BEYOND THE NATIONAL CONVENTION,

Ashley South, The IRRAWADDY, August - September 2004, Vol. 12 No. 8

The writer of the article has authored some books on Burma and is an authority in Burma affairs. The man focus of his article is on Burma’s cease-fire groups and ethnic nationalities’ struggle for self-determination. The article would have been a masterpiece had it combined the aspirations of the ethnic nationalities and the aspirations of the Burmese majority. The two are not separate as many western writers on Burma think and articulate. For the ethnic nationalities self determination means self-rule. For the Burman majority it is also self-determination which means empowerment of people at the grass root. Both are against centralization and for autonomy of the people. Fundamentally therefore it is a common issue where power can be shared and people can participate in the sharing of power. In other words, it is a Constitutional issue. The National Convention is grappling with that problem. Its proposed principle on which the future Constitution is to be based have not only denied fundamental rights to the nationalities but also it has marginalized people in general. They guarantee “military participation in the future state”. It means domination by the military of nationalities as well as the majority Burmans by the military elite. The article could have touched on this aspect to enable the readers get the totality of the political picture.

The article did not address the 1990 May Election which is the crucial stumbling block to the political process. Question rises: will it not be repudiation of the mandate if NLD joins the National Convention at the terms laid down unilaterally by the junta? The junta entered in a dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu K yi for peaceful transition and suddenly terminated it and put her under house arrest without any explanation to the people. Every step the junta has taken and is taking is against the rule of law. The author could have brought out the salient point that National Convention is targeted to annulment of the 1990 Election. When we look beyond we have to see the present.

The analysis about the cease fire groups is short of reality. Over the years they have not been able to wrest any concessions. The junta tried to corrupt their leaders the article has nicely brought out under the heading at the end “post cease fire disappointments; missed opportunities for peace building. The author
however miscalculated in stating” it should therefore no longer be possible for
the international community to demand a resolution of the NLD - junta con-
flict first, before addressing “the ethnic question”. It is also uncharitable to state
that “for Burma’s ethnic nationalist communities in particular, it represents a
milestone in efforts to have their concerns registered on the national political
stage”. The very reason why Ne Win made the coup was that all had reached a
consensus on the concerns and on the excuse that disintegration of Burma had
been planned, the coup was staged.

The 1990 Election is the watershed in Burmese politics and the stake holders
have been clearly outlined. What will be “beyond the National Convention will
largely depend on the steps laid down in the road map. The article stated that
Chief Justice U Aung Toe has stated there will not be any change in the 104
principles. The National Convention may be reconvened to confirm them and it
will be sent to the top Drafting Committee to be constituted in that session.
Questionnaires will be put to referendum and if yes vote is given, a General
election will be held according to the provisions of the designed Constitution.
Beyond the National Convention may be the continuation of the junta rule.
Depending on the emergence of balance of forces between the junta and the
opposition and realization of people that a Constitution is a must for the society
to survive, the beyond will surface in its majesty or ignominy.