flaws in the elections. The opposition is divided and this plays into the hands of the regime.

Internationally, political pressure should force the regime to negotiate and compromise, rather than isolate it. The UN, ASEAN, India, US and EU should form a core group to coordinate these efforts. The international community should be prepared to not recognize the elections and to continue to engage Burma.

The opposition should be prepared to react to an election without compromises. The situation won't change fundamentally. The opposition has been trying the same methods for twenty years. However, these methods could be used more effectively. People tend to stop at the entry point and not fully exploit tools to engage. 《

MULTI-PARTY TALKS

By Harn Yawnghwe

“Multi-Party Talks” on Burma were first proposed by the Ethnic Nationalities Council in 2006. At that time, the international community was still very divided on how to deal with the Burma question. The idea was to try to bring together the two extremes – neighbouring countries and the West. It was a best-case scenario based on the North Korean Six-Party Talks – North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the USA – and the “Quartet of International Mediators for the Middle East” – the UN, EU, Russia and the USA. Of course, this assumed that the international community had the will to resolve the Burma problem. In reality, Burma is not on the priority list of any nation’s agenda and thus cannot attract the kind of attention and resources necessary to set up a new international mechanism to enable “Multi-Party Talks” on Burma to take place.

”The SPDC prefers the status quo. It does not really care whether sanctions are lifted or not.”

Shocked by the brutal repression of monks during the “Saffron Revolution” of September 2007, the international community has since become more cohesive. But the gap still remains between those who want to impose more sanctions and those who feel engaging the regime will bring better results. Neither has made much progress.

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

In December 2007, the “Group of Friends” of the UN Secretary-General was formed. It consists of Australia, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Britain, the USA, and Vietnam, as well as the country holding the presidency of the European Union – currently Sweden. It differs from the concept of the “Multi-Party Talks”:

- It does not include Burma
- It is an ad-hoc, unofficial body advising the UN Secretary-General
- It has no clearly defined goals nor vision of what can be accomplished

The composition is slightly larger and different – voluntary, individual country membership rather than blocks of strategic stakeholders (Australia, France, Indonesia, Norway, Singapore, Thailand, Britain, and Vietnam versus South Asia, ASEAN, and the EU).

Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 further galvanized the international community to try to work together in more concrete terms in a limited field – cyclone relief. The Tripartite Core Group (TCG) – Burma, the UN and ASEAN – was formed to coordinate the work. The EU, Norway, the USA and other nations provided funding.

This has worked well enough to encourage the international community to attempt to expand both the geographic scope and work of the TCG. This has, however, not

been welcomed by the Burma's ruling party, the SPDC.

To date there is still no mechanism to coordinate the international community. But it is unlikely that "Multi-Party Talks" can be initiated. This is because:

- The SPDC is not interested in engaging the international community to solve Burma's problems.
- The SPDC is determined to implement its Road Map and hold elections in 2010. It does not want any foreign involvement in the process.
- The SPDC would like to continue exploiting the differences that exist in the international community and it would rather have direct bilateral talks with nations like the USA.
- Burma is still not high enough on the priority list of the international community and no nation is going to allocate the necessary resources.

It is unlikely that the international situation will change much with regards to Burma in the short or medium term. It is also very unlikely that the SPDC will change its attitude before the 2010 elections. Therefore, rather than pursue the "Multi-Party Talks", it may be more beneficial in the short term to try to provide input to the "Group of Friends".

However, given the frequently stated perception that the UN Secretary-General is weak, and the fact that the Obama administration is reviewing its Burma policy, nothing drastic can be expected. The most positive outcome might be an agreement to better coordinate increased humanitarian aid to Burma. While this may not be much, it should be welcomed because there are

reports that the Burmese economy may fare badly this year and that the agriculture sector may face a crisis.

OPPORTUNITIES

Does this mean that there is nothing that the international community can do? Yes and no. Timing is a key factor. In terms of humanitarian aid there is a lot more that the international community can do in these crisis areas:

- a) Cyclone recovery in the delta
- b) Famine in Chin State
- c) Ongoing refugee crisis on the Thai border
- d) Internally Displaced Persons in Shan, Karen and Karenni States
- e) Potential refugee and IDP crisis in Kachin, Shan and Mon States on the Chinese and Thai borders
- f) Potential famine in northern Rakine State/Rohingya and the Dry Zone
- g) Potential economic crisis based on rice crop failure

In terms of politics, the scope is more limited. While many are hopeful that the new engagement with the USA will lead to a new policy, this possibility is remote. For the USA, the minimum concession is the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The SPDC cannot agree. For the SPDC, the minimum requirement is the lifting of sanctions. For the USA, without the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi this cannot be done. The stalemate will, therefore, continue as long as Senior-General Than Shwe and the SPDC remain in power.

International efforts to bring about change in Burma have not succeeded in the

last 20 years. We can keep trying internationally but it may take another 20-40 years. We cannot depend on it.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM THE ELECTIONS?

One possibility for change is the 2010 elections. Can we try something different? Do not misunderstand me. I am not supporting the 2010 elections. I am also not saying that the elections will bring positive change. As far as Senior-General Than Shwe is concerned, there will be no change whether or not the elections take place. The Army must remain in absolute control either directly or indirectly. As a result, international sanctions will remain in place. The status quo will continue. What I am saying is that when there is change, when there is movement, there might be a possibility to introduce something that will improve the situation. Without movement, there is nothing anyone can do.

The SPDC prefers the status quo. It does not really care whether sanctions are lifted or not. It wants the international community and especially the domestic opposition to remain paralyzed. We need to be prepared to influence the outcome when change takes place:

1) Generational change within the ruling SPDC. Is there any way to change the mindset of the senior officers? For example, Cyclone Nargis forced many low-level and mid-level Army officers and civil servants over a wide range of

ministries to interact with the population and civil society to deal with immediate life and death issues without referring back to the top. Can the new generals coming to power be made to see that it is possible to deal with existing problems in a different way?

- 2) Change from direct to indirect military rule – the elections. While the SPDC plans to control this process every step of the way, they cannot be 100% certain. Even if the democratic opposition did nothing, the outcome is uncertain for the military. This is true of elections even in democratic countries. People are unpredictable. The more factors there are to consider in an election, the more uncertain the outcome becomes. If the elections return democratic leaders or more liberal military officers, are we prepared to welcome them and empower them to sustain the change?
- 3) Internal dynamics within the military between officers who will remain in the Army and those who will have to retire to be elected. Can we somehow empower the elected members so that the elected government provides some degree of oversight?

When there is change, our actions will help to shape events either in a positive or negative direction. We need to evaluate whether they will contribute to democracy or dictatorship in the short and long terms. It is not possible in the heat of the moment to make such evaluations. So it is important to start mapping out the options now. 《

Harn Yawnghwe is the Executive Director of the Euro-Burma Office in Brussels.

Position Represented at the Conference

by Nwe Aung

The following is my summarized contribution on “Political Change in Burma” to the Conference hosted by Burma Center Prague:

- 1) Dr. Thaug Htun mentioned the ‘Proposal for National Reconciliation Towards Democracy and Development in Burma 2009’ in his contribution “Prospects for Dialogue in Burma.”
- 2) The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) fully support the Proposal, which is an olive branch for the international community as well as for the Burmese military. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said, “It is still not too late to achieve national reconciliation.”
- 3) But the NCUB believes that the military regime always ignores the democratic movement’s goodwill offer and goes forward with their 7-step Roadmap, which we totally reject, including the 2010 sham election and the 2008 Nargis constitution. The UN should strongly reject and declare as null and void the 2008 Nargis constitution, which it did in South Africa in 1983 (UNSC resolution 554, 1984).
- 4) We believe firmly that the military dictators cannot be persuaded to come to the reconciliation table by ‘constructive engagement’ by a ‘softly, softly approach’, or by offering humanitarian aid. In order to persuade them to the reconciliation table, strong and timely actions of the international community, such as the UNSC, UNGA, EU, and ASEAN, are to be applied, for example:
 - 5) A strong and timely UNSC binding resolution on the military regime has to be adopted. We welcome President Ramos-Horta’s article, advocating for a strong UNSC binding resolution.
 - 6) The UN membership of the Burmese military regime should be suspended and diplomatic relationship should be down-graded.
 - 7) A global arms embargo must be imposed, as an EU arms embargo alone is not enough. Thanks go to the Czech Government and Desmond Tutu, among others, for their strong advocacy.
 - 8) EU should impose stronger sanctions on the military regime, for example in the sectors of financial, insurance and marine products, and a ban on the Euro currency in Burma.
 - 9) The military regime is committing gross crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and exhumation, which constitute a threat to the peace. The UNSC should form a commission of inquiry in a timely manner to investigate the crimes and refer the report to the International Criminal Court (ICC), so that justice can be had. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Burma Conference in Prague

- 10) The NCUB is of the strong opinion that the UNSC's intervention in Burma is at present vital due to the gross human rights violations by the Burmese military offensives, especially in ethnic areas of Eastern Burma.
- 11) Crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing activate the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) requiring the UN to take decisive action in a timely and effective manner through the Security Council when the military regime

Nwe Aung is the Director of the Burma Office-Europe in London.

Letter from the former Czech president Václav Havel for the Burma conference in Prague on September 15-16, 2009.

›

in Burma is manifestly failing to protect its own population.

- 12) The unified democratic movement of Burma is going to challenge the credentials of the illegitimate military representation at the UNGA this year, and seek strong support from the friendly member states of the UNGA. 《

VÁCLAV HAVEL

in Hradecek, August 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends,

I am pleased that Burma Center Prague decided to organize this important gathering and I would like to extend a warm welcome to you. Let me also thank everyone else who helped prepare the conference as well as those who are participating in it.

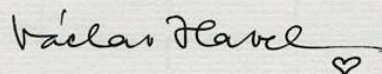
I have been following the situation in Burma for a long time, criticizing the military junta and drawing attention to cases of injustice, which the Burmese are exposed to every single day. The state of human and civil rights in the country is alarming and I consider the Burmese regime to be among the most repulsive in the world. Of course, no authoritarian let alone totalitarian regime will change on its own. Change requires a functioning national opposition and unrelenting international pressure.

What can we, who do not live in Burma, do to bring down the current regime and help the country onto the road to freedom and democracy?

- 1) We should remind, again and again, democratic governments of the free world that even in practical politics it is necessary to place human rights concerns above economic interests and not the other way around.
- 2) We should demand that policies towards Burma be clearly formulated such that the Burma issue remains a priority for the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the European Union, the United States, and the ASEAN countries.
- 3) We should appeal to the relevant international organizations to find a path towards China's disengagement in Burma.
- 4) We should, from now on, show continued solidarity with open-minded Burmese and support or directly organize support for those persecuted and their families through NGOs and humanitarian organizations.

Please allow me to express my admiration for all those who despite difficult conditions, harassment, persecution, and imprisonment tirelessly and peacefully to promote human and civil rights in Burma.

I wish you every success for your Prague meeting and look forward to its outcome.

Václav Havel 

Conclusive Statement

by Burma Center Prague

The conference was conducted in awareness of the fact that the Burmese pro-democracy movement in exile is a complex forum with different approaches that in the past have often missed opportunities to consult each other on points of disagreement. Participants, however, agree that constructive communication within the movement is crucial for maintaining an important role in the future of Burma and in order to be perceived by the international community as a key partner for further development.

Participants also agreed that the role of ethnic nationalities and the role of women deserve particular attention as pivotal factors for achieving reconciliation, stability, and justice in Burma.

Although the upcoming elections, scheduled for 2010, are unanimously identified as lacking democratic legitimacy, participants took different positions on whether people should be encouraged to take part in the election, since the participation of democratic forces would open the chance for a gradual change or, on the contrary, the democratic forces' participation might merely strengthen and legitimize the regime.

Many participants suggested that an arms embargo would be an effective means to curtail the regime's suppression of the Burmese population. Several speakers

argued that change in Burma could be promoted by directing support to civil society activities inside Burma, even if they do not openly pursue political objectives.

While all participants agreed that a dialog with the regime is necessary and must be benchmarked by credible reciprocal steps, no agreement could be reached on the question of the conditions of involvement. Also, different positions were maintained on the issue of sanctions versus engagement. Participants, however, agreed with the observation that past activities for democracy lack tangible results not least because the regime enjoys strong international economic and political support.

Burmese participants welcomed the interest and involvement of European and Western players and recommend that they keep consulting the expertise of the Burmese pro-democracy movement in exile as a primary force making use of its capacity to act as a bridge between Burma and the international community. Participants in the conference articulated their wish to repeat similar conferences that facilitate a meaningful dialogue between representatives of different ethnic groups and different approaches for the common goal of democracy, freedom, and justice in Burma and to invite the participation of European/Western players. They particularly appreciated the contribution of participants who joined them from inside Burma. 《

Than Shwe Has Left the City. Impressions from Rangoon

by Bianca Son

Every time an Embassy official approves my visa for Burma, my heart leaps, I am thrilled to once again visit the land of many pagodas. I have been travelling in and out of Burma for many years now. My visits were always dominated by my awareness of the state of the Union of Burma – the grave situation of all the people inside its borders. Still, I can honestly say, I enjoyed my trips; I enjoyed my encounters with everyday people.

This time, I was looking forward to seeing the very people that had had the courage to rise up against the government just two years earlier. Surely, there would be tension in the air. Surely this time people might speak to me about it. I did not enter Burma in 2007. Instead, I waited at the border area hoping, watching and waiting. Finally, I was worried about the wake of misery I might leave behind so I stayed outside.

Now, in 2009, things must have changed in Rangoon; I was not there for the Saffron Revolution. Surely the Revolution has continued in some way, perhaps underground. I want to see it, I want to experience it. I want to find evidence of the Revolution, to engage with it, to be a part of it. Even though I am on the wrong side of time, I might be able to cluster this trip with the Revolution in years to come – at least in memory. If only I can find something in Rangoon. I need evidence of change.

I leave for Rangoon; my stomach in knots, my brain occupied with dozens of scenarios, including one of me spending years in Insein Jail. Allowing my body to take control, I stop thinking as soon as I board the plane. I am frozen, afraid to look out the window. Everyone, I know, is a spy. I wave about the Lonely Planet frantically turning it upside down and right side up again making it obvious that I am looking at maps of downtown Rangoon. Behaving like every tourist in every city is calming. For a moment, I feel like a tourist. I want to be with the people. I look forward to the masses in longies, the coffee shops, the Indian restaurants that encourage me to eat with my hands, the monks in the early morning hours.

I remember very little of my actual arrival. Perhaps I forgot to breathe, but somehow I manage to get into the heart of the city. The next few days are hazy as well. I am paralyzed. Time, for me, suddenly hangs like stagnant air. Finally, I look up and notice today's Rangoon.

A CITY OF DECAY

The Thatmadaw's presence is hardly noticeable. Gone are the large red billboards heralding self-reliance, gone are the many security booths on street corners wrapped in barbed wire. Gone are the truck loads of soldiers spitting betlenut. Than Shwe has left the city and left all the peo-

ple behind. Everything is in a state of decay. I negotiate the streets and instead of allowing incense to fill my nostrils, I cannot ignore the smell of death. It is sweet and in some moments smells like coconut rice. But my body aches; I am ill. My insides reflect the state of the nation's former capital. Rangoon is dying.

Longies are replaced by black jeans, baseball caps and hip-hop T-shirts. Women manoeuvre on heels that are too high, carefully balancing their steps on broken sidewalks within the tight corridors of the inner city. Only "officials" continue to wear the

”Rangoon is no longer a threat to Than Shwe. He has created his own safe haven elsewhere deep in the jungle.”

national dress of pristinely white ironed dress shirts tucked neatly into longies. It's the rainy season. The rain does not stop; I cannot think, I cannot assess what is happening in my city, a city in which my father studied; one that holds my many childhood memories. I cannot get a proper look at the city. I only know it is dark in Rangoon, morale is low. Before, money changers would approach and retreat with the nod of a head, now I am followed for blocks and blocks by desperate people – mostly, it seems, of Indian descent. Children slap taxi windows when I buy just 20 kyats worth of jasmine, a hotel door man tells me that he believes all foreigners are informants.

Aung San Suu Kyi, it seems, is only a figurative hero. People have lost hope in her actual ability to create change. The beer

shops are thriving and everyone has red-stained teeth. The tea shops, on the whole, appear to be empty. I was always a stranger in the city, but now the city has become a stranger to me. I begin to count the days until I can leave. This city is dead.

Burma's richest man and son-in-law to Than Shwe is now running Rangoon. Tay Za's presence is thriving and alive. The Lonely Planet explains that a SIM card costs a whopping US\$ 1000, but Tay Za, new man of the people, runs a 20-dollar SIM card deal. Everyone's on the phone. Inside Internet cafes, I have access to nearly any site imaginable. The people are molded into consumers, perfect for Tay Za. Money speaks loudly in Rangoon, even monks and nuns come up to me asking for money. Tay Za is making real changes. He employs expats for his fleet of non-flying Air Bagan planes and losing football teams. For these expats, Tay Za is "a nice guy." Rangoon and the whole of Burma is a family business for Tay Za; he is married to Than Shwe's own daughter. Second in command is his 23 year-old son, Pyo. Pyo, too, is a "nice guy." He manages his father's businesses and has his driver ferry him about in a Rolls Royce. The expats occasionally get a ride and speak highly of the experience. I wonder if the juxtaposition confuses them, as it would me; I wonder if they, too, notice that Rangoon is dying.

According to the dozens of expats Pyo manages, he calls last-minute meetings but supplies Black Label and French cuisine. Everything is good for them. Tay Za and Pyo are waiting for the sanctions to lift when they will see 'real' money. They sup-

port dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi; she can bring an end to the darn sanctions!

Instead of tea shops, I hang out in hotel bars, making the expat Happy Hour rounds Monday through Sunday from hotel bar to hotel bar. I listen to them and laugh at their jokes. All are striving to be part of the eventual boom. Each one will get a piece of the pie. No one speaks of Aung San Suu Kyi. Occasionally, someone will mention the unspeakable, but is hushed quickly by eyes rolling toward possible microphones in the ceiling – the conversation switches to football or to the many homes the expats are building all around Asia. I no longer believe that the microphones are there. Rangoon is no longer a threat to Than Shwe. He has created his own safe haven elsewhere deep in the jungle.

EXPAT CYNICISM

My expat time is not only limited to the hotel bar, but I also receive invites to embassy dinners and private functions designed for the western elite. Participation comes easy to me. I just smile and nod my head to every offered glass of newly pressed wine from Than Shwe's own local vineyard. Over dinner someone explains the wisdom of Than Shwe's comment to Nargis victims, "Why do you beg for chocolate from foreigners, if you are hungry eat frogs." "Frogs are a delicacy in my country" chuckles another expat. "The Generals are misunderstood" figures in most conversations. Everyone agrees, the Burmese people have no business participating in the creation of democracy. Look at Thailand, look what has happened there. Tourism swept in like a tidal wave; the government is rich, but the everyday busi-

nessman struggles for survival while his daughters dance at Nana. "Even if there were democracy tomorrow, no one is prepared." More wine is poured and everyone agrees that we are not in the business of politics and thus sheepishly enjoy an evening out of the sun, "among friends." The city is dead and no one cares!

Alone on another evening, I gaze at Sule Paya Lan, the road where the Saffron Revolution took place. I can clearly see the very pavement where photojournalist Kenji Nagai was assassinated. The next day I walk there, back and forth, nothing, there is no evidence here. I am not a part of the Saffron Revolution. The proximity of time is relative. Two years means nothing here. Two years, less than a thousand days, and there is nothing left. Nothing is left of the Revolution. It feels as though the people resigned to their fate. Taxi drivers used to speak to me in Rangoon, now my daily journeys are made in silence. The people, it seems, have come to realize that there is no hope from the West. China, perhaps, is the only country that might offer some relief.

Rangoon is a sinking ship. Everyone is talking about Naypyidaw. Some expats have access and speak of a new city where Than Shwe sleeps well. There are rumours that bunkers and intricate tunnels, all the way to China, make up the underground.

All my life I assumed that Burma's regime commits obvious atrocities against its people. These atrocities are not evident to everyone, especially the many expats profiting inside Burma. I now wonder how larger entities including governments view the situation in Burma. Are the military generals really misunderstood? Have we lost our moral compass? Have we given up

on the country completely – allotting it to China and India? Or worse to business people directly related to Than Shwe himself? What have our awareness campaigns achieved? United States President Obama recently said that democracy has never been imposed from the outside. Others have highlighted similar truths. If there is no change inside, how can we, from the outside, achieve anything? Our exiled politicians meet heads of states, presidents, UN representatives, actors, activists, “important people” – none have made an impact. Of

course, some NGOs are actively managing to keep people alive inside, especially in ethnic areas such as in the Delta. But simply being alive is not enough.

I am now glad to get out of Rangoon. I am not sure I will ever return. The pagodas, the food, even Bogyoke Zay, no longer have pull. I have lost some hope. For now, the most interesting place I would like to visit is Naypyidaw. I just want to get my head around what is happening and why because I no longer understand anything! 《

Bianca Son is a Reader at the University of London, School for Oriental and African Studies in the Department of History.

Democracy In Burma Is Worth Investing In

by Zoya Phan

For the past year in the UK, there have been almost daily reports in the media about expenses claimed by British MPs. Many seem to have taken advantage of the system, claiming expenses for extra homes and luxury items. The response from many British people is not just anger, but also to become cynical and say they won't bother voting any more. For myself, coming from Burma where people are making such huge sacrifices, including their lives, for the right to vote, this is a very strange response. How lucky they are to be able to vote out these MPs if they don't like them. In Burma, for years we didn't know that the generals had stolen at least \$5 billion

from gas revenues and had hidden the money in banks in Singapore. In the UK it was on the front page when a government minister claimed expenses of less than a euro for a bath plug.

This is democracy working, a free media holding a government and Parliament to account, and the public being able to get rid of MPs if they misbehave. But people in the UK now talk about having fewer MPs and reducing their funding. Having now lived in a democracy for five years, I can see how precious it is, but people in the UK seem to take it for granted, and want to reduce spending on MPs.

In my view this will make British democracy weaker, not stronger. I have been so impressed with many British MPs that I meet. They genuinely care about issues; and the support that many have given to our struggle for freedom in Burma, when they get no votes and no personal gain by doing so, has for me been a good example of how those that represent us should behave: to act with compassion and on principle, even caring about people they have never met who live thousands of miles away.

”When Burma’s generals are finally gone and we have democracy in Burma, that is when the hard work will really start.”

I think democracy is worth paying for because a government that is accountable to the people is essential for ensuring justice and development. Democracy is also worth paying for in Burma, but I have been watching with growing concern as funding for Burmese organisations working for democracy is cut by donors, including the European Commission.

Donors now say they want to fund in-country civil society capacity building. Of course this kind of work is important, but it is not the same as funding organisations overtly working for human rights and democracy. Why do the Commission and other governments always polarise these issues by choosing either one or the other, not both? They did the same when we lobbied governments to fund more cross-border aid. One British government official asked, ‘OK, if we fund cross-border aid,

which projects in-country do you want us to cut?’ The whole argument is a totally false one. It doesn’t have to be either or. It must be both. It is also false because both forms of support are in-country, the only difference is the way they are delivered.

Because of various restrictions by the dictatorship, there are large parts of Burma where it is impossible to deliver humanitarian assistance. Cross-border aid is the only way to reach those parts of Burma that the regime blocks aid to. It is similar with human rights and democratisation work. Because of restrictions by the dictatorship, it is almost impossible to do this work from inside Burma. Yes, some limited civil society capacity building, normally piggy-backing on aid projects, is possible in Burma. It is important that this continues. But it is not the same as overt pro-democracy and human rights work. Organisations need to be based outside Burma to organise and operate freely, and reach the international community. These groups get dismissed by some as ‘exile’ but their work is largely in-country; they act as a bridge between Burma and the world.

THE BACK DOOR TO BURMA

There is still a common misconception, left over from the days of Ne Win, that the Burmese dictatorship is isolationist. It isn’t. Burma’s generals have done much to integrate themselves into the international community. They have better relations with their neighbours than at any time in history, they have more foreign trade, more foreign investment, and more diplomatic missions around the world. The dictatorship isn’t isolationist, but it does try to isolate the

people of Burma from the world, and the world from information about what is really happening. The exile organisations on Burma's borders have been the back door to Burma. They break through the isolation that the generals try to impose on the people. This is where we find out what is really happening in Burma, the systematic use of rape, the torture of political prisoners, slave labour, executions, and the burning of thousands of villages. This information doesn't come from the United Nations, aid agencies, or foreign embassies in Burma. It comes from these 'exile' organisations. And now their funding is being cut, and so their capacity reduced. Burma's generals probably can't believe their luck.

”The fact that so many activists have been forced into exile creates an opportunity for the future stability of a democratic Burma.”

Already the dictatorship has been trying to slam shut this back door into Burma. It is no coincidence that the major new military offensives against the Karen are along the Thai-Burma border, even though there are Karen National Union (KNU) controlled areas much deeper inside Burma, even just a few days' travel from the new capital, Nay Pyi Daw. They have also been sending death squads into Thailand, assassinating my father, Padoh Mahn Sha, the General Secretary of the KNU, in February 2008, and targeting other democracy leaders. They are increasing pressure on the Royal Thai government, resulting in raids on offices, more restrictions, and more harassment. Burma's generals are pushing the

back door into Burma closed by cutting funding. The European Commission and other governments are helping them, giving that door a final shove.

When Burma's generals are finally gone and we have democracy in Burma, that is when the hard work will really start. The challenges our country will face are enormous: a legacy of dictatorship, extreme poverty, a history of centuries of conflict against and between ethnic people, cultural and environmental destruction, corruption, and an economy in ruins.

SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

To tackle these challenges we will need extraordinary leaders. Leaders who will embed democracy back into our culture. The fact that so many activists have been forced into exile creates an opportunity for the future stability of a democratic Burma. They can live in democracies and see how they work. In exile these people can have the opportunity to learn about democracy, to operate in organisations with democratic accountability, answering to civil society. They can gain skills which Burma will desperately need when democracy finally comes to our country. The international community should be investing in and supporting the organisations on the border where these skills can be learnt. It should learn lessons from East Timor, which needed so much international support. Work should be being done now to prepare for the day when Burma's generals are gone.

A forest does not just have one type of tree, and it is the same with democracy. A healthy democracy is multi-faceted, with

many layers of civil society and political activity. In Burma right now some seeds are not allowed to grow, so must be planted elsewhere. They are vital, though; they are the seeds of a future, genuine, flourishing democracy. Just because you want to water other seeds in Burma, doesn't mean you can let these die.

As in the UK, democracy for Burma is worth paying for, and investment now in organisations and individuals working on Burma's borders will reap rewards in the future. The move to cut funding must be reversed. Don't help Burma's generals slam the back door, isolating the country even further. Invest in our people and our organisations. Our future depends on it. 《

Zoya Phan is the international coordinator at Burma Campaign UK. Her autobiography, *Little Daughter*, was published in April 2009.

Not Out of Place

by Ko Ko Thett

Over the past twenty years, the Burmese democracy movement in exile has been among the most vocal critics of the 'Myanmar' military regime. The exiles' relentless efforts, shored up by the West, have been crucial in exposing the human rights violations and hopeless governance of the isolated military state to the world. The exiles' success in 'internationalizing the Burma problem' is no mean feat. Yet that sums up just about everything they have achieved so far.

Inside Burma, every single issue the exiles stand for – human rights, health, education, food security, you name it – has been exacerbated. The exiles have been incapable of negotiating the release of a

single political prisoner let alone achieving the 'national reconciliation' or negotiated settlement of key stakeholders via a political dialogue. Naturally the blame for Burma's woes falls on the moribund regime and the ineffectual international community. The Burmese exiles do not appreciate the fact that they are also responsible for the multiplicity of their country's crises. After all, they speak for the whole country.

The exile movement, including Western campaign groups, which should have demonstrated model governance for a future Burma, has turned out to be a colossal failure in democratic practice. Noble intentions notwithstanding, the movement today is

rife with anti-democratic symptoms such as authoritarianism, clientelism, character assassinations, elitism, factionalism, lack of transparency and accountability, male chauvinism, nepotism, ostracism, reverse ageism (the more senior the wiser), reverse racism (worship of the non-Burmese, especially whites), and social injustice. Myopic expediency politics, due to the lack of ideological direction or visionary statesmanship in exile, have undermined political and social cohesion of the whole movement. These traits, in varying degrees, are common to similar émigré movements worldwide. For the Burmese, however, they have become too conspicuous to be ignored.

”The big majority of the exiles have failed to make their movement participatory.”

According to an estimate some 3.5 to 4 million Burmese currently live outside Burma. At least half of them are immigrant workers carving out a living in Thailand. Numbers do not translate into strength. The politically active exile community is the tip of the iceberg compared to the overseas Burmese community, the ice beneath the surface. Most of the exile leaders have virtually no influence in the overseas Burmese communities, let alone inside Burma. Neither do they attempt to overcome the exile-overseas divide. Usually their elitism, spy-paranoia and prejudice mar their organizational abilities. Particularly the white-collar Burmese expatriates, who have come to see exiled politicians as careerists, treat the whole movement with disdain. In the Burmese exile movement, there is no Subhas Chandra Bose who could sway thousands

of his compatriots overseas. The Burmese Sangha political movement in exile that emerged after the ‘Saffron Revolution’ may be much closer to the overseas Burmese communities. It is another question as to whether the Sangha, with their conditioning in strict monastic order, can be a mediating force for the movement.

A TOP-HEAVY MOVEMENT

The vast majority of exiles therefore have failed to make their movement participatory. Their sensitivity to criticism and their ostracism have marginalized many reform-minded intellectuals. As a result, the movement has become more inward-looking and reclusive. A look at the structure of any long-standing Burmese exile organization will reveal the patriarchy of a clique of the same old exiles over the past twenty years. There is no room for youth in the leadership of the movement. Meritocracy is unheard of. In exile groups, just like inside Burma, hierarchy is usually organized in terms of seniority, patron-client relations or patrimonial leadership to ensure in-group loyalty. Women therefore set up their own exclusively-women organizations. Yet Burmese women’s organizations essentially remain under the hegemony of male-dominated groups since they are dependent on the established exiles for their survival.

Personal rivalries and power struggles within exile organizations often lead to the setting up of parallel organizations or splinter groups. Over the years the movement has seen the rise and fall of a myriad of Burmese exile groups, only to be followed by the emergence of more groups that aim

to tie splinter groups together. As a popular joke goes, two Burmese usually set up three organizations: one each and an umbrella group for both. Perhaps the number of umbrella organizations reflects the emphasis on 'solidarity' by the funding West. Consequently, alliance, coalition, congress, council, federation, forum, network, partnership, and lately even 'government,' have become the synonyms of delusory solidarity in Burmese exile politics.

”Usually senior exiles give juniors fish but they will not teach them how to fish.”

Perverse in-fighting and perpetual squabbles among the exiles mean there can be no such thing as organic unity in the movement. Even broad alliances built on common ground and functional unity can be wobbly when met with heady political challenges. The leaders of the umbrella groups are also the leaders of their own organizations plus numerous other institutions they belong to. Just like their nemesis Myanmar regime, the Burmese exile movement is top-heavy. The exiles seem oblivious to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's 1994 message to them: 'There can't be all chiefs and no Indians.'

Unlike the Myanmar regime which is run by a consolidated elite, the movement is run by a fractured elite. Most elite Burmese exiles are as elusive as eels, perhaps except to their foreign donors. They will not take accept your criticism. They will just ignore you, in a chillingly similar manner as their repetitive political demands have been ignored by their nemesis regime. The irony is that while the elite leaders are

jetting around the world, wining and dining, apparently enjoying their highly-paid activism, grassroots refugees usually spend their own hard-earned money for their political convictions and dissemination of their cultures in their countries of residence. On the other hand, some exiles get engaged in clientelist politics by luring Burmese asylum seekers, who do not really have the 'well-founded fear of persecution', into their fold. This practice is very common in countries with large Burmese communities such as Thailand, Japan, the UK and the US.

Another mode of exile corruption happens in 'proposal politics.' Over the years, many exile political groups have been transformed into civil society organizations. The political freedom of the movement as a whole has been compromised as the exile NGOs have to live up to the expectations of their Western donors. This process may be termed 'NGOnization of Burmese exile politics.' Proposals are part and parcel of NGO survival. Assisting nascent exile NGOs in their proposals is a lucrative job in the movement. Usually senior exiles give juniors fish but they will not teach them how to fish. Just like reproducing political statements that lack substance, the corrupt exiles effectively duplicate themselves by producing a new generation that lacks capacity or commitment, or both. Naturally, very few remain true to their proposals or dedicated to the movement after they get what they seek.

Like most of the top brass of the regime, most of the leading exiles and their hangers-on find that taking extreme positions is rewarding in their conflict, which has been institutionalized by sheer complexity and

duration. Some conflict experts hold that the Burmese generals as well as the exiles have become what Eric Hoffer calls 'true believers.' Moderate or rational voices tend to be marginalized in a true believer culture wherein both sides of the conflict feel morally righteous to stand their grounds. The institutionalization of the conflict also means that the identity of the participants of the conflict is now intrinsically linked with the conflict itself. In other words, the participants of an institutionalized conflict would not survive without the conflict. The toast 'Long live the revolution!' therefore becomes an inside joke at Burmese exile parties.

A MOVEMENT TOO STATIC

Then there are clandestine politics which are no longer clandestine. In the past, Burmese exiles had cautiously distanced themselves from activists inside Burma. In contrast, present day exiles are quick to grab the credit for any unrest or political campaign that happens in the country. This is particularly alarming since affiliation with exiles is the biggest offence to the regime.

A critique of the Burmese exile movement would not be complete without a word on Burmese exile media groups. The Burmese media groups in exile have considerable influence in the overseas Burmese communities. The fact that these groups are all run by the Burmese exiles, who are not trained journalists, makes the information they air very dubious at times. Even though some groups have made conscious attempts to improve their image, the overall quality of information of the Burmese media in exile remains little short of propaganda at best.

This is not to say that one Burmese exile is only as good as the next one. There have been remarkable activists in exile whose commitment and sacrifice are exemplary. But they are thin on the ground. It is also said that the democratic tolerance of the exiles has improved over the past twenty years for they can now sit together with their detractors at Burma conferences.

Due to their close link to the West and their animosity against the military regime, none of the representatives of the exile groups are likely to be accepted by the regime as key participants in the country's internal politics in the near future. For their part, despite their rhetoric on inclusiveness in democratic processes, most exile leaders have failed to imagine any scenario where they could coexist with the regime leaders under the same political system. While the regime has been able to implement its transition plan to pseudo-democracy as its exit strategy, the exile movement, which does not need an exit strategy, has essentially remained remarkably static over the past twenty years.

What they lack in substance, the exiles make up for in spirit and style. Provided there is continued support from the West – the money spent on Burma is petty cash compared to what is spent in other global trouble spots, the cream of the Burmese democracy movement in exile will continue to survive and thrive. The most earnest among them will continue to be recognized as champions of human rights and democracy as they go about resisting the repressive Myanmar state beyond 2010.

The exiles will not be out of place, at least in the short term. However, if they are serious about 'dialogue and national recon-

ciliation,' they must change their way of doing things, their political culture. They must open up the movement not just to criticism from outside but also to the opposition from within. A democratic overhaul of the movement is long overdue. The movement has to adjust itself to the changing social and political circumstances inside Burma. For reconciliation with the

future state of Myanmar in the long run, the exiles should consider shifting their focus from change of government to improvement in governance, from an antagonistic approach towards the state of Myanmar to an acceptable agonistic or dialogue model, and perhaps from demand activism to tactful politics. 《

Ko Ko Thett is independent Burma scholar and a student of politics at the University of Helsinki.

Trust the People

by **Maung Zarni**

The Kafkaesque trial of Aung San Suu Kyi has drawn attention to the fundamental need for genuine reform in Burma, South East Asia's poorest and most oppressed country. Before this trial the opposition and Western supporters were divided on whether they should welcome, participate in, and support the election next year. After all, the generals had already held one election eighteen years ago, refused to honour the results and all but destroyed the winning party led by Suu Kyi.

PRAGMATISM

The proponents of the election – including local and foreign commercial interests, some Western non-governmental organisations, the regime's Asian neighbours, the

United Nations, Western policy circles and local social activists – counsel the Burmese opposition to be 'pragmatic' in dealing with the regime.

In their view, the opposition and the population have only bad choices: either frustrate the regime's deeply flawed political process and prolong the deadlock, which hurts the public economically and politically more than the generals and their cronies, or risk helping consolidate another period of military rule. The first one collapsed amid popular protests twenty years ago.

These advocates of pragmatism readily concede that the election will not lead to genuine political change, but it is 'the only game in town'. They argue it will

fundamentally alter the political landscape: from total military control to a bi-cameral legislature with limited space for political parties and activities. This projected new landscape therefore offers opportunities that the pro-change forces should seize if the country is to move in the right direction.

”Until the paranoid and feudal character of the military leadership changes, no official transitional plan offers any hope for reform.”

SCEPTICISM

In contrast, the critics, which include the bulk of Burmese dissidents, both in the country and in exile, and their solidarity organizations in Asia, Europe, Australia and North America, say the vote will only serve the regime’s twin-purpose of legitimising its already monopolistic control over Burmese politics, while responding minimally to the gentle nudges from key Asian supporters and allies – like China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) – to embrace reconciliation and reform in form, if not substance.

The sceptics believe a regime that failed to honour the previous election results can only produce another sinister ploy to hang on to power in a new incarnation.

Prominent lawyers, such as Justice Richard Goldstone and Geoffrey Nice, who were prosecutors for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and who co-wrote a recent Harvard Law School report *Crimes in*

Burma; Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, until last year UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar; and the International Labour Organization, lend credence to the Burmese dissidents’ claim that the regime is deeply criminal – even genocidal – with no interest in reconciliation or democratisation.

Protected by powerful allies on the Security Council – such as China and Russia – and, in effect, given carte blanche by India and ASEAN, the regime has long been thumbing its nose at the international community.

While the junta’s external allies and supporters and the extractive industries may be held indirectly responsible for the situation, it is the political and economic power of the predatory state and the military elite which have resulted in and maintained hell on earth for the Burmese people.

Until the paranoid and feudal character of the military leadership changes, no official transitional plan offers any hope for reform.

Of course, the military alone cannot be expected to build a modern, democratic and prosperous state in a conflict-torn, poverty-stricken, and multi-ethnic nation. It needs a process designed to tap the strength of Burma’s ethnic and political diversity, while ensuring partnership and cooperation between the military and society at large, especially the dissidents, who are as committed to defending and keeping the Union together as any military officers, past and present.

The election may offer a new political process and present unforeseen oppor-

tunities, but with more than two thousand dissidents behind bars, and many more in exile, prevented from going home to help rebuild the country, and inspirational leaders such as Suu Kyi deliberately pushed out of the process, the military has shown its hand.

The farcical trial of Suu Kyi indicates how uninterested the military junta is in nation- and state-building, including mending damaged foreign relations or creating a 'big tent' for all Burmese citizens and organizations, most specifically the National League for Democracy, which have offered the regime an olive branch and opportunities to cooperate.

The election allows for absolutely no meaningful cooperation and partnership between the military and the rest of society: armed ethnic resistance groups, the dissidents, the parties, the private sector and the intelligentsia.

Most Burmese know the polls do not represent progress. For they will be held in accordance with the constitution, which is meant to legalise the prerogatives of the military, as well as the supreme political role of the generals.

Nearly half a century of military regimes, with their sinister 'transitional plans' or 'roadmaps' – like the 1974 one-party socialist transition plan, or the

multiparty transition in the 1990 election – have equipped the electorate with tested expertise on the anatomy and prospects for transition. To them the 2010 election is old wine in a new bottle.

NEW POWER CENTRES

Supporters of change in Burma should embrace strategic engagement with civil society and potentially reformist elements in the state bureaucracy and even the military.

This type of targeted, strategic engagement will lead to the gradual emergence of alternative centres of power: economic, societal, intellectual, and eventually political. As opposed to ASEAN's Constructive Engagement, targeted and strategic engagement is change-driven and puts resources and ideas at the disposal of local communities and their allied international organisations. Let the people and their allies chip away at the controlling power of the military regime, patiently, strategically and under the radar.

As a Burmese exile who lived under the first military regime for 24 years and a professional student who has studied the Burmese military rule as an institution for the past twenty years, I have greater confidence in the people to instigate genuine reform than the military-controlled electoral process. 《

Maung Zarni is a Research Fellow on Burma at the Centre for the Study of Global Governance, The London School of Economics, and founder of the Free Burma Coalition

This article was first published in *The World Today*. Reprint courtesy of the publishers. (www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/twt)

PUBLISHED IN 2009 BY BURMA CENTER PRAGUE, O.P.S.

coordination, editorial and layout: Christoph Amthor; note-takers at the conference: Ian Lively, Mary Matz; editors: Mary Matz, Reena Sattar and Ian Lively

This project was financially supported by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

All texts in this publication are copyright protected and may not be reproduced without prior written permission from the respective authors. Opinions put forward in the articles do not necessarily represent the views of the publisher.

Printed copies of *Focus on Burma* can be ordered at shop.burma-center.org.

ABOUT BURMA CENTER PRAGUE

Burma Center Prague, o.p.s. (BCP) was founded in 2006 in the Czech Republic as a non-governmental and non-profit organization by people native to Burma and by a multinational group of supporters living in the Czech Republic.

The mission of Burma Center Prague is to restore peace, justice, democracy and human rights in Burma. The organization informs the Czech and European public about the situation in Burma, organizes public events and campaigns, provides assistance to Burmese refugees and implements projects to empower the Burmese people. All activities assume the importance of human rights and the need to provide the population of Burma with basic tools enabling them to survive and have access to such fundamental services as education, health care, and legal security.

The organization acts in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations and the UN Millennium Development Goals and seeks to increase the outreach of its work by maintaining international networking with similar organizations and the Burmese pro-democracy movement.

Burma Center Prague particularly focuses on engaging individuals and civil society organizations to create a movement for coordinated, reliable, and independent activities to build capacity for a free Burma and prepare them for participation in the democratization of Burma.

CONTACT INFORMATION

www.burma-center.org

info@burma-center.org

Burma Center Prague, o.p.s
Dělnická 54
170 00 Praha 7 - Holešovice
Czech Republic



Projekt je podpořen z finančních prostředků Ministerstva zahraničních věcí ČR.