



Burma Issues

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WHERE IS DEMOCRACY WITHOUT THE GRASSROOTS

In Burma the word democracy is often linked with Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD or the now-stalled dialogue process. Rarely mentioned are the grassroots people, governance for the people as a whole, representation and participation from the masses and the necessary input into social, economic and political structures that is needed in a democracy. In Burma, democracy and a regime change are often portrayed as the solution to Burma's internal problems, and Aung San Suu Kyi is often portrayed as the beacon that can deliver it. In reality, democracy is not Aung San Suu Kyi, democracy is not political parties, democracy is not the dialogue between the NLD and the SPDC, democracy is not even the installation of democratic elections and political parties, and democracy is not about the needs of a select group of people. What then do we really mean when we call for democracy in Burma?

International support for Aung San Suu Kyi, her NLD party and the dialogue process suggest that what is really meant is regime change. Currently Burma is governed by an oppressive and often brutal military dictatorship. Under this regime Burma has achieved a least developed country status, seen the collapse of its economy, poverty and starvation become a reality for many of its population, oppressive and brutal human rights abuses enacted upon a largely innocent civilian population, the erosion of civil society and the disintegration through mismanagement of necessary infrastructure. That a regime change is needed cannot be in doubt.

But regime change in Burma doesn't constitute democracy and won't necessarily bring about a just and real democratic system in Burma. In fact it can be argued that the root cause of Burma's problems do not stem from the military regime at all, that in fact the military regime is a product of Burma's problems. It can also be argued that any regime change that doesn't include a social democracy that employs democracy as a way of life, won't necessarily improve the lives of people in Burma nor solve the many social, economic and structural problems that

Burma currently faces. Inherent in Burma's social fabric are systems of patron-clientism and chauvinism. Traditional structures, going back to the days of the Burmese kings, have encouraged a society that is reliant on social classes where one group holds superiority over another. Over history Burmese society has often accepted one groups right to dominate another. Today this is equally evident in Burma as the people themselves contribute to the continued dominance of the military regime. It is therefore not enough to view democracy first as a regime change, and only after this resolving the many problematic factors that hinder the existence of a true democracy in Burma. These traditional social structures, unaddressed, will continue to remain in place regardless of a regime change.

If these underlying traditional issues are to be addressed and a true democracy to emerge, then the people who participate and contribute to the continued existence of these structures must play a very important role, both in being aware of these ingrained structures and then finding creative solutions in dealing with them. If this is the case, there are dangers that lie in following this order of regime change and then social change; specifically that the people of Burma will not be ready for democracy. There are too many examples across the world of well meaning (and some not well-meaning) western forms of democracy being imposed upon other cultures. The reason they are not successful, and in many cases downright destructive, is the ill-informed view that the ideal of democracy can be implemented by an outside source. In fact democracy can only emerge from an internal process of self-evaluation and critique that is relevant to a specific country and situation, and should therefore never be implemented the same way twice. Democracy must come from the needs and voices of the people inside that specific country. The work of the great Indian thinker, B R Ambedkar, encompasses what is needed for

Real democracy must be ingrained in social behaviour as well as political structure. Without its inclusion in the social practices of everyday life, no matter how successful the political structures are, democracy will not be able to exist in a true and effective sense.

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democracy, "democratisation can only be an internal process in which, through a process of self-critique, entrenched practices and habits of authoritarianism must be replaced with democratic practices". Unless the people are prepared for democracy, unless internal self-critique exists with an outcome that prepares people to express their needs and wants and participate in the process that will recognise these needs and wants, a regime change will make little difference to a democracy movement based on true social justice.

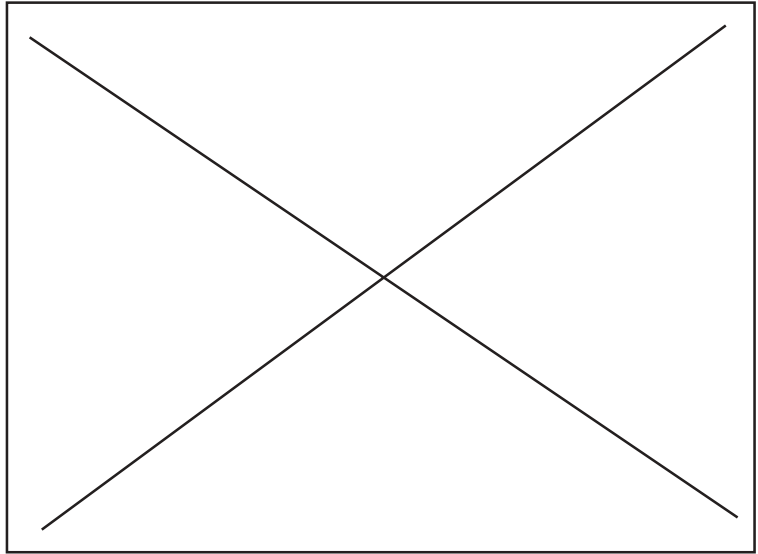
Another danger lies with Burma's state of multi-ethnicity. How will a group of diverse, often oppressed ethnic groups co-operate together with a central democratic power? This is not something that can be dealt with after a regime change. These groups must play a prominent part in the democracy transition, from the very beginning. To unite an otherwise divided country under a new democratic form of governance is a complex process that cannot realistically be the responsibility of one person, or even one party. Unfortunately the pressure, predominantly from elements of the international community and the media's portrayal of the problems in Burma, is residing solely on Aung San Suu Kyi's ability to do this.

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life, no matter how successful the political structures are, democracy will not be able to exist in a true and effective sense. When planting a new idea, the ground must be well prepared. In Burma this is the grassroots communities, the majority that make up the ground level of society. Without their participation and the preparation needed for them to contribute to the new social, economic and political structures for a truly peaceful Burma, a democracy based on a just society will never be successful.

Those working on a solution to Burma's situation; NGO's, funders, activists, governments and countless individuals, must all be aware of the important role for grassroots communities when



Working with the grassroots
BI 2002

we talk about democracy. A lot of energy and commitment needs to be given to groups and individuals who are actively involved in the struggle for a real democracy, a democracy that involves the voices of the grassroots people. They are capable of articulating their needs and they must be a necessary component to democracy and a newly emergent society based on freedom, participation, and justice and peace for all. And who better to shape a new society than the people who will live in it and are directly effected by it.

This article does not suggest that Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD or the democracy movement are unnecessary components to true democracy in Burma. This movement is as necessary as the grassroots movement and they should work together for the benefit of all people. Often, working for the democracy movement and working with grassroots communities are seen as two separate movements. The question is often asked, how do grassroots NGO's contribute to the democracy movement? This needn't be a question, as democracy cannot exist without the input of the grassroots communities and therefore working with grassroots communities is perhaps the most important element of bringing democracy to Burma. It is addressing this element that must not be forgotten when we talk about Burma and democracy. It is one of the most important factors for funders, activists, policy makers, governments and the grassroots themselves, if a true, just and peaceful society is to emerge in Burma.

THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE INSIDE KARENNI STATE: PART 1

This report is based on a Burma Issues field trip to the central and western areas of Karenni State. The purpose of the trip was to look at the current health and education situation and the security of livelihood for the villagers who live in this area. The beginning of this year saw many difficulties for farmers in this area where crop production was low, commodity prices high and continuing military operations and human rights abuses were prevalent.

The area encompassed by Dee Maw Hsoe and Kay Lyar townships in central Karenni state is heavily reliant on agricultural practices. Crops are predominantly paddy, groundnut, maize, sesame and green pea and these plantations rely heavily upon adequate rainfall. From May-June last year this area experienced heavy rainfall which stopped after the planting season and didn't begin again until the harvest season. For an area dependent on agriculture these climate changes had a drastic effect on villagers crop production. In Dee Maw Hsoe township, last years paddy production rate was a mere 25%. In village tracts to the south, where irrigation systems and water sources were far better they still only managed a 50% production rate. Farmers who traditionally grow groundnut saw such a bad first harvest that some farmers planted twice. Others had no choice but to try and live off their meager first harvest. These factors had a serious effect on villagers living standards.

Coupled with this were the dramatic prices of commodities on the market. A tin of good quality rice is priced at 4,000 (\$3.8) kyat on the market and low quality rice is priced at 3,000 (\$2.9) kyat. A tin of ground-nut is 1,200-1,500 (\$1.17-1.46) kyat, a viss (1.63kg) of maize 120 kyat, a viss of green pea 350 kyat, and a tin of sesame 6,000 (\$5.8) kyat. In contrast a public servant receives a monthly wage of 4,000-5,000 (\$3.8-4.8) kyat and a seasonal labourer only 600 kyat per week. Buying basic food necessities is therefore likely to take up a huge chunk of your salary or is completely unaffordable. In December last year a tin of rice sold for 2,200 kyat. Three months later, the price of the same rice jumped noticeably to 150% of its previous price.

EDUCATION

The right to education for Karenni people is consistently denied under the rule of the military regime. Schools in rural areas are facing a constant shortage of schoolteachers, teachers' salaries are often cut and various fees are imposed upon the students. The salaries of the teachers and the fees imposed on the students differ from

school to school. According to a local resident, students fees depended mainly on the headmaster of the school. Furthermore, schools are frequently closed without reason.

It has been reported that Unicef is providing educational and health assistance to the Burmese government to be used in rural areas. However, villagers continue to report that schools, particularly in rural areas, face shortages of school supplies and learning materials such as books, pens and pencils. Only a handful of school materials provided by Unicef has reached schools in some rural areas because of the corruption of various high-level government officials. "Headmasters charge the students 20-30 kyat per book when they are supposed to sell them at only 5 kyat a book as stated by the provisional office," said a schoolteacher from Daw Ta Ma Gyi village tract.

Both state-run schools and community-run schools are found in rural areas in Karenni State. However, there are still many villages that cannot afford to build schools. Even when schools exist, countless school-aged children are unable to attend. Parents are either too poor to send their children to school or need them to

Some of the difficulties facing teachers are:

1. Teachers in rural areas are mostly from remote areas of other states and divisions and do not fulfill their teaching responsibilities. They would rather work at well-paid jobs than teach in schools. The government does not take action against the teachers who fail to fulfill their teaching duties.
2. Shortage of schoolteachers in rural areas.
3. There is no systematic academic year planning because schools are closed when teachers go for training, meetings or go to get their monthly salary from the nearby town.
4. The normal pay of a teacher is 4,000-5,000 kyat. However, township/state officers always cut their salaries. The actual salaries the teachers receive are reduced to 3,000-4,000 kyat.
5. Lack of training for the teachers and inadequate teaching materials have resulted in ineffective teaching because it is difficult for teachers to apply new teaching methods without teaching aids. Instead, they use outdated teaching methods.
6. Lack of proper monitoring system within the education department and a failure to inspect schools in rural areas.
7. Teachers cannot finish the syllabus outlined by the government.
8. Teachers' salaries do not keep up with the skyrocketing prices of commodities. As a result, teachers are not motivated to perform their duties.
9. Lack of cooperation between the teachers and the students' parents sometimes leads to misunderstanding and problems.

work to contribute to the family income. Results at the high school level are often poor and the dropout rate is very high in the rural areas. All these factors indicate that the future of the next generation is extremely worrying.

HEALTHCARE

Health care is severely limited in most parts of the rural areas of Karenni State. Some villages have missionary health workers, midwives or village health workers employed by the military regime. These health workers are not well-trained and often mis-diagnose and mis-treat patients, leaving many patients suffering from negative side effects. The military regime has made no effort to supply medicines or medical facilities to this area. Instead, medical workers have to buy the needed medical supplies with their own money and then charge the patients extremely high prices. Although many international NGOs have provided health assistance, villagers report top-level officials have sold these medical supplies on the black market for their own benefit.

A vast majority of people do not have access to basic medical care and health education. The lack of well-trained health workers and the high costs of treatment and medicines have exacerbated the poor health situation in Karenni State. It has been found that respiratory diseases, diarrhea and dysentery are common among the people. Quite a few people have died of these diseases as they are highly infectious and are found among people aged between 5-25. A midwife from Pro Hsoe Township commented that these diseases are partially the result of poor sanitation and a lack of health education in the area. "Villagers just do not know how to take protective measures during the outbreak of diseases. Thus health problems are having a dire effect on the people's life." A sizeable portion of the population is also infected with malaria and Urinary Tract Infections. Tonsillitis and kidney diseases are found among the 18-30 age group. In addition, pneumonia, beriberi and arthritis are found in the 5 to 40 plus age group.

Although clinics exist in Pro Hsoe Township, only empty shelves are found in them. A health worker admitted that he had limited knowledge and was ill-trained to carry out the work effectively. Health workers sent by the government only give polio vaccination once a year to villagers. It is encouraging however that the health work-

ers in the areas say they are willing to participate in health-related workshops in order to upgrade their knowledge.

Health and education continue to be two of the most important issues for villagers living in Burma's ethnic rural areas. The Burmese military deliberately deny these basic human rights to villagers in the ethnic areas.

Next week Burma Issues will look at the security of livelihood and military operations in this area that also effect the ability of villagers to survive



BI Staff

Some of the difficulties facing students are:

1. Frequent school closure destroys the students' enthusiasm for school.
2. Inadequate learning materials hinder them from learning.
3. Students get no encouragement from their parents and the majority of them have to support their parents or take care of their younger siblings.
4. Students who complete primary school have to go to nearby cities for secondary and high school education. Most parents cannot afford the living costs and the transportation and school fees needed to send their children to these schools. Students who want to pass the examinations often bribe the teachers to pass and children from military families are given top priority on the pass list. Those from rich families or who have connection with the military officials are in the second group. Burmans whose relatives have no connection with any revolutionary group or opposition party are in the third group. Students from the ethnic minorities are at the bottom.
5. Job opportunities are scarce. As a result, after completing school they have to pay bribes to get jobs, or cannot find any employment at all.
6. Private tuition fees are too expensive for students from rural areas to afford.
7. The disparity between civilian and military education discourages students to further their studies.

Health cases in February 2003

No	Diagnosis	0-5ys		6-15ys		>16ys		Total		
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
1	UTI	2	-	1	2	7	15	10	17	27
2	Bacillary-dysentery	3	1	1	-	3	1	7	2	9
3	Amoebic-dysentery	3	-	1	3	2	2	6	5	11
4	Pneumonia	10	6	3	9	10	5	23	20	43
5	Tonsillitis	2	1	2	7	6	11	10	19	29
6	Beriberi	-	-	-	-	2	12	2	12	14
7	Malaria -PF	-	-	-	-	4	2	4	2	6
8	Malaria -PV	1	-	-	4	5	3	6	7	13
9	Diarrhea	3	4	-	1	-	2	3	7	10
10	Skin Disease	2	-	1	-	5	3	8	3	11
11	Others	21	24	20	16	75	154	117	194	310
All total		47	36	29	42	119	210	195	288	483
		83		71		329				

DEMANDING SANCTIONS THAT DEMAND SANCTIONS THAT DEMAND...RELEASING?

Since the current military regime claimed rule over Burma in 1988, it has seen three US presidents (four if you include the tail end of the Reagan administration), the tragic opening of Euro Disneyland, and many brutal wars all over the planet. Many of the more publicised wars that have been waged in the last fifteen years have been attempts to crush military regimes or regimes that offend democracy. The US has been at the helm of many of these wars including both the Iraq invasions, Sudan, Bosnia and Afghanistan. However Burma's regime has always been allowed to continue its oppression with relative security from Western military forces.

Recently a letter from a Burmese girl living in exile was published in a local newspaper asking US president

George Bush for just one missile to be used to wipe out the top government officials in Burma. She said doing so would prove to the world that the war on Iraq was not about oil and in fact about bringing down a brutal regime. Without a doubt, support of a military response to end Burma's junta is out of the question. It does however, raise the question of what steps need to be taken or changed in how the world is dealing

with the latest turn of events surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's struggle for democracy.

On May 30th, Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested and placed under "protective custody". The world is too smart to know that shutting down NLD offices and arresting NLD top figures was not really done to protect anyone. What these actions are leading to is difficult to determine, but it has already resulted in wide international attention. Over the last month Western and Asian country's alike have been stating that they "demand the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi so that talks with junta leaders may begin again". There has also been a wide call for import bans and existing sanctions to be tightened. That's super, but if one looks at the simple

time line accompanying this article they will see that all of this has been happening since 1988 and very little has changed. Sanctions and demands, sanctions and demands, that has been all that most governments can come up with and yet Aung San Suu Kyi still gets arrested and still faces long terms of imprisonment. When it comes to running a nation the Burmese junta does not seem to be too good at it, but in this situation they seem to be playing everyone for suckers. At what point will country's forcing sanctions upon Burma run out of sanctions to force? What the international community might need to consider is a different approach. Sanctions and demands just do not seem to cut it anymore and it makes people wonder how hard they are trying.

For one they could recognise more people supporting democracy in Burma than just Aung San Suu Kyi. When she is not under arrest, the international community pulls back its pressure with the optimism that things are improving, but then Aung San Suu Kyi is arrested again and the world rolls its eyes in frustration. The NLD is certainly not the only legal political opposition to the junta that is pushing for democracy. There are several Burmese and ethnic political groups that could use support as well as the general population who continue to support democracy in the face of brutal human rights abuses.

Another aspect is to take pressure outside of Burma. In the last year the Burmese military has quite openly and successfully been improving relations with their neighbouring country's and other Asian countries. This indicates that Burma has recognised the increasing boycotts from the West. They cannot rely on Western investment and support any more so they are turning to their neighbours and friends in Asia. China has always supported Burma and recently good relations have been established with Bangladesh, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia. Because of conflict with China, India has joined the relations game as well. Even Japan has been writing an endless amount of blank checks, in the form of aid for Burma. Perhaps the most puzzling is that of Thailand and Australia. These are two democratic countries' that have openly condemned the arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and have demanded her release but then confess that imposing sanctions is not an option. Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer said that sanctions imposed upon Burma "would be pointless". Thailand's Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra also said that sanctions were out of the question. Thailand is one of the



leading countries investing in Burma. Once again economics determines everything, major corporations and the money they seek to make is more important than human rights and lives. Burma's government has wisely targeted the economies of its neighbours, knowing that it would be difficult for those countries to impose restrictions on Burma that will directly affect their own markets and investments. These are areas that the international community needs to come together and figure out.

It would appear that the Burmese government knows what they are doing and as long as they have the moral support of China and the financial support of Japan, Thailand, Australia and others, no one will be reaching for their guns to quick. It must be difficult for a govern-

ment to run a country but the Burmese junta make it look easy by simply not caring. This means that they can stay in the business of causing people to suffer a little longer while everyone on the outside argues over whether or not sanctions really work.

A military approach in forcing the Burmese government out of power is just not realistic, nor beneficial to the long-term resolving of Burma's ethnic divisions and depleted economic and social structures. But if George Bush were to send one missile into Rangoon it can be assured that he would not need UN help to prove that Burma was containing GMD, Generals of Mass Destruction.



Rudy Huffer

This is a very simple summary of the international response to the imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi. 1988-present

Sept 1988 -Aung San Suu Kyi urged the United Nations and the foreign community to make a strong protest on the new Burmese government. She also cautioned any kind of foreign external intervention in the affairs of the country.

1989 -Aung San Suu Kyi put under house arrest.

Feb 1994 -Report of Congressman Bill Richardson expressed hope that Aung San Suu Kyi and Khin Nyunt will meet soon for preliminary dialogue.

Mar 1994 -US officials say the Clinton administration is considering measures to pressure Burma to open talks with Aung San Suu Kyi.

July 1994 -Australia joined the US and EU in criticising ASEAN for inviting Burma to its annual meeting in Bangkok.

June 1995 -Before resigning as British Prime Minister, John Major condemned continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and promised to continue pressing for her release.

July 1995 -Aung San Suu Kyi released

May 1996 -Australia, UK, Japan, US, France and Germany all condemn the arrests of NLD members.

July 1996 -The EU Parliament asks EU member nations to impose sanctions against Burma in the areas of trade, tourism, and investment.

July 1996 -The US senate passes a directive that bans all new US investment in Burma if repression increases or if Aung San Suu Kyi is exiled, harmed or arrested.

Dec 1996 -Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer says Australia will not impose sanctions against the SLORC because they wouldn't be effective. However he complains about the lack of freedom and disregard for human rights in Burma.

Apr 1997 -EU sanctions on Burma aimed at forcing the country's military rulers to stop human rights abuses will be extended for a further six months.

July 1997 -Canada announces that it will join the US in imposing sanctions against Burma.

1998 -Aung San Suu Kyi put back under house arrest.

Oct 1998 -The EU steps up sanctions against Burma's junta by extending an existing ban on visas for senior junta officials.

Sept 2000 - American President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair blasts Burma's ruling junta for its treatment of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Oct 2001 -European Union governments are set to renew their long-standing sanctions against Myanmar but will also recognise a "relative improvement" in the country's political climate.

May 2002 -Aung San Suu Kyi released from house arrest.

May 2003 -Aung San Suu Kyi is arrested while on tour in Sagaing State.

June 2003 -North American, European and Asian Nations demand that Aung San Suu Kyi be released and discuss the tightening of sanctions.

news briefs

ferry sinks in tavoy. It was reported that an express ferry that runs along the Tavoy coastal route, carrying nearly 500 passengers including more than 70 children sunk and many passengers were feared drowned. The authorities failed to issue a statement on the news of the sinking of the ferry and many guards are said to be positioned near the location of the incident. No boats or ferries were allowed to approach the scene of the accident and the ferry services along Tavoy-Myeik-Kawthaung route were temporarily suspended. Corpses rescued by fishing boats were confiscated and buried secretly by the authorities without informing the victims relatives.

unpopular dam projects. Thai lawmakers and social critics urged the Thailand and Burma governments to canvass public opinion before building two dam projects they fear could cause irreversible damage to local communities and the environment. The scheme, collectively called the Thai-Burma Salween Hydro-Electric Power Dam Project, will displace hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority people living along the Thai-Burma border and destroy the worlds richest source of teakwood, they said at a seminar. The two dams would have

a combined generating capacity of over 5,000 megawatts and be sold to Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. They feared that flooding would displace people on both sides of the border. "At least three villages which have been there for a hundred years will go, and so will the communities and culture of the minority groups there," Senator Kraissak said.

aung san suu kyi remains in detention. Burma continues to detain NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her party. NLD offices have been closed and many members imprisoned following the attack on her motorcade this month. The SPDC came under unprecedented pressure from ASEAN this month, who have always stuck by their policy of non-interference in member states internal affairs. They defied this by issuing a statement at the recent meeting for Asia-Pacific leaders in Phnom Penh calling for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and a return to dialogue. Foreign Minister Win Aung, stated that Aung San Suu Kyi continued to remain in "protective custody" because of assassination plots against her, details of which he was vague about. When asked when she would be released he replied, "I

cannot say how soon, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow or when, but we can assure you one thing that we are working to bring back the situation to normal." He also stated that the military government would press on with efforts towards national reconciliation despite the May 30 incident. Both UK and US officials stated Aung San Suu Kyi was now being held in the notorious Insein Prison. This statement was later denied by the Burmese junta, although they continue to refuse to disclose where exactly she is being detained.

fencing Indo-Burma border. The government, in a bid to cut off the supply channels of north-eastern insurgent groups from across the eastern border, is considering fencing of the Indo-Burma border. The fencing proposal is aimed at tackling cross-border insurgency, being perpetrated by groups such as Nagaland-based NSCN (I-M) and NSCN (Khaplang) which are known to train their cadres in camps based in Burma, as well as the smuggling of arms and narcotics. Actual dialogue with these insurgent groups was not an option unless they were willing to negotiate with no pre-conditions.

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