

EURO-BURMA OFFICE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR HARN YAWNGHWE: SUU KYI IS NOT POWERLESS



BORN under the name Hso Harn Fa, Harn Yawnghwe has been living in exile in Canada since he was 15 years old. Harn and his family were forced to leave Myanmar following the March 2, 1962, coup by General Ne Win, which started the reign of the military junta.

Early morning on that fateful day, the Burmese army surrounded the residence of Harn's father, Sao Shwe Thaik, in the capital city of Yangon. Harn's older brother, Hso Hom Fa alias Myee, only 17 years old at the time, was shot to death. "And my 66-year old father was arrested," said Harn.

Shwe Thaik, Myanmar's first president, was sent to jail by the military regime and passed away eight months later. "I knew something was very wrong when my father, who had served his people all his life, had to die in prison," Harn said. The bloody tragedy had a profound effect on Harn's life. "I became politicized at the age of 14."

While in exile, Harn actively participated in peace talks between various ethnic armed groups in Myanmar and the government, as well as the military junta. He founded the Euro-Burma Office in Brussels, Belgium, in 1997 to promote the establishment of democracy in his homeland.

From Thailand, Harn responded via-email to interview questions by *Tempo* journalist Mahardika Satria Hadi and contributor Asmayani Kusri, two weeks ago, on Thursday. He provided his perspective on a number of issues, including his criticism against Aung San Suu Kyi and the Rohingya crisis.

Why did you criticize Aung San Suu Kyi through an open letter?

I became increasingly concerned about her autocratic style of government but still tried to facilitate the peace process with the ethnic armies. When my visa was denied, it became clear that she does not appreciate my work and does not want me to continue to be involved. That was fine. But when the Rohingya issue exploded, I had to speak out.

What did you expect from Suu Kyi following your open letter?

I did not really expect her to read the letter or respond positively. She is not known for her humility. She will be very angry that I have dared to criticize her in public. But she needs to know that there are limits to what can be tolerated. I did not support her to become a dictator or a queen.

Why made you stand up for the Rohingya?

You cannot allow innocent people to be killed just because they happen to belong to a certain ethnicity or religion. That is totally wrong. There can be no justification. I also do not agree with the decades of discrimination against the

Rohingya people practiced by past military regimes.

Some people view Suu Kyi as not having a firm stance in addressing the Rohingya situation.

She is definitely not powerless. That is a myth. She knew the legal limitations before she took power. Knowing the limitations, she took the job because she believed she could make a difference. She is not doing anything regarding the Rohingya, because she does not want to.

How should Suu Kyi position herself?

The people of Myanmar are overwhelmingly Buddhists. Buddha taught compassion and tolerance. She could have used Buddhist values to control racial hatred and religious bigotry. Most people would have listened to her and moderated their positions. Even the military would not go against that because they too want to be popular and loved by the people.

Will the military truly relinquish its power?

As mentioned earlier, nobody expected the military to give up power easily. But from holding 100 percent of the power, they retained 25 percent and was

willing to experiment with democracy. The military does not think highly of civilian politicians. They think they are corrupt and self-serving. But (Suu Kyi) being who she is, the military decided to give her a chance. The military wanted to prove that even without their intervention, Suu Kyi and a civilian government are not capable of governing the country. Their calculation seems to be coming true.

Are you planning to return to Myanmar and help solve the Rohingya crisis?

The Myanmar government does not want me to be involved in the Rohingya crisis. They say the Rohingya do not exist. I say they have existed for centuries. I have also seen old National ID cards identifying the holder as Rohingya. Government school textbooks also describe the Rohingya people as one of the peoples of Myanmar. The 1947 Constitution says that all people (except those who opt to leave) within (the country's boundaries) at independence in 1948 are citizens. General Ne Win changed the citizenship laws in 1982 to strip the Rohingya of their citizenship. ●