Sri Lanka Peace talks:
Comparative Reflections on Burma

For those interested in democratic transition in Burma whether as activists, analysts or policy makers, there is a great need now than ever before to reconsider the legal means to push its democratic transition. Gen. Khin Nyunt had said, “Such a transition cannot be done in a haphazard manner because the world is full of examples where a hasty transition has led to unrest and instability.” What is the “haphazard” and what is the “hasty” which he had referred to? Forty years of junta’s rule - is it hasty? Two years of confidence building talks, with UN Special Envoy as facilitator. Is it hasty? In 1990 in order to straighten things, the junta held General Election, was it half-hazard? Khin Nyunt’s rhetoric is a cruel joke. Not haphazard/hasty process but betrayal by the junta to honour the election result has caused “instability” and it has put “unrest” on national agenda Burma’s transition may be reflected in the perspective of Sri Lanka, now focus of international attention. Since independence in 1948, the Buddhist Sinhalese majority dominated and discriminated against the Hindu Tamils. In 1983, the Hindu Tamils took up arms and have been waging war for 19 years, Asia’s bloodiest civil war. It has left 65,000 dead and eight hundred thousand refugees. The central question is a separate state for ethnic Tamils that are to secede from Sri Lanka or allow high degree of autonomy. At long last Norway, acceptable to both, has brokered peace talks between the parties. The talks have made substantial progress and promises to provide role model in the process of negotiation for national reconciliation.

What are the differences and similarities in the situations of the two countries, Sri Lanka and Burma? There are fundamental differences although apparent similarities. First, in Burma the conflict is not ethnic perse. It is basically a political power struggle. The parties are differently placed. In Burma, the power is in the hands of military dictatorship,
which overthrew the constitutional government. The military rulers compounded its legitimacy by holding General Election in 1990. The people gave a landslide victory to the opposition led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy. In the case of Sri Lanka, the opposition ethnic force unlike Burma is not in a position of legitimacy. The power that be in Sri Lanka is a duly elected government unlike Burma. The result is that the motivations of the two governments differ. In the case of Burma, the motivation and only concern is survival and in the case of Sri Lanka, the driving force is the constitutional mandate to end the civil war. Secondly, the difference is also in respect of the balance of forces between the parties. In case of Burma the ruling Junta is in a position of strength. The commitment of the opposition to non-violence is regarded by the junta as its strength. The success in getting cease-fire from 16-armed ethnic groups has made the generals swollen-headed. The momentum of the pro-democracy movement has also eroded. This is not to suggest that Burma's opposition can engage the junta by going back to armed struggle. This course had been experimented but has not yielded results. Opposition has to search for a new model. Thirdly, the ruling junta in Burma is die-hard power hungry elite. It has rebuffed global pressure time and again. The issue is not skill of Razali as a negotiator or his losing face internationally. The generals do not listen to anyone. International community has voiced its growing impatience.

If any lessons have to be taken from peace talks in Sri Lanka, it is that the party in power has to soften. The opposition’s response in Burma for peace talks is based on its faith in Rule of Law. Basically, Rule of Law is a conflict resolution mechanism with malice to none. The generals must realize “The longer it delays to enter a substantive dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the harder it will become for the international community to provide a framework within which the process of national reconciliation can move naturally towards its logical conclusion” Secretary-General Kofi Annan.