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HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY - ASIAN-STYLE



While human rights is now being discussed as a major issue globally, people in Burma still do not have the assurance that even their most basic rights of food, education, health care, and security can be guaranteed.

Information for Action +++ International Campaigns for Peace +++ Grassroots Education and Organizing

Human Rights and Democracy - Asian-style

by Anna Mitchell

While Asian leaders - from Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew to Burma's Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt to China's Li Peng - loudly insist that Asia has no need or use for Western-style human rights, there is a growing people's movement within the countries of the region to redefine these rights in a manner which makes them both acceptable and relevant to Asia.

In many ways this is a new twist to an old debate. When United Nations first tried to define 'human rights' in a legal document - the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - it immediately fell foul of a serious ideological rift. Way back then it was the Cold War battle between communism and capitalism, and the best solution was to create two covenants, one relating to Civil and Political Rights and the other to Social, Economic and Cultural Rights. Many people from both sides of the divide knew that in fact these two sets of rights are interdependent, each useless without the other: but the serious question was of priorities, and it was more or less accepted that communist countries would privilege bread on the table over the right to freedom, whereas capitalist nations considered matters like self-expression and at least theoretical equality before the law had a higher priority than the right to a fair day's wage for a fair day's work.

With the end of the Cold War the problem has not evaporated, but simply shifted location. Now it is an East v. West, Asia v. Euro-America debate. The moral bankruptcy and mounting social problems of the West are plain for all to see, making it easy for Asian leaders to claim - as Lee is so fond of doing - that they are caused by too much democracy and emphasis on individual rights.

But as it happens, this is a false analysis, and a typical example of how those in power use (or abuse) their position to set the parameters of debate in terms which will entrench their own authority. In the same way the Rangoon junta repetitively invokes "the Burmese tradition of community service" when questioned about its use of slave labour. It is important to keep a clear mind when confronted with these simplistic and deliberately misleading notions.

There have been two recent significant efforts to counter the specious

verse population. Colonial exploitation of Asia and Africa by Western powers cannot be summarily discounted, especially when it continues to the present day in a more subtle form, through such Western-controlled institutions as the World Bank and the IMF.

The other significant initiative has been taken by the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission, which has produced a draft Asian Charter on Human Rights, entitled Our Common Humanity, now being translated and circulated to all Asian human rights NGOs, community organizations, and concerned persons and groups for further discussion. Three regional consultations are planned during the first half of 1995, and a final regional meeting will be held in Phnom Penh in May which will consider suggested amendments and finalise the Charter.

The Charter has five basic tenets.

- 1) That human rights are universal, applying to all human beings irrespective of their physical and mental abilities.
- 2) That human rights are indivisible, and the denial of any rights, under any pretext, leads to the denial of others.
- 3) That the right to live in dignity and security implies the right to adequate food. The community has a primary obligation to ensure that the state provide access to appropriate methods of production, conservation and distribution of food. Any imposition by international agencies of policies which deprive people of food is a fundamental violation of human rights.
- 4) The right to live implies people's freedom to be involved in unrestricted consultation regarding matters affecting their own livelihood. Governments which deny their people the right of participation in such deci-

While human rights have no simple solutions, a great deal of creative thought is now being devoted to these issues in Asia.

arguments of autocratic leaders and to define a set of human rights which are appropriate for the Asian region. A Malaysian NGO, the Just World Trust, which promotes the need for alternative ways to create a fairer world, recently held a conference entitled "Rethinking Human Rights". More than 300 delegates representing 60 countries heard distinguished international speakers argue for widening the debate on human rights to include the means to live with dignity. It was pointed out that India introduced universal suffrage upon independence in 1947, at the moment of its independence, while African-Americans were effectively denied the vote until the 1960s. Japan has had democratic government since the end of the second World War. China's monumental achievement in providing the right to food to its huge population should not be entirely overshadowed by its savage repression of dissent at Tianenmen Square in 1989. Malaysia has a remarkable record of guaranteeing cultural rights to its ethnically di-

HUMAN RIGHTS



Protection of the rights of these refugees is not merely a Western concern.

sions, by overt or covert means, cannot be regarded as legitimate, and both government and judiciary must be free from corruption. Where the people have been disempowered by social or natural catastrophe, the international community has an obligation to offer temporary assistance.

5) The right to sustainable development. Industrialised countries which exploit the natural resources of developing nations, with the collusion of national governments, must compensate the people for the deprivation of their livelihood and the ensuing human rights abuses.

The Charter then goes on to offer special protection to vulnerable groups - women, children, indigenous people, minorities, workers, refugees, older and disabled persons, students,

peasants and fisherfolk, persons with HIV/AIDS, prisoners (political and other) and human rights defenders.

Finally the Charter looks to put these ideals into practice by means of various remedies and mechanisms.

1) Social and political remedies. These include easy access to people's representatives, commissions and the media. Also education at all levels, which should include education in non-violent resistance, the ethics underpinning human rights and the means to achieve them. Professionals and academics have a special responsibility in this regard.

2) Legal remedies. Laws must be enforceable and adapted to current social and technological conditions, with absolute protection for victims and the lawyers who assist them. Military and para-military organisations and personnel must be fully subject to these laws.

3) Regional mechanisms need to be both informal and formal. Informal mechanisms should be available through people's organisation, professional and other interested parties who can raise public awareness and counteract 'the culture of silence' which permits human rights violations to take place behind a cloak of secrecy. Formal mechanisms need to be developed regionally and to be appropriate

to the particular conditions and circumstances of the region.

4) International mechanisms are currently Euro-based and Euro-centered. The Human Rights Commissions, Rapporteurs and Special Representatives only take action in developing countries after long delays during which great destruction and loss of life occurs. Asian people do not, and have no reason to trust officers trained in Western-style diplomacy. Their Westernised view of local history, traditions and current problems makes them easy prey to manipulation by unscrupulous governments. It is essential for Asians themselves to set up mechanisms to protect and promote human rights.

While human rights have no simple solutions, a great deal of creative thought is now being devoted to these issues in Asia. While such a debate flourishes, and will doubtless escalate, it will be increasingly difficult for authoritarian regimes to claim that human rights are merely a Western concern.

References:

'Our Common Humanity' - A Charter of an Asian Human Rights, proposed by the Asian Human Rights Commission for discussion

'Rethinking Human Rights' by Daya Kishan Thussu (BP 941227)

Further reading

'Human rights in the Post-Col War Era: The Cases of North Korea, China and Burma' by Joanne Bauer

'Empowerment for a Culture of Peace and Development' by Aung San Suu Kyi

'Struggling for a Square Meal and a Voice' by Daya Kishan Thussu (BP941213)

'Is Culture Destiny' by Kim Dae Jung, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 6, 1994



LITERACY

Adult Literacy

by CAC

Diversity equals disorder -- it's a hallmark rationalization for oppression. In today's context, one need only invoke the Y-word to demonstrate what will happen if people of diverse religious, ethnic and political interests are given an opportunity to assert their identities: "another Yugoslavia." In Burma, successive military regimes have embraced this outlook, actively seeking to homogenize the people of Burma. Languages, perhaps the most potent agent of culture, factors prominently into both the suppression of cultural diversity in Burma and the struggle to preserve ethnic identity.

What is the value of the written word? Everyone reading this article is literate in at least one language, many in more than one. Literacy is the faculty that allows us to communicate beyond the range of our voice: reading is a form of perception and writing is a form of thinking. Literacy is one of the fundamental critical skills which allows people to function in society. Literate people have an unrivalled form of expression, communication and intellectual exploration.

Illiterate people can certainly survive without being able to read and write, but in tense, complicated circumstances of social oppression, their illiteracy is far from neutral. Absent a vehicle for expression, communication and critical analysis, illiterate people can be kept from understanding and controlling the economic, political and cultural processes that keep them in chains.

Illiteracy in Burma is greatly complicated by the diversity of native languages and the political conflicts among their speakers. Sensing that diversity was disorder, military governments in Rangoon began a Burmese-only schooling policy. In places where native Burmese speakers dominate, most people would be studying their native tongue and mi-

norities would have to conform -- as they must in so many places around the world. In outlying regions where the Rangoon government controls local schools, non-Burmese speaking people -- who are often in a dominant majority -- are in effect denied by the state an opportunity to become literate in their own language -- the language in which they express themselves most articulately and naturally. Ironically, in so-called "liberated" areas where Rangoon's central school system does not penetrate, people have the opportunity under the auspices of ethnic (and linguistic) minority administrations to become literate in not only their native tongues but often in Burmese as well.

Lying between the government-schooled areas and the liberated literacy zones, the "brown" areas of the civil war, where neither the government or opposition forces are in complete control, are perhaps the most intense pockets of illiteracy in Burma today. How can illiteracy in one place be more intense than illiteracy in another?

Illiteracy in Burma's civil war zones is an especially urgent problem because it cuts oppressed people off from information that can help them transform their oppression into the power to redirect their future. How can human rights information be collected when no one has the basic skills to record it? How can people secure a better understanding of the oppression enveloping them if they can not read a newspaper or pamphlet? How can families prevent disintegration under the terrible pressures of war when parents can not read letters from their children? How can soldiers understand the social and political significance of their struggle without being able to read and evaluate for themselves the history of conflict in Burma?

Projecting this illiteracy into a future without warfare, urgent needs persist in these much-neglected areas.

Can farmers, after decades of sub-survival jungle cropping, return to their land to resume normal agriculture? What information will farmers have to evaluate the dangers of mono-cropping and chemical fertilizers, two threats to the rural economy which will surely arrive with imprudent economic growth? When backpacker tourists start trekking their way into mountain villages, a cycle of exploitation and poverty begins. One need look no further than Thailand to witness the terminal stages of this preventable disease. But without the literacy skills to anticipate tourism's attendant problems and control them, the pandemic will spread.

One of the answers to breaking the cycle of oppression in Burma is to achieve native language literacy for all peoples. This does not mean that Burmese can not be the lingua franca if all groups consent; indeed, in opposition-managed schools Burmese is a required subject. Progressive, empowering adult literacy programs aimed specifically at combatting the many forms of social oppression in Burma are a good way to plant seeds of education in communities disrupted by civil war. Literacy is a prerequisite for all other types of education and -- especially -- the "development" programs that governments and other external agents will begin pressing on rural populations. Disorder is not a natural product of diversity; where true disorder does exist in Burma, it is the product of authoritarian state command over Burma's cultural diversity.



Reports

Burma Issues receives a number of local and international reports each month. In future we plan to list these at regular intervals, so that our readers are aware of what is available from the Burma Issues Documentation Centre.

1) THAILAND & HER NEIGHBOURS

Proceedings of an international seminar jointly held by Thammasat and Kyodo Universities, 12 December 1994 - Various papers on the development of Asia, with particular reference to Thailand & Indonesia.

2) REPORT ON DEMOCRATIZATION OF BURMA/MYANMAR

Author: Thomas R. Lansner, Forum of Democratic Leaders in the Asia Pacific, 2 December 1994 - Report of meeting. Panellists included Ven. Rewata Dhama of Burma, Senator Hersherson Alvarez of the Philippines and Britain's Martin Smith.

3) EDUCATION RIGHTS AND MINORITIES

Minority Rights Group Inc, December 1994 - Report on education for minority people, with particular examples taken from the education of Bengalis in London, Palestinians in Israel, Mozambiquan & Malawi refugee education projects etc.

4) ASIA REPORT & BURMA/MYANMAR REPORTS - BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Forum of Democratic Leaders in Asia Pacific, 1 December 1994 - Background material supplied to the above forum to aid discussions of Burma. Includes reports from Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Economic Intelligent Unit, AI, US Department of State, NCG, US Congress and press coverage.

5) THE TIES THAT BIND - ASPECT & PROSPECT FOR CO-OPERATION ON MAINLAND SOUTH-EAST ASIA (draft)

Author: Khatharya Um, Ph. D., International Seminar at Thammasat University - Paper on the interconnectedness of Mekong countries (China, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma)

6) BURMA CONSULTATION (21-22 OCT 1994, BONN, GERMANY)

Burma Donors Secretariat, Canada, 2 December 1994 - Reports on meeting of Burma groups in Bonn - review of current situation and strategy for 1995.

7) BURMA/THAILAND - THE MON: PERSECUTED IN BURMA, FORCED BACK FROM THAILAND

Human Rights Watch Asia, December 1994 - In view of international changes in policy towards Burma, this report documents continuing systematic abuse of Mon, in particular, and calls on (1) SLORC, to cease HR abuses & punish offenders, (2) the Thai Government, to end refoulement of refugees & migrants, including illegal ones, and (3) the international community, to press for a firm UN resolution, cease investment and pressure their respective governments.

8) PANGLONG AND THE STRUGGLE OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF BURMA

Mahn Aung Lwin, ABSDF, 27 December 1994 - A study of the main ethnic groups in Burma (excludes Rohingyas) in relation particularly to the Panglong Agreement.

9) ANALYTIC CONTENTS AND THEMATIC INDEX TO THE REPORTS OF THE KAREN HR GROUP

Burma Peace Foundation, New York, December 1994 - As title.

10) TOWARDS AN ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS CHARTER

Asian Human Rights Commission, 28 December 1994 - A draft Asian Charter on Human Rights proposed by the Asian Human Rights Commission Section for discussion.

11) BURMA ALERT - NEWS REPORT, PLUS OTHER PAPERS

Authors: Harn Yawngwe, Bertil Lintner et al, Forum of Democratic Leaders in Asia Pacific, 24 December 1994 - Keynote speech by Dr Sein Win, schedule for inaugural FDL-AP conference 11 Nov - 3 Dec 1994, Prospectus (looks at Human Rights in Asia), "Recent Political Developments in Burma" by Bertil Lintner, "Democracy in Burma" by Harn Yawngwe, Report of Sub-group on Burma by Thomas R. Lansner.

12) BURMA (MYANMAR) AT THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY 1994

Burma Peace Foundation, 28 December 1994 - Papers of UN proceedings relating to Burma during 1994.



Sources in this issue include:

BP = Bangkok Post

TN = The Nation

All dates are entered as year/month/day

Has Joe McCarthy Reappeared?

by N. Chan

In late 1988, soon after Burma's democratic movement was violently put down by the military, a call was issued by opposition groups to boycott foreign companies wishing to invest there. Investments, they said, would simply help provide the military with funds needed to enlarge its military forces and to upgrade its military hardware. Money is the grease which keeps the Burmese military running smoothly, and without it, there would be few soldiers to "man the fort". Very few members of Burma's growing army are there for ideological reasons. The army is one of the very few places, if not the only place, where people can receive a steady salary and other benefits designed to keep soldiers happy and loyal. Cut the funds, and the army collapses, allowing the democratic forces to carry out the job they were elected by the people to do back in 1990.

In 1989, leading opposition figure, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, echoed this call for economic boycotts, stating that investing in Burma at this time is like taking a stand against democracy. Shortly after that, she was arrested by the military and has remained under house arrest since then.

Economic boycotts are an effective way of helping bring about positive change to a society. South Africa is an excellent case study of how boycotts finally helped force an end to apartheid. They are one of the few ways in which people can make their voices heard, not only to the huge corporations which wield so much financial power around the world, but also to the dictators who pocket a country's resources and allow the people to languish in poverty and fear.

In the United States, economic boycotts have long been a strategy of organizations fighting for human rights and justice, both within the US and internationally. US-based move-

ments to support democratization in Burma are presently making use of this strategy, and it is crucial they do so since US companies are Burma's second-largest foreign investor, second only to Singapore. To date they have had significant success. Among others, Levi Strauss, and Liz Claiborne pulled out of Burma when they were confronted with the horrific human rights record of the Burmese military regime. Amoco pulled out due to shareholder pressure and economic considerations. Yet, many other companies remain entrenched in Burma, rubbing shoulders with the military regime and providing not only direct and indirect economic support, but also a form of political legitimacy for them. In general, their response to calls for divestment from Burma is an attempt to link economic progress to improvement in human rights and democratic values.

This is exemplified by a May 16, 1994 letter from Texaco to the Pepsi-Burma Boycott Committee in which a representative of the company wrote, "Texaco supports the aspiration of all people to attain full human rights. We believe we help advance this universal desire, first, by improving the standard of living for employees, suppliers and customers and their communities. Beyond that, we provide a positive influence by actively and visibly respecting individual rights, being committed to ethical principles, and caring for the environment." Texaco is involved in a joint venture with Unocal (USA) and Slorc to build a gas pipeline across southern Burma from the Gulf of Martaban to Thailand. One of mainland Asia's last rain forests lies in the pipeline's path and it is certain that villages of ethnic minority groups living in the area will be forcibly removed. Environmental damage, and abuse of the rights of people living in this area, can hardly be avoided by this project.

PepsiCo, which is coming under increasing fire for establishing a soft

drink factory in Rangoon, has taken a different, and much more defensive, stand against the call for boycotts. In a letter dated July 25, 1994, Wayne Calloway of PepsiCo wrote to Mr. Brian Schmidt of the Pepsi Boycott Committee complaining of intimidation. Mr. Calloway outlined two reasons why he felt the boycott of Pepsi was unjust.

"The first involves how corporations decide on where to do business. I don't think corporate CEOs should make foreign policy decisions. If you think about this for awhile, I believe you'll come to the exact same conclusion. That's a job for our elected officials.

The second involves pressure and intimidation. Despite your very moderated voice, high ideals and noble purpose, none of which I question in the least, you really are dealing in coercion and strong-arm tactics. It's no different than what years ago was practised by Joe McCarthy and the like."

Has a new Joe McCarthy appeared on the American scene? Wayne Calloway seems to think so.

"In those days, 'Establishment organizations' felt fully justified in using intimidation on progressives and liberals...feeling their noble purpose justified anything.

They were wrong then, just as you are wrong now, in my opinion. Like a blacklist, a boycott is just another form of intimidation, and those despised tactics of the past are no different than what you are doing yourself. That we are a big, pretty successful company doesn't change the principle, at all.

So...for both reasons, I think you are wrong to attack PepsiCo in this way."

Strong words, defensive words, and perhaps words which attempt to redefine "intimidation". When voters shake their fists in the faces of their

elected representatives and threaten to vote for someone else next term, is that intimidation? Or when the government shakes its fist in the faces of its constituency and threatens to imprison them if they do not vote the right way, is that intimidation? In a democracy, the voice of the people is of tremendous importance. The government is there to serve the people and heed the voice of the people. Voting is one way the people make their voices heard. Threatening to vote for a new candidate is hardly intimidation. It is an honest attempt to voice out what the voter feels is right and wrong.

A democratic economic system should be no different. The company and its product should exist for the good of the people. The people should not exist for the good of the company. Therefore, if the company is involved in unjust practices in the eyes of the consumer, the consumer has the right to voice that opinion. Since few consumers have the right to vote in share holder meetings, and since their letters are rarely taken very seriously, the way they make their voice heard is by refusing to purchase the product. This will be seen by the company as intimidation only if the company has no respect for the consumer.

Like governments, large corporations have tremendous power and influence. That power and influence must be controlled by the people, at least in a democratic society. The presence of a foreign corporation in a country is not a neutral act. It either

supports or interferes with the process for change the people of that country are involved in. If it interferes, it becomes a force against the people, and a boycott of that company's products is the people's way of saying, "human rights and justice is more important than your profit line."

Intimidation? Joe McCarthy was a member of the US government. He was able to mobilize a tremendous power behind himself (not so very different from what large corporations can do) which he used to destroy individuals and groups he considered a threat to his own beliefs. That is intimidation. A group like the Pepsi Boycott Committee is hardly a power force which can be compared to the US government. When they call for a boycott, they are not intimidating Pepsi, nor are they trying to destroy Pepsi. They are simply utilizing their democratic voice to say, "We will not purchase your product as long as your investment supports a brutal military regime which has a record no less horrifying than Iraq's. Divest from Burma, support the voice of the people of Burma, and we will be most happy to purchase your product."

Economic boycotts have been in the past, and continue to be now, an effective way of supporting democratic movements, and of helping control those with economic and political power. The Burmese military regime has steadily tightened their grip around every aspect of life in Burma. They hold the list of foreign companies investing in Burma up as an indication of their new democratic face.

Yet, the economy of the people continues to deteriorate, human rights abuses continue unabated, and the government elected by the people in a mass voice of support, continues to exist only in exile. This can be broken only when these companies realize that the consumers they depend on for survival care sincerely about the well-being of all the people throughout Burma.

Mairead Maguire, the winner of the 1976 Peace Prize supports this. She recently said, "I want to tell the oil companies, please have a responsibility to the ordinary Burmese people--please disinvest. It is your money that is keeping the SLoRC in power."

Sources:

"Business Must Shun Burmese Despots", by Edith T. Mirante, The Burma Monitor, August 1994

Pepsi-Burma Boycott Committee information packet



Newsletter Note

An international movement supported by more than 100 Nobel Laureates and leaders in all walks of life now campaigns exclusively for complete freedom in her own country for the Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. With the name Campaigns for Human Rights, with a Board of Directors consisting of 8 Nobel Laureates, this movement is absolutely determined that other governments and corporations should cease economic support for the military in Burma which oppresses Aung San Suu Kyi and the rest of the Burmese people.

The Secretary of this Movement is Professor of Mathematics Israel Halperin, University of Toronto, Toronto, M5S 1A1, Canada.

NEWS BRIEFS

NEWS ITEMS OF SPECIAL INTEREST

Chinese Premier's visit to Burma

Li Peng's visit to Rangoon in late December was prominently featured daily in the *New Light of Myanmar*. At his closing press conference, Li Peng said his visit had been one of goodwill, that China did not wish to interfere in Burma's internal affairs, and that China had no military aspirations in the region. However, the close military links between Burma and China have caused anxious speculation amongst neighboring countries.

BP and TN

Early release for Suu Kyi now considered unlikely

The third visit to Rangoon of mediator U Rewata Dhamma led to speculation that Aung San Suu Kyi might be released in January. However, Lt.-Gen Khin Nyunt has announced that Burma's constitutional convention is entering an important stage, and Suu Kyi's release might 'encourage dissidents to cause domestic disruption.'

TN 940108

Karen Rift Widens

Karen guerrillas have launched a military offensive against a group of several hundred Buddhist Karen mutineers, marking a serious internal split. The KNU accuses the

new group, called the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Association (DKBA), of forming an alliance with SLORC and reneging on the peace treaty signed with the KNU on December 15. There is some evidence to support this allegation.

TN 950104

Buy Reebok!

The Franklin Research and Development Corporation reports that Massachusetts-based Reebok has joined **Levi Strauss & Co** and **Liz Claiborne** in specifically shunning business in Burma for human rights reasons.

Boston Globe 941222



BURMA ISSUES

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