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Picture by Saw Tay Htoo

"Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.

Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."

– Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Burma Issues, the monthly newsletter of Burma Issues, highlights current information related to the struggle for peace and justice in Burma. It is distributed internationally on a free-subscription basis to individuals and groups concerned about the state of affairs in Burma.

P.O. Box 1076
Silom Post Office
Bangkok 10504, Thailand
durham@mozart.inet.co.th

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EDUCATION: STUDY IF YOU CAN, BUT DON'T GET SMART

Education in Burma is in a crisis. In 1990, the UN estimated that the number of Burma's children enrolled in primary school was extremely low: only 27% of children completed primary school, 34% of dropped out before completing five years, and 39% never attended primary school at all. In spite of being one of Asia's poorest countries, Burma has an official literacy rate of 78%, based on a 1983 census, but UNICEF observed that actual literacy in Burma is likely to be significantly lower and falling, one factor being the low rate of primary school attendance.¹

The percentage Burmese with higher education is dropping as well, with no more than 11%, and possibly as few as 4.3% attending secondary school.² The higher education system is in disorder, suffering from frequent school closings over three decades, radical and often confusing changes in administration and policy, and the exodus of many of Burma's brightest students and teachers. There are no longer any internationally creditable Ph.D. or masters programs in Burma. For the average student, lengthy closings of high schools and universities have made getting even a high school or bachelor's degree an odyssey.

The reality is that the Slorc generals are caught in a double-bind. The people they rule are understandably bitter, weary of poverty and limited opportunity, and the generals seem to see significant economic development as a way to placate the public and defuse their opposition. In booming economies like Malaysia and Singapore, people have proved willing to tolerate a less-than-democratic government as long as they have a chance at a comfortable life. But to achieve that kind of explosive growth, Burma needs a highly educated population, as almost every one of the 'Asian tigers' have shown. But the junta has been burned: student mass demonstrations in 1962, in 1988 and most recently in 1996 have drawn strong public support, which the junta has typically handled using massive and sometimes bloody displays of force. The backlash continues. Hundreds of youths have been sent to prison and hard labor camps for political activities, including three eighth grade boys who were sentenced to 13 years in prison for the political act of hanging posters in their school.⁴ In September 1996, nine young people were arrested for distributing leaflets outside of Aung San Suu Kyi's house.⁵ The paranoia even seems to extend to primary schools, which were closed for seven months after the 1988 uprising, and reopened in June 1989 only under military supervision.⁶ It is hard to see any material improvements in the restrictions placed on schools, teachers, and students in Burma, in spite of national development ef-

forts. With the education system as it is, fear, poverty and prejudice are preventing the vast majority of Burma's students from getting any education at all.

Money gets spent

Burma's military rulers have made much of their educational development efforts in recent years. The reality is that Burma continues to spend hugely on defense and continues to expand its military, while comparative increases in education spending are only slight: the percentage of government spending allotted to education has dropped every year. And of course, even a significant increase in spending may not necessarily translate to increased educational opportunities. In 1962, when Burma's military overthrew the country's first democratic civilian government, all schools in Burma were nationalized, including those schools previously run by churches and NGOs. Thus, the government took on the expense of paying these teachers salaries and maintaining these schools, without any increase in educational resources.⁷ More recently, ceasefires in ethnic minority areas have brought large numbers of existing local schools, formerly run by minority groups and local communities, under the Slorc education department, similarly increasing government obligations without any growth in educational facilities.

Even when new schools are built in Burma,

these schools may have cost the government nothing; reports from inside Burma indicate that many new school buildings, especially those built in the border areas, are built without any government money at all. One NGO wrote, "When the Slorc says it has spent money setting up schools, most or all of this money is actually extorted out of the local population. In situations like this, they [local Slorc officials] often extort 2 or 3 times the amount they need and turn a profit."⁸ The cost of maintenance often defaults to the local level as well, as a school teacher from Mergui/Tavoy District reported in 1995, "The school is built by the villagers with their own finance. It is of leaf roofing and bamboo." He remarked that it was "not so convenient" in the rain; "We reported it [to the educational authorities] many times, yet the school is just as you see it now."⁹ In many reported cases, local communities not only have to pay for the building, but must also pay salaries of the teachers as well. If the community can't afford to pay the costs, or no teachers are available, the school building may very well stand empty.

School isn't the same as schooling

A new school building gives the appearance of progress, but a building does not always mean more children are attending school. According to a 1995 UNICEF report¹⁰, in the decade between 1983 and 1993 more than 12,000 new schools were opened in Burma, and UNICEF

CIVIL SERVANTS

Two Burmese government employees talk about their jobs, salaries, and options.

Female primary school teacher, 900 kyats monthly salary.

"Due to the present high cost of living, government employee wages are not enough to make ends meet. At present, for loans taken last year, there is a monthly deduction of 500 kyat. Furthermore, there is also a reduction of 280 kyat, and with other funds such as welfare funds,.... [After all the deductions] only 80 kyat are generally left for a worker....

"Eight years back, our salary was about 450 kyat. At that time the cost of rice [for one month] was about 100 kyat, and though there were deductions for welfare funds and contributions, we still had 300 kyats left. Five of our household members could live on 8 kyats [a day] for oil, salt, chilies, onions and other vegetables, prepared economically.... [Since then] the market prices for food and commodities have risen 9 and 10 times. Our pay have risen twice the previous amount. So, with the present amount of income, the workers are doomed to starve or get into debt."

What can be done to address these problems?

"We have to give private tuition to 15 students at home for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. We have to charge 50 kyats per month for each student. We teach English and arithmetic. This is how we make the money for oil and salt, etc....

"Some students cannot afford to pay for the extra hours. A household with four children in school would incur 120 kyats [per month] including extra attendances. If the parents happen to be government employees it would indeed be very difficult to meet such expenses. Much has to be given already to contributions to the wards. The school cooperatives [pro-

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grams set up by the government to provide some financial assistance to teachers] are not much of a substantial thing.

"Now the price of food and other necessities are rising daily. I even think of leaving my teaching job, as I feel very frustrated. On second thought, I realize that I have no money saved. If I resigned my job, I would have to explain the reason why I want to leave. It is very complicated. I would be subjected to suspicions and put to justice...."

"When we think of education, we are aware that even graduates would have only the opportunity of being a government servant. Being a government servant would make our lives no better. So making money is the best solution to the general problem."

Burman man, a civil servant for nearly 20 years.

"Nowadays with the government salaries, it is only the amount for one trip to the market. My wife is also a government employee. Our combined income amounts to only about 2000 kyat [per month]. [After the usual deductions are taken out,] it leaves only about 1400 kyat to buy food..... The government however has a project to disburse 300 kyat per month to each employee. If the worker is absent five days from work, he or she will not get the privilege. As for the temporary and daily-wage workers, they do not get this privilege. The government does not increase the pays of the workers and the 300 kyat welfare money is just a trick to get the worker to do more work and to stay within the work-site. Previously, even though our pays are small, we were better off. Nowadays, if only one person in the family works, his pay is not enough for even himself, not to mention a whole family. So the workers now have to make strict family planning to avoid additional children. They do not want to pull in new members in the family house and to suffer the agony of poverty and want."



Anonymous sources

estimated at that time that there was about one primary school for every two villages. However, even children with access to a 'tuition-free' government school often cannot afford to attend that school. With the economy in shambles, many formerly middle-class Burmese are working as hard as they can just to make enough money to buy rice. Children must often stay home to help working parents, or find paid work. In many areas, households must also supply regular labor to forced labor projects; when the parents can't be spared, the children must go in their place.

Students otherwise able to attend school must still find money to pay for their own books (often only available on the black market), uniforms, and stationery, as well as many unofficial fees, which, as described by one human rights group, could include "'maintenance' fees, 'table and bench fees', broom, waterpot and drinking cup fees, fees for 'Parent-Teacher Association', 'sporting fees', etc." With overfull classes, low teaching standards, and national exams as the only means of student evaluation, tutoring is a necessity for many students who wish to advance their education. Teachers, whose civil servant salaries are not enough to make ends meet, often offer tutoring to paying students after school. The price of tutoring increases with the class level and the number of subjects covered.

Even children who have the time and the money to study require proof of citizenship

before they can enroll in government-run schools. Burma's 1982 Citizenship law identifies three levels of citizenship: citizens, associate citizens, and naturalized citizens. Every Burmese is required to carry an identity card which states ethnicity, religion, and citizenship, and is color-coded according to their citizenship class.¹² Without an identity card, students cannot attend public high school or university.¹³ Obtaining an identity card requires written records which prove one's ancestry and presence in Burma prior 1823 (the year before the Arakan area of Burma was annexed by the British). Providing this proof can be nearly impossible for many Burmese who have been displaced by fighting in Burma's border areas. In addition, many with proof may still not qualify, most notably Burma's Rohingya Muslims, who's ancestors almost without exception arrived in Burma after 1823. In addition, to go to school in Burma beyond the primary-school level requires fluency in Burmese, effectively barring many ethnic minority children from higher education.

Teachers learn the system

For teachers on the government payroll, education may be the least important qualification to teach. Among numerous other decrees which restrict government employees, all public servants in Burma are subject to the 1/90 Order, which requires them to complete a 33-question examination on their political ideas, which some have had to complete numerous times to show that their answers are consistent.¹⁴ "In-

correct' responses may be cause for dismissal. Teachers as well as parents of school children face fines, harassment, or even prison if students participate in any kind of political activity. A high school student from Thaton reported, "...It also says that the students must not do or talk about politics. Teachers and parents have to sign this paper. If the students do anything serious politically against Slorc, then as they say, 'if the children are bad, it betrays the parents' name', so the police will come to the parents and they could be arrested and sent to prison...."¹⁵

Lack of resources and support for the teachers is another problem. They must frequently teach without even the basic resources of blackboard, chalk, textbooks, or maps; and they typically face extremely large classes where they may be required to teach several grades at once. Effective training for teachers could help make up for this shortage, but government training rarely addresses any issues outside of discipline and doctrine. Teachers throughout the country must periodically attend government organized 'refresher courses'. It has been reported that as part of the training, teachers have been required to dress in military uniforms, learn military maneuvers, and sing patriotic songs.¹⁶ Secretary-1 Khin Nyunt, while addressing teachers gathered for Special Refresher Course 21, outlined the goals of the course as "vitalizing patriotism, holding in esteem Our Three Main National Causes, and student management and discipline enforcement."¹⁷ In these courses, teaching skills clearly take a back seat to 'national goals'. As Khin Nyunt explained to one group, "Refresher Courses for Basic Education Teachers are aimed at enlightening them as to national duties in building a peaceful, modern and developed nation, which is the national goal...."¹⁸ Teachers who 'fail' courses like these are fired.¹⁹

Ideological indoctrination is also foisted upon students and teachers alike via the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), a huge mass-organization which is heavily funded by, and ideologically almost indistinguishable from the Slorc. Teachers and students are said to be under particular pressure to join USDA, and the USDA agenda may even overlap with government standard training. In Khin Nyunt's speech to the attendees of Special Refresher Course 21, he exhorted them to make a "thorough study of subjects related to the Union Solidarity and Development Association, which is organizing the mass of people to become a strong national force to be able to secure the student youth's participation in the association."²⁰ USDA members are required to pay regular dues and attend periodic mass 'rallies', often at a distance from their village.

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WHILE SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED

“Universities – no, they have not been closed. Some of the universities have had classes suspended a little bit early, before the winter holidays, and they will be reopening very soon.... It is not the majority of the schools or colleges that have been closed. It is a very small minority where disturbances have taken place and in those universities, it is not the majority of the students.... They are [at] the mercy of the very small handful of students who are influenced by external factors and do not concentrate so much on education but agitating the other students to defy authority and to break the law.” – Ambassador U.Aye, responding to concerns voiced by members of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, January 16-17, 1997.

Almost all schools in Burma, from the primary school level up through university, were closed in mid-December, 1996, to discourage further demonstrations after nearly 2,000 students took to the streets in peaceful protest in Rangoon. High schools and some universities were reopened again in mid-August this year, but as of this writing more than 30 universities remain closed, though the education department said in August, “The time for reopening the universities is getting closer than before.” The anecdotal information in this story was collected while nearly all the schools in Burma were still closed.

When schools are closed, some of the younger children enjoy the extended vacation, but it's a different story for many of the teachers who must show up at school every weekday for 're-education'. Whenever the students demonstrate or become politically active, the government blames the teachers and applies pressure on them to exert greater control over their students' actions. One teacher remarked that he hasn't received any structured re-education other than hearing the need for greater control. Now, when he goes to school, he basically sits in his office doing nothing (or anything he wants to pass the time) because he has no students. Many civil servants have to have other jobs to supplement their incomes. While the schools were closed, one high school teacher spent the time working as a waiter in a seafood restaurant.

University and senior high school students are frustrated. As of June, high school teachers hadn't yet released the exam scores for the seniors, so they couldn't plan what universities to attend. A student's scores are crucial in determining where they can go to study. Many university students want to finish with university so they can look for work or apply for graduate programs in foreign countries. A computer science student and a physics student said they feel they don't have many job options in Burma. When schools reopen, the students will have one week of classes, one week of study time and then they have to take their final exams, which will cover information that was taught months before. Another vacation will follow the end of the term until the next term begins. This means that when many schools opened in the first week of August, by the third or fourth week of August the term was over and they were closed again.

There are several problems inherent in Burma's education system. Upon high school graduation, students take a national standardized exam. People with the best scores qualify to go to medical school, and then (in order of decreasing scores): computer school, technology, and other sciences and finally the students with the lowest scores are funneled into the humanities. As a result, some students feel forced into a field in which they have no interest. One student admitted that he got top scores, and his family wanted him to be a physician, but he can't stand hospitals. As a result, he lost face with his parents and settled for computer science. Some of his classmates come from rural areas and have never seen computers and aren't interested in them either but are studying computer science because they received high scores. The first year

or two of computer science studies are elementary, especially by western standards because some students have no previous computer experience. To compound the difficulties, students often have to go to the US Information Services library or the outrageously expensive (1000 kyats annually) British consulate's library to do research since the universities often don't have the necessary books. The computer science student described it as a perpetual hunt around Rangoon for the right book. He remarked that rural students, especially women, feel at a disadvantage because they're not familiar with Rangoon and the many places that might have a necessary book.

“Frustrated with these problems with the educational system, many people are trying to get out of the country. Students and teachers alike are leaving.”

Universities have also shortened courses by about 50% in an effort to process students more quickly. As a result, course content is taught at a more superficial level. Professors try to cover the same material as before, but they can't give in-depth explanations and examples about their teachings. Exams have also become easier. Some professors would like to give difficult questions to their students, but the government is pressuring the professors not to upset the students in any way. Enough really easy questions are included on most tests to make it impossible to fail.

One university-level history teacher said she would like to teach a different perspective on history than the government allows. However, she said she can't challenge her students, even when she's teaching small groups, to be more critical of the government. Military intelligence places informers in her university classes and it is difficult to determine who the informers are. Another professor described the research situation at his university. Students and professors can't do research because chemicals and scientific equipment are difficult to obtain. This adversely affects the quality of education available in the sciences. Even in Rangoon, research facilities are lacking.

Frustrated with these problems with the educational system, many people are trying to get out of the country. Students and teachers alike are leaving. Often the brightest and most capable people are the ones who are able to meet foreign acceptance criteria. The result is a brain drain among graduates and teachers. One student remarked that half of his classes were taught by people who haven't received degrees yet, while the other half were taught by second-rate professors. He said that professors exhibited a lack of commitment and ability to clearly explain complex concepts.

It is a credit to the Burmese, to their persistence and their respect for learning, that so many continue educate and to learn within such a trying system. As Aung San Suu Kyi wrote in a simple understatement during her own studies, “Developments in Burma after 1940 took many abrupt twists and turns, and to this day, it still remains a society waiting for its true potential to be realized.”



C.E.

EDUCATION FOR THE MARGINALIZED KAREN

When the Karen rebellion started forty-eight years ago, a majority of the Karen did not expect that the war would last as long as five decades. Thus, the KNU did not have a long-term education plan for its people. Only in the 1960's, recognizing that a protracted war was underway, did the newly-established Karen government formally establish an education department. The KNU became enthusiastic about the development of a new curriculum for schools in the areas it controlled. The KNU was able to draw up a more comprehensive curriculum for its schools, from primary to high school level, based on the Burmese government's curriculum and the old British education model. This new urban-biased curriculum ran counter to the Karen's strong agricultural society. Both the Burmese government's and the western education model tend to produce specific skills for management jobs and industrial development. Consequently the KNU's education model was not able to fulfill the needs for the development of the Karen farmers.

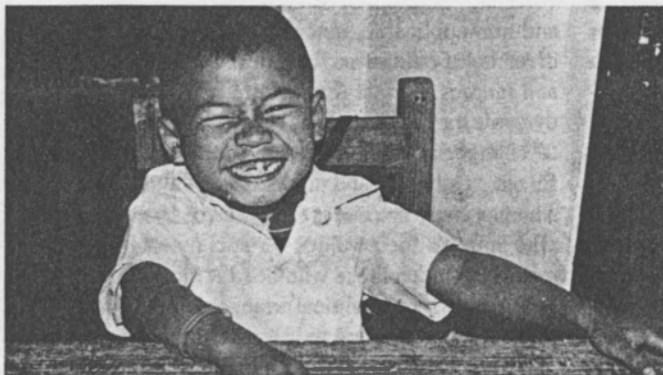
As a consequence, there are significant forces driving social change in the Karen society. Young men who are not interested in joining the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) or serving in the KNU or farming have only a few other choices, including working as small timber merchants, as laborers for Thai logging companies in KNU areas, or as unskilled labor at construction sites and industries in Thailand. The few opportunities for women include working as maids in Thai households and having light jobs in Thai industries. For the Karen maids, risk of sexual abuse by Thai men is quite high.

The marginalized Karen refers to the large group of Karen people who are living well below the poverty line and who have many fewer opportunities than the small number of privileged Karen. Geographically, these are the Karen living in KNU-controlled zones, the civil war zones, and the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. The majority of Karen in the Karen State are still living a primitive life. They suffer not only from poverty, but also from the civil war. They live a distance from the KNU's well-entrenched areas. For them, death from starvation, displacement or Burmese military activity is an everyday reality. Many people suffer from endemic malaria. Children and older people, who have less resistance to disease, often die helplessly in the jungle. Karen households get rice from their own upland cultivation. The Karen still use traditional slash-and-burn methods for rice cultivation. The rice crop is primarily for subsistence, and these people rarely produce a surplus. However, many households suffer from starvation due to the Burmese military's 'four cuts' operation, a military strategy in use by the Burmese military since the 1950's, which aims to cut rebel groups off from access to organization, food, new recruits, and financial support.

Marginalized Karen in the refugee camps are the poor people who have fled from persecution by the Burmese government and army. A number of families of high ranking KNU members and merchants live in the refugee camps, but the majority of the people in the camps are marginalized families who are not KNU leaders. The marginalized Karen living in the refugee camps are relatively better off than those living in the war zones. However, poverty still remains in the camps. Small thatched roof and bamboo houses are common for the majority of the refugees. The people live on the aid rice and fish paste provided by humanitarian organizations in Thailand. A few foreign medical organizations provide health care programs for them. A refugee, a mother of four children, said "We get basic food from these foreign organizations, but we

still need some money to spend for general things such as good diets for sick children, a few clothes, and school fees. So we need small jobs for a small income." For this 'small income', many refugees sell their labor to Thai employers. A large number of refugees work as laborers in Thai rice plantations. Daily wages are fifty to sixty Thai baht (less than US\$2.00) per day. Some suffer from skin diseases and sickness because they lack awareness about the use of chemical pesticides. In some households, even children work to supplement family income.

Educational development and development in other areas of life are interrelated. Educational developments can enhance the development in other areas if the design of the education program is based on the needs of the people. If the aim of educational development programs is to benefit the majority of marginalized Karen, careful consideration must be made about the needs of the people.



A young Karen student.

The participation of marginalized Karen is key to developing needs-based education for the majority. A thorough and broad based survey should be done to discover the needs

of marginalized people before the educational programs are implemented. The urban biased educational system is inapplicable to the marginalized Karen. To be beneficial to these people, the education system must be applicable in their environment.

Equal access to educational opportunities is very important. There should be alternative plans to provide educational opportunities for the children from poor families. Agricultural development programs can help people in poverty, and with such programs available, poor families would have more reason to send their children to schools. In addition, financial aid for children from poor families to study at Karen schools will enhance their educational opportunities. Financial aid for children to go to Karen schools is much less expensive than a foreign scholarship programs.

Foreign scholarship programs can still support education and development in other areas, but there should be a clear consideration of how scholarships will be helpful to the development of the marginalized people either directly or indirectly. Scholarship programs which offer selected subjects applicable to the development of the homeland might be a way to improve the life of the marginalized people. However, because of the high cost of study abroad, the scholarship programs are an opportunity for only a limited number of the Karen. There should be an alternative for larger numbers of Karen to receive an appropriate education. Setting up a college in the KNU area is an alternative. Offering scholarships in less expensive programs in other countries, but at the same educational level that western countries offer, is a way to cut costs and to allow a larger number of Karen students to study.

In summary, educational programs should be applicable to the marginalized people. There should be equal opportunities to study for all Karen children regardless of their social status, family background, and religion. Needs of marginalized children should be the first priority. Furthermore, if the high cost of study in western countries is a reason to limit the number of students, there should be an alternative offering scholarships to larger number of the students. ❖

Excerpts from a paper prepared by Saw Moe Kyaw Tun. Full copies of the 19-page paper can be requested from Burma Issues.

ASIAN VALUES OR ASEAN AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS' VALUES?

"If ideas and beliefs are to be denied validity outside the geographical and cultural bounds of their origin, Buddhism would be confined to north India, Christianity to a narrow tract in the Middle East and Islam to Arabia." — Aung San Suu Kyi¹

In 1948, the international community agreed upon the Universal Declaration for Human Rights (the UDHR) as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, which led to the development of international promotion and protection of these rights. Next year will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the UDHR. 1998 will also mark the five year review of the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action, which was adopted at the 1993 Conference on Human Rights, of which 174 countries participated, including many Asian countries. In the lead-up to the anniversary, the Asia-Pacific region has been hotly debating whether the UDHR is really "universal", that is, whether there is a universal culture of human rights which applies to all people despite contextual diversity and cultural specificity. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir has called for a review of the UDHR based on the fact that a number of countries did not exist when the UDHR was drafted and had no input into it.² The "Asian values" debate is based on the complaint in Asia that the West — particularly the US — is heavy-handed and culturally insensitive in condemning human rights conditions in developing countries, along with the contention that paternalistic, authoritarian forms of government are more compatible with "Asian values" that tend to stress social stability over the rights of individuals. Authoritarian Asian countries have used their economic success to promote their nations as models for prosperity that challenges Western liberal democracies. The debate does not bode well for the assumption that Asean, in admitting Burma into the organization in July this year, will take some responsibility to change the existing political, economic and social order in Burma.

This decade has seen the intensification in the Asian values debate. The essence of the argument is that "Asia is different". The "Asian values" school states that Asians have a more positive attitude towards power, authority and hierarchies, and contrary to Western individualism, they emphasize the rights of the collective, unity, social harmony, consensus and order. Proponents of "Asian values" argue that human rights can only be understood within the cultural, historical and economic context of a nation. This, in essence, is a cultural relativist challenge to universalism. This rationale has allowed many lesser developed nations in the region to direct their energies towards economic development, rather than political and social rights. The emphasis on Asian values is an attempt to continue economic competitive-

ness, which has had great success in a number of countries in the region, while keeping the forces of democracy at bay.

The idea that Asian values derives from Asian culture, religion and philosophies to which "Western" notions of human rights are alien and non-applicable, ignores the plurality and diversity of culture and realities in the region, and ignores the fact that culture is inherently dynamic, not static and has been/is susceptible to change, both from internal and external forces. "Culture" (and its system of values) is a human construct, and is often created by elites who impose their values on society. It is a means by which those who benefit most from the existing socio-political arrangement, maintain the status quo and tend to marginalize the values of those who wish to change this status quo.³

The question that needs to be contemplated, then, is who are the articulators of "Asian values". States, in the form of government elites, not the individuals or peoples groups whom they are supposed to represent, are the main articulators. That is, "He who defines, controls."⁴ Burma is ruled by a military dictatorship which has ignored the peoples' wish to have a democratic government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, as expressed in the 1990 elections. It is therefore not surprising that when Burma's human rights record was questioned at the Asean Regional Forum meeting in July, the Burmese Foreign Minister Ohn defended the regime by accusing the Western press of presenting a distorted picture of his country.⁵ Such arguments are primarily an attempt by the governing elite to maintain the political status quo, that is, to consolidate their hold on political power.

In the 1993 Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights (Asean countries' contribution to the Vienna Conference) Article 17 emphasizes the imperative of the statist right to development, recognizing it "as a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights." It affirmed in Article 19 that "poverty is one of the major obstacles hindering the full enjoyment of human rights," especially that of development. This rationale is the basis of the argument that economic growth must take precedence over demands for democracy

and human rights, and that there is a causal connection between authoritarianism and economic success. As Singaporean academic Thio Li-Ann stated, "Given the first priority of eradicating poverty, the right of development could be enlisted as an excuse or justification for quashing civil-political rights,"⁶ as there has been no discussion as to what point of economic success is necessary for there to be a relaxing on civil and political controls.

Lee Kuan Yew, the leader who has been largely credited for Singapore's successful economic development, has vociferously advocated that Asians fear too much democracy as it may undermine the "East Asian Economic Miracle" — a rationale that implies that civil and political rights threaten economic stability and could retard economic development which requires a stable environment.⁷ The argument la-

...
"...the right of development could be enlisted as an excuse or justification for quashing civil-political rights."
 — Thio Li-Ann
 ...

strength, considering the recent economic crisis in Southeast Asia, and that Burma is regarded as a basket case in terms of economic development despite being ruled by an iron-fisted regime. "Economic progress" in Burma has weakened social stability since mounting evidence indicates that most of the infrastructure projects carried out under the Siorc regime have been undertaken with massive exploitation of Burmese citizens. It cannot be claimed that authoritarianism necessarily leads to the eradication of poverty by prioritizing development, as Burma was ranked in the 1996 World Human Development Index as one of the least developed nations of the world, coming in 133 out of 174 nations.⁸ This ranking has not taken into account Burma's worst economic crisis, which has likely deepened Burma's status as one of the least developed nations in the world.

The Asian values emphasis that groups and communities are more important than the individual should not be regarded as just an Asian "value." The UN has implemented many international instruments concerned with group interests, the aim being to protect those groups who are either vulnerable to abuse or marginalized. In Burma, it has been the various ethnic and religious minority groups, opposition groups and individuals that have suffered the adverse effects of the denial of human rights. These groups have no forum to voice their grievances under the current military dictatorship. The only group whose well-being is taken care of are members of the regime and those affiliated with it. For Asean to be sincere in its adherence to Asian values and

Confucianism (of which "harmony" is a cardinal component), it should make substantive efforts to help restore state-society harmony in Burma – a nation renowned for its lack of harmony and order between the state and civil society.⁹

Unfortunately, Asean's admission policies exclude human rights considerations as a condition for membership; the nature of governance is considered irrelevant.¹⁰ This is not surprising since the majority of its members are authoritarian states. Article 5 of the Bangkok Declaration emphasized "the principles of respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as non-interference in the internal affairs of States, and the non-use of human rights as an instrument of political pressure". However, in light of the crisis in Cambodia before its planned Asean admission in July, Malaysia's acting Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said that Asean's "non-involvement in the reconstruction of Cambodia actually contributed to the deterioration and final collapse of national reconciliation.... we need to consider 'constructive intervention.'" The concept of constructive intervention or involvement reflects a leap in policy, especially as Ibrahim further explained this new term: "Constructive involvement entails, among other things, direct assistance to firm up electoral processes, an increased commitment to legal and administrative reforms, the development of human capital and the general strengthening of civil society and the rule of law...."¹¹ Hopefully, Asean will substantiate this new policy direction further, and apply it to Burma.

The "Asian values" school does not deny the concept of human rights, but attempts to change the focus of "universal, inalienable" rights-oriented rights, like development in the pursuit of economic growth, at the cost of civil and political rights. The Asian Charter on Human Rights (recently released), was drafted and finalized by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and the International Affairs Section of the Christian Conference of Asia. It involved regional consultations with Asian NGOs and other community organizations who had expressed the need for such a Charter following some Asian government's call that human rights are Western concept and have no relevance to Asia. It states "there is an exhortation of the spurious theories of 'Asian Values' which are a thin disguise for their Authoritarianism" and endorses the UDHR and the other covenants comprising the International Bill of Rights,¹² declaring that, "We believe that rights are universal, every person being entitled to them by virtue of being a human being." The essential aim of the Charter is that it can be used as an educational document, and as a basis to develop solidarity actions for the protection and promotion human

rights in Asia.¹³ Asean leaders take note: human rights are considered universal and inalienable by Asian people in the region. There needs to be a change in policy concerning relationships with member states if they want regional stability and security. Constructive involvement, along Anwar Ibrahim's lines, should be applied as soon as possible to Burma in order to restore harmony according to the wishes of the grassroots Burmese people.



V.J.C.

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NEWS!

The Burma Issues documentation center publishes a *weekly summary* (via email) of Burma news items and other documents received.

There are two formats: the original (contains summaries, authors, media type, date & indexing info.) and a slightly longer version that includes titles. If you would like to receive either of these summaries, please email Burma Issues at: durham@mozart.inet.co.th & remember to specify the version you prefer.

Continued from 'Education', page 3

The educational perks of USDA may make membership more palatable for some, for USDA offers access to educational resources otherwise in short supply in Burma, such as language labs, computers, and courses in computers or English.²¹

Intellectual Burma

The education system in Burma is failing both students and teachers alike. New schools, sports fields and aggressive indoctrination cannot address the Slorc's problem: that dictatorship is ultimately threatened by a literate, educated populace. In spite of small progress so far, Burma's generals seem optimistic. They hope that with heavy restrictions, retraining and rhetoric, Burma can invent an education system which, as Secretary-1 Khin Nyunt put it, will nurture "the youths to become patriotic intellectuals and intelligentsia".²² Unfortunately for Burma's youth, it seems that in this system they will have to try to become "intellectuals and intelligentsia" without much access to books, computers, native language instruction, or information about the world or themselves; and from teachers who have neither the time, freedom, or training to educate effectively. And they'd better do it without openly questioning any authority along the way. That's one thing they've surely learned by now.



E.M.

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The Last Word

What Others Have to Say About Burma

"The NLD is always in favor of a meaningful dialogue with the Slorc, but this would have to include Aung San Suu Kyi. According to the NLD's principles, any important undertaking by the party should be done with both the chairman and the general secretary together." — *An NLD (National League for Democracy) statement that explained why chairman Aung Shwe decided not to attend an exclusive meeting with Khin Nyunt on Sept. 16.*

...

"He looked very calm and very collected. I think he hardly used words like 'rogue' or 'moron'. It was a difference." — *Rustam Sani, a Malaysian political commentator referring to Mr. Mahathir's performance on the CNN program Q&A in which he was questioned about Malaysia's economy.*

...

"Until the military junta in Burma is prepared to recognize the democratic rights of the people, and most certainly until it is prepared to cooperate with the rest of the world in trying to take action against the menace of heroin, it will be extremely difficult for the governments of the developed world to recognize the government of Burma as an acceptable interlocutor and a partner." — *British Foreign Minister Robin Cook explaining why the UK would not allow Slorc leaders to participate in the Asem meetings next year.*

"We do not discriminate among ourselves. We do not accept discrimination by others among Asean members." — *Philippines Foreign Under-Secretary Rodolfo Severino who will become the Asean secretary-general in January, responding to England's refusal to grant visas to Burmese diplomats whom Asean would like to attend the Asem meetings in London next year.*

...

"Such a warning represents only one voice and should be regarded as a personal opinion which is not necessarily Asean's collective stance." — *Thai Foreign Minister Prachuab Chaiyasarn commenting on PM Mahathir's threat to boycott the Asem meetings next year if Burma is not invited.*

...

"I think the UN Charter is quite clear. The sovereignty of a country should not be violated. Nobody should interfere with the sovereignty of a country. We don't meddle in anybody's affairs. We don't like anybody to meddle in our affairs, as well. I think that is quite clear. I think the National Convention is a very capable body for deciding the future of our country." — *Brig. Gen. David Oliver Abel, Slorc minister for National Planning and Economic Development, responding to the question of whether Burma needs an international mediator to help resolve its internal problems.*

BURMA ISSUES
PO BOX 1076
SILOM POST OFFICE
BANGKOK 10504
THAILAND

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