

Between Isolation and Internationalization: the State of Burma
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MULTI-PARTY TALKS ON BURMA:
Overseeing a transition from military rule.

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Burma – the Problem

Scholars have attributed the cause of the problems in Burma to various factors - social, economic, constitutional and political. While these are all valid to varying degrees, I would like to suggest that an additional factor that has perhaps not been studied adequately is the different concepts of national or ethnic identity held by the Burma Army and the rest of the population.

Several books have been written about the politics of ethnic nationalism from the point of view of the minorities or ethnic nationalities¹. But I have not seen scholarly studies on the politics of ethnic nationalism from the point of view of the Burma Army or the majority Burman. Usually, the Burma Army is portrayed as a neutral modernizing force² or as a nation building institution³.

The majority Burman make up about 60% of the population and live in the lowlands which make up about 40% of the land. The remaining population live in the highlands in the seven ethnic states – Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kareni, Karen and Mon - bordering Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand.

The Arakan, Mon and Shan kingdoms pre-dated the Burman kingdoms by several centuries. Arakan kings were said to have ruled in western Burma from 2666 BC. They certainly ruled from 146 AD until 1785 AD when the then Arakan kingdom was conquered by the Burman king - Alaung-paya. Burman religion, script and culture are derived from the Arakan and Mon.

Mon-Khmer kingdoms also flourished in southeast Asia before the advent of the Burmans and Thais. Mon kings ruled lower Burma from 825 AD until Honsawadi was conquered in 1757 AD by the Burmans. Modern day Thai and Burman culture have been greatly influenced by the Mon. Cambodia can be said to be a modern Mon nation.

Shan or Tai kings were said to have ruled the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy from 754 AD until 1253 AD. Shan/Tai kings also ruled in lowland Burma from

1287 AD in Ava, Pegu/Bago, and Toungoo. Not being united as a single nation, Shan rulers were either independent or paid tribute to the Chinese, Burman or Thai emperor/kings. At the time of the British annexation of Burma, the various Shan principalities were recognized as British Protectorate States and did not become part of British India. Laos and Thailand can be said to be modern Shan nations. In fact, Siam and Shan, and Thai and Tai are synonymous.

The first Burman kingdom or empire was founded at Pagan by A-naw-ratha in 1044 AD. The second was founded at Pegu/Bago by Tabin-shwe-hti in 1539 AD. Tabin-shwe-hti's brother, King Bayin-naung expanded the Burman empire by conquering Thailand (1569 AD) and some of the Shan states. He is a major hero of the current regime in Burma. The third Burman empire was founded by Alaung-paya at Ava in 1752 AD. In common lore, General Ne Win's rule was the fourth Burman empire, and the current military regime is the fifth.

According to this mindset, the Burman empires were interrupted by the British in the 19th century. The British divided up the Burman empire into the various ethnic states which today are causing a problem because these states now refuse to acknowledge Burman suzerainty over them. It is, therefore, the duty of all Burman patriots to re-establish the Burman empire to its former glory. This may sound strange in the 21st century but the underlying concept may go a long way towards explaining some of the seemingly inexplicable strategies of the Burma Army such as the exclusion of ethnic nationalities in the higher ranks of the military and in the political process; the near-genocidal suppression of ethnic insurgencies; etc.

From the point of view of the ethnic nationalities, their kingdoms were also interrupted by the advent of the British. But this interruption was beneficial. It especially enabled the Shan/Tai and Karenni to rebuild their nations. While the Arakan and Mon were not able to re-establish their kingdoms, their histories and their status as distinct entities were recognized. The Chin, Kachin, and Karen who did not have kingdoms and prior to the British colonization had little to do with the Burmans, gained recognition through their service in the British armed forces. This was especially true during the Second World War.

This may also be another factor in the 'Burman – ethnic nationalities' conflict. The ethnic nationalities remained loyal to Britain and fought the Japanese Imperial Army in the jungles behind the front lines. Burman nationalists, however, actively assisted the Japanese war effort in order to drive the British out. War-time atrocities further fueled a Burman-Karen conflict.

After the war, in February 1947, Aung San (father of Aung San Suu Kyi) attended the 2nd Panglong Conference convened by the Supreme Council of the

United Hill Peoples (SCOUHP). As a Member of the Executive Council of the British Governor of Burma, Aung San came to the Conference to persuade the gathered Chin, Kachin and Shan leaders, to agree to join the 'Frontier Areas' to 'Ministerial Burma' and together seek early independence from Britain. The Aung San-Atlee Agreement, reached earlier in London in January 1947, had stipulated that the peoples of the Frontier Areas be consulted about their future.

The 1947 Panglong Agreement became the basis for the new Republic of the Union of Burma. The Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry to determine 'the best method of associating the Frontier peoples with the working out of the new constitution for Burma' reported in April 1947 that:

"The importance of the Agreement lies not only in the fact that it settles the form of association during the interim period, but also in its enunciation of certain principles, notably that the frontier peoples should be entitled to fundamental democratic rights, that they should have the right to full autonomy in the internal sphere, and that they should be entitled to receive a measure of assistance from revenues of Ministerial Burma, which are relevant to decision of the ultimate form of association."

Since then, all Burmese constitutions from 1947 (amended to allow for the creation of the Arakan, Mon and Karen States), to Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Programme Party constitution of 1974, to the SPDC's 1993 proposed military constitution, recognized these ethnic states:

1. Arakan State (Akyab, Kyaukpyu and Sandoway Districts of Ministerial Burma)
2. Chin State (Chin Hills and the Arakan Hill Tracts of the Frontier Areas)
3. Kachin State (Myitkyina and Bhamo Districts of the Frontier Areas)
4. Karen State (Salween District of the Frontier Areas, and eastern Toungoo, parts of Thaton and Amherst Districts of Ministerial Burma)
5. Kayah State (Karenni States - Frontier Areas)
6. Mon State (parts of the Thaton and Amherst Districts of Ministerial Burma)
7. Shan State (Federated Shan States including Northern and Southern Shan States, the Kachin Hill Tracts of Northern Hsenwi and Mongmit States, Kokang, and Northern and Southern Wa States - Frontier Areas).

The following Frontier Areas were incorporated into Ministerial Burma:

- a) Naga Hills District (including Somra Tract and the Thaungdut and Singkaling Hkamti Shan States)
- b) Upper Chindwin District (Homalin Sub-division and Tamu township)

While each state is named after the major ethnic group in the state, it is recognized that each state is multi-ethnic as is 'Burma Proper' or 'Ministerial Burma'. The basis for the states is historical rather than racial.

From the point of view of the ethnic nationalities then, the basis for national unity should be the 1947 Panglong Agreement where equal partners agreed to voluntarily join their territories together to form a new democratic nation.

The Burma Army's motto of "One blood, one voice, and one command" to promote national unity troubles the ethnic nationalities. Atrocities committed by the Burma Army in the ethnic states since independence in 1948 have also raised the question of whether the Burma Army is not an invading army of a rejuvenated Burman empire. Ethnic nationalists, therefore, see their struggle for self-determination not as an insurgency but as a war of national survival.

These conflicting concepts of nation building may add to the genuine fear in the region that removing the iron grip of the Burmese military will open up a Pandora's box of separatist ethnic movements. But the situation in Burma is not sustainable and sooner or later, these issues will have to be addressed. The National Reconciliation Programme managed by the Euro-Burma Office has made significant headway in trying to resolve these issues amongst the ethnic nationalities, but the international community has yet to recognize let alone address these problems. I have touched on this matter only to illustrate that the problems in Burma are deep-rooted and complex. They will not yield to easy solutions and greater efforts will be needed if we want democracy in Burma.

Democracy versus Military Rule

Added to this already difficult situation is the tendency internationally to oversimplify the struggle in Burma as a struggle between good and evil, a struggle between the forces of democracy and totalitarianism, a struggle between peaceful Buddhist monks and warmongering soldiers, a struggle between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a helpless heroine and Senior-General Than Shwe, an all-powerful king. They make very good copy for the media.

But if we keep to this mindset, there can be no compromises, no dialogue, no national reconciliation, and no political solution. In this scenario, someone has to win and someone has to lose. There cannot be a win-win solution. While this could be very emotionally satisfying if the forces of evil were to lose, the reality is that if we push for this scenario of winners and losers, the likely winners will be the military, not the democracy advocates or the ethnic nationalities.

It is also ironic that while Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself has called for dialogue and advocates a non-violent Gandhian struggle against oppression, the rhetoric in the democracy camp especially amongst the diaspora is one of violent regime change. The frustration with the two-decade old political deadlock and the specific needs of modern media may have added to this sense of confrontation rather than compromise. The underlying desire is to punish the generals, not to find a practical solution. This in turn has led to call for more sanctions, which I would also like to touch upon briefly later.

I just want to mention here that simply bringing democracy to Burma will not solve our problems. Apart from the issue of ethnic identity mentioned earlier, it must be remembered that the problems with the ethnic nationalities started in the democratic period of Burma's history.

After Burma became independent in 1948, the Communist Party of Burma denounced it because independence had not been achieved through a people's revolution. The Communist Party went underground and Aung San's private army, the People's Volunteer Organization (veterans from the war), the paramilitary Union Military Police, Special Police Reservists, and Burman units of the Burma Army mutinied. Only the 4th Burma Rifles remained loyal. The ethnic army units – notably the Chin and Kachin Rifles – rallied behind the government and saved the day. This was the first major challenge for Prime Minister U Nu of the newly independent nation.

The second major challenge was the Karen uprising in 1949. The Karen who served with distinction during the Second World War had been promised a state of their own. But negotiations with U Nu broke down and a massacre of Karen civilians triggered an uprising. The Commander-in-Chief of the Burma Army who was a Karen was replaced by Ne Win, who had commanded the 4th Burma Rifles. This was the beginning of the process of the Burmanization of the Burma Army. Other challenges included the Karenni's non-acceptance of the Union of Burma. In 1887, Karenni sovereignty had been recognized by the British and since they had not participated in the Panglong Conference, Karenni leaders fought to break away from the Union.

The next major challenge was the 'Kuomintang' invasion of Shan State. Retreating from Mao-Tse-Tung's Red Army, Chinese nationalist troops backed by the Central Intelligence Agency made Shan State their base from which to invade China. They were finally pushed out of Burma into Thailand in the early 1960's with the help of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. But in trying to assert Burmese sovereignty, Burma Army troops operating in Shan State committed atrocities against the civilian population. This led to widespread dissatisfaction and a call for Shan State to exercise its constitutional right to

secede from the Union of Burma. Shan leaders led by Sao Shwe Thaik, the first president of independent Burma, formed the 'Federal Movement' and instead tried to amend the constitution.

In 1962, U Nu accepted this proposal. But General Ne Win, claiming that a federal system of government would break up the country, seized power.

Therefore, if we want the Burma Army to return to the barracks, the constitutional arrangement with the ethnic nationalities has to be settled. In this context, it would seem sensible to endorse the 1994 United Nations General Assembly resolution that called for a 'Tripartite Dialogue – the military, democracy advocates, and the ethnic nationalities – in order to solve Burma's problems and build a sustainable democracy in Burma.

Sanctions versus Engagement

In addition to the simplified 'democracy versus military rule' solution, the policy debate on Burma always focuses on sanctions and engagement – and whether either option works. The problem is that no one in these debates bothers to define what we want to achieve through either sanctions or engagements.

What is the strategic objective of either applying sanctions or engaging with the generals? Is our goal the overthrowing of the generals, punishing them, or bringing about change in Burma? Without a common goal, the proponents of both sanctions and engagement can claim success for their own self-defined goals.

In the sanctions debate, the main focus is on democracy and human rights. The concept is that the Burmese military should be punished and pressured to enter into a dialogue with the opposition.

On the engagement side, the focus is on the economy. The concept is that there is no democracy in Burma because its economy is not developed. It is said that engagement and trade with the generals will develop the economy and entice the generals to reform. Or alternately, a more affluent and a larger middle-class will influence the generals to change.

If we define our goal as punishing the generals, the sanctions have worked while engagement has not. If we define our goal as pressuring the generals to enter into a dialogue with the opposition, neither has worked. If we define our goal as bringing about change in Burma, again neither policy has worked.

I have myself been very active in calling for sanctions. My first objective was to raise the profile of Burma and get the international community committed to the idea that it has a moral obligation to act. In this sense, I believe the sanctions policy has been very successful. I believe that the international community is now very aware of the situation in Burma and is committed to finding a solution.

The second objective was symbolic. I wanted sanctions imposed so that the generals will know that their behaviour is not acceptable, and that they need to change. I also wanted the people of Burma to know that they are not alone. The world does care about what is happening and is concerned. Again I believe that this objective has been met although the generals are not convinced that they need to change.

The third objective was to pressure the generals into having a dialogue with the opposition and bringing about change. This objective has not been met.

It has failed for several reasons. One is the fact that the sanctions have not been multilateral and Burma's neighbours in particular have helped to negate the effects of the sanctions. The other factor is that there is no real political will within the international community to bring about change in Burma. Burma is not high on any nation's priorities. Burma has been isolated for so long that it has no impact on the global scene. For most countries, Burma is an abnormality that should either be exploited or dealt with but it does not make much of a difference one way or the other. There are a few exceptions, such as the Nordic countries which have been trying to make a real difference, but in general, there is no will to invest political capital in Burma.

Burma is an embarrassment for the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) but it can continue to function without doing anything drastic.

Access to the Indian Ocean and regional stability are strategic issues for China but there are more pressing issues. The same can be said of India's containment of China policy and its energy security concerns.

Yes, the European Union has renewed its Common Position. But do the generals in Naypyitaw care? What more can the European Union do?

President George Bush has also issued another Executive Order but what do these actually amount to other than being symbolic and of good publicity value? Will the USA jeopardize its trade relations with China in order to bring about political change in Burma?

The United Nations Security Council has recently issued another statement on Burma. But what will the Security Council do if the Burmese generals continue to ignore the UN Secretary-General's 'good offices' mandate? Will the Security Council be able to adopt a binding resolution on Burma? Even if China were for some reason, such as the Olympics, able to agree to a resolution, will Russia agree? It is extremely unlikely that both nations will refrain from using their veto. But even if both nations agree and the UN Security Council passes a binding resolution, what will the UN do if the generals refuse to comply?

Will the UN send in troops to make the Burmese generals comply? Given the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, I do not think the international community is prepared at this time to do much more in Burma.

But the third reason why we have not been successful in bringing about change in Burma is probably related to the fact that Burma is a 'critically weak state' which is not capable of changing on its own.

Weak States

A recent Brookings Institution analysis⁴ and a University of Maryland study⁵ suggest that Burma is a 'critically weak state' that requires a different approach than the strategies that have been applied.

For a number of years now, Burma has been identified by various governments like the UK and institutions like the OECD/ World Bank as a 'fragile' state or a country on its way to becoming a 'failed' state.

'Weak' states are defined by the Brookings Institution as countries lacking the capacity and/or will to foster an environment conducive to:

1. Sustainable and equitable economic growth
2. Establish and maintain legitimate, transparent, and accountable political institutions
3. Secure their population from violent conflict and to control their territory
4. Meet the basic human needs of their population

In this context, Burma is a 'critically weak' state in the bottom 20% of the 141 countries surveyed. Burma's overall ranking is #17 with a score of 4.16. The lowest score is 0.52 and highest score is 9.41.

What is interesting about this analysis is that Burma is in the company of mostly Sub-Saharan African countries like Burundi #5, Chad #16, Congo (Dem

Republic #3 and Republic #20) Eritrea #14, Ethiopia #19, Sierra Leone #13, Somalia #1, Sudan #6, and Zimbabwe #8.

It is interesting because when we talk about Burma, most people compare it to South Africa #110, or former Eastern European countries – Czech Republic, Slovak Republic #141, Hungary #140, or Poland #135, or to other Asian countries that have undergone a transition (weak states) – Cambodia #34, East Timor #43, Indonesia #77, and the Philippines #58.

But from the analysis, Burma has more in common with Sub-Saharan African countries than with Asia except for Afghanistan #2 and North Korea #15. If this is true, this means that policies that may have worked in South Africa, Eastern Europe, or even in other Asian countries will not work in Burma. It also means that transition in Burma is not likely to follow the Eastern European model. The question then is, what will work in Burma?

The key definition of a ‘weak’ state is that it is incapable or unwilling to fulfill its responsibilities as a government. In other words, there is a disconnect between the rulers and the ruled. This explains why neither sanctions nor engagement with the SPDC have yielded the desired results. Sanction may hurt the population and the regime, but the regime is able to find ways to evade the sanctions, and after a time nullify the pressure that it faces. But the people have no such options and their conditions deteriorate further, which is the case in Burma and in ‘critically weak’ states. The Burmese regime will also engage economically up to a point. But it will not endanger its power base and it will not provide a climate for sustainable and equitable economic growth.

This means that, if the international community wants to bring about change in Burma, a rather drastic new strategy – or a drastic reinterpretation of the existing policies – may be needed. In spite of the unacceptability of the SPDC’s undemocratic policies, the international community may have no choice but to engage the military – not to trade and promote economic relations, but to prevent Burma from deteriorating further and becoming a ‘failed’ state like Somalia #1, Afghanistan #2, or the Democratic Republic of Congo #3.

Therefore, a longer-term strategy to bring democracy to Burma instead of an immediate transition may need to be considered.

Preventing Burma from becoming a ‘failed’ state should serve to unite both the ‘sanctions’ and the ‘engagement’ camps. The instability from Burma becoming a ‘failed’ state would serve neither the cause of democracy nor the cause of economic development. Both camps should cooperate and coordinate their efforts and jointly engage the Burmese regime to address the structural

weaknesses in Burma's economy, issues of good governance, human security and the government's ability to meet the basic human needs of its population.

What then should the international community do?

The Burmese Military

Unfortunately, the only real political actors in Burma are the generals. Burma's survival and future are priorities for them. They have in the past five decades, and will in the foreseeable future, set the political agenda. The democratic opposition and the ethnic nationalities are important political actors too. But to date, they have not been able to counter-balance the military.

Again unfortunately, the generals do not intend to give up power. They feel the pressure to change. But if possible, they will only concede minor points to ease the pressure and continue with their basic Road Map to ensure that the military has a leading role in Burma's political future. The generals do not want to speak to anybody. They have a plan and they are confident they can carry it out.

In this context, the regime in February 2008 announced a referendum for its new constitution on 10 May 2008, and general elections in 2010. Preparations are underway to ensure that the people vote 'Yes'. This is happening in spite of the fact that a cyclone hit Burma in early May causing possibly up to 60,000 deaths.

Reactions from the Burmese democracy movement to the military's plans for a referendum and elections are predictably negative. Skepticism about the referendum and elections being 'free and fair' are widespread. Most Burmese are of the opinion that the military is planning to win the referendum at all costs. They believe that the generals would not have called for a referendum unless it had found a way to determine the outcome. The fact that an election date has been set is also seen as an indication that the military has already decided the outcome of the referendum.

The National League for Democracy and other political parties that have been excluded from the constitutional process are calling for a 'No' vote for the referendum. They will also likely reject the new elections as fraudulent. At stake are:

- a) The results of the 1990 general elections;
- b) The political future/exclusion of the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD, the United Nationalities League for Democracy / United Nationalities Association and others including the National Coalition

Government of the Union of Burma and National Council of the Union of Burma, whose mandates derived from the election results;

c) The legitimizing of military rule.

The ethnic armies with ceasefire agreements – United Wa State Army, Kachin Independence Army, Shan State Army, New Mon State Party, etc. – will not be able to influence the outcome of the referendum. They will also likely participate in the new elections as political parties. A crucial question is whether they can participate in the elections without giving up their arms? Most groups are not happy with the military's constitution and do not want to give up their arms until a satisfactory constitutional arrangement is made. This will be a major issue to resolve in the next two years leading to the elections.

Most ethnic armies that do not have a ceasefire agreement – Karen National Union, Shan State Army (South), Karenni National Progress Party, Chin National Front, etc. – will side with the NLD and other political parties if they continue to be excluded by the Burmese military. But if the generals make overtures and offer them comparable terms to those given to the ethnic armies with ceasefire agreements, some groups might participate in the military's Road Map process. To date, the military has not done so and this means that even after the elections in 2010, these ethnic insurgencies will continue to be a problem.

But whatever the motivation or game plan, it is clear that the generals –

1. Are preparing for a change in the governance;
2. Are preparing for a change in leadership;
3. Have set a time-table for the change in governance.

The dilemma is that by rejecting the military's plans because they are not perfect or not in accordance with what we want, we may be prolonging the dictatorship. By opposing the National Convention in 1993, have we not prolonged military rule by 14 years? General Ne Win's one-party rule by the Burmese Socialist Programme Party was imposed in 1974. It collapsed 14 years later in 1988. Could a similar fate not await the SPDC's new game plan?

In 1990, most of us in exile rejected the call for elections and called for a boycott. We had to reverse our stand when the NLD unexpectedly won 82% of the seats. Should we this time also call for a boycott or should we be preparing our people to contest the elections in 2010?

But if the opposition endorses the military's Road Map, it would mean that the 1990 election results are no longer valid. This in turn would mean that Daw

Aung San Suu Kyi and the 1990 election-winning parties no longer have a mandate. Worse still, the new elections will legitimize military rule.

According to the new constitution:

- Political prisoners like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi cannot contest the elections;
- Basic human rights are not guaranteed;
- Power is concentrated in the President, who must have military experience;
- There will be no independent judiciary;
- There will be no independent legislature;
- The President can decide the national budget;
- The Commander-in-Chief can seize power if he deems national security is threatened;
- The Commander-in-Chief will appoint 25% of national legislators;
- The Commander-in-Chief will appoint 33% of regional and state legislators;
- The Commander-in-Chief will appoint the Minister of Defence who reports to him;
- The military will be independent of the new elected government;
- Cannot be amended except with the approval of more than 75% of the representatives in both houses of Parliament, and more than 50% approval of all eligible voters.

So it is clear that the new constitution will not lead to a democracy – ‘disciplined’ or otherwise. So, the question, is why participate in the elections?

Is this the end of the road then? Is this a win-win solution for the military and a lose-lose solution for the democracy movement?

Options

Fortunately, the generals are not gods. They too have to die one day. Senior-General Than Shwe is 75 years old and reportedly not in good health. Therefore, we need to be prepared for a generational change.

Secondly, the results of the May 10th referendum, like the severity of the cyclone, may be a surprise. The Senior-General and most Burmese expect the generals to win. Vote manipulation is almost a foregone conclusion. But there are indications that the military as a whole was taken by surprise by the Senior-General’s decision to hold the referendum in May, so soon after the uprisings in September 2007. It is possible that there is no master plan in place to ensure that the vote will be ‘Yes’. It will likely depend on the zeal of each local commander and results could be patchy.

Thirdly, even if the referendum produces the results that the military wants, there is no guarantee that the military will be able to maintain the absolute grip on power that it has managed to have up to now. Some political space has to be opened up if the election process is to have any credibility at all. Some opposition parties may be able to win some of the seats out of the 75% non-appointed national seats and 67% non-appointed regional and state seats. This could introduce some level of limited debate as opposed to no debate today. In the early days of the National Convention that was convened in 1993, the opposition was able to use the controlled forum to air their disagreement.

But even if the military appointed 25% of the national seats and 33% of the regional and state seats, and ex-military officers won all the remaining seats, there could still be room for disagreement. During Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Programme Party era, the arrangement between serving and ex-service officers worked well because the socialist philosophy at that time frowned upon excessive wealth. The Burmese military today espouses capitalism and uses their privileges as officers to accrue wealth. Those officers who are required to doff their uniforms to become 'civilian' elected representatives will lose their privileges and immediately become poor. This could create another unexpected dynamic within the ruling elite. Therefore, the situation may not be as bleak as it seems on the surface.

In any case, it behooves the international community to be prepared if an opportunity presents itself. What would a transition plan look like, assuming the Burmese generals want to talk? And what role can the international community play in such a transition plan?

Framework for a Transition

Assuming that the generals want a transition and are willing to start a dialogue, there will be two processes, one domestic and one international to support the domestic process.

On the domestic front, key objectives for the negotiation should include:

1. A peaceful transition to democracy
2. Building peace and ensuring justice
3. Safeguarding the territorial integrity of Burma
4. Affirming Burma's sovereignty
5. Making Burma a prosperous nation
6. No recrimination or fault finding

Ideally, participants in the dialogue and negotiations should include:

1. Members of the Burmese military:
 - Members of the State Peace and Development Council
 - Members of the War Office/Ministry of Defence
 - Regional Commanders
2. Democracy advocates –
 - Political parties that won in the 1990 elections.
(Rohingyas had a party that won several seats in the 1990 elections).
 - Political parties that will participate/participated in the 2010 elections
 - 88 Generation students (in Burma, in prison and in exile).
 - Others political groups including exiles (NCGUB, NCUB, etc.).
3. Ethnic Nationalities:
 - Representatives of the seven ethnic states considered ‘legal’ by the military including ceasefire groups.
 - Representatives of the seven ethnic states considered ‘illegal’ by the military, mainly non-ceasefire groups and exiles. They include Rohingyas and smaller nationalities.
4. Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and other religious leaders.
5. Others – Academics, businessmen, workers, etc.

But it must be kept in mind that –

- A. No individual Burmese general, no matter how willing he is to negotiate, can go against the collective will of the officer elite. Therefore, any plan that directly infringes on the rights and powers of the military will not work.
- B. The Burmese military genuinely believes that it is the only institution capable of safeguarding Burma’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Any plan must take into consideration the military’s key role in Burma’s future. It must also not infringe on Burma’s sovereignty or affect its territorial integrity.
- C. Since its independence, Burma has remained neutral in international big-power politics. Any plan must respect this neutrality, or it will not work.
- D. The Burmese military needs to be an active participant in any international process. It is paranoid and tends to be suspicious of any process especially if

it is not in control. Without the consent and participation of the military, there can be no national reconciliation in Burma.

Given these key requirements, the current international mechanism for bringing about change in Burma will not work, and the generals will not talk. But if there were the political will, it would be possible to engage the generals in a dialogue:

1. First, the international community would need to accept the official name “Myanmar”. This is a major concession that the democracy movement and the international community will have to make. I have personally argued to retain “Burma” based on the democratic principle that the people and not an elite should decide on a country’s name. But if this is the price we have to pay to get a dialogue going to bring about change in Burma, we should pay it for the sake of the people. In addition, it makes no real difference to a Burmese whether Burma or Myanmar is used. In reality, they mean the same thing: Burma is colloquial and Myanmar is the literary form.
2. It needs to be mutually agreed by the international community and the people of Burma, especially the generals, that the current situation in Burma is not beneficial to either the people of Burma or the international community.
3. Instead of merely making demands for the generals to change, the international community could approach the generals to see how the concerns of the generals can be addressed as we seek to bring about change together.
4. Instead of trying to impose external solutions, the international community needs to convince the generals that their advice and suggestions could help Burma become a respected member of the community. In this sense, the UN needs to find a way to convert the UN Secretary-General’s ‘good offices’ mandate into multi-party talks based on a combination of the “Six-Party Talks on North Korea”⁶ and the “Quartet of International Mediators for the Middle East”⁷ as outlined below.
5. The United Nation’s involvement is crucial because the people of Burma (both the military and the opposition – democracy advocates and ethnic armies) are more likely to accept a UN solution rather than a Chinese solution or an ASEAN solution.
6. The UN Secretary-General’s ‘good offices’ process (Gambari) is more acceptable to the military, China, India and Russia. The advantage of the Gambari process is that it gives direct access to the top decision-maker in the military which is crucial. The disadvantage of this process is that it lacks an enforceable mechanism, and needs back-up from the UN Security Council.

7. The UN Security Council process carries more weight but it is not acceptable to China, India and Russia for several reasons including:

- The UN Security Council initiative is seen as a US-led attempt to interfere in domestic matters using the excuse of violations of human rights and democracy which cannot be denied in the case of Burma;
- The perceived ultimate end result of UN Security Council involvement is foreign troops in Burma. This is unacceptable to both India and China.

This may change if the situation deteriorates further and the instability becomes untenable for China. One possible scenario – frustrated Burmese turn on the visible perceived allies of the SPDC. In other words, the mobs turn on Chinese businesses in Burma like the 1967-68 anti-Chinese riots. In such a case, China could either turn to the UN Security Council or take matters into its own hands.

If the above conditions can be met, it must be made clear that the goal of the multi-party talks is not to overthrow the military regime but to help the people of Burma to reconcile their differences and to have a peaceful transition.

Goals of Multi-Party Talks⁸:

- o To affirm the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Union of Myanmar;
- o To assist in the process of national reconciliation in the Union of Myanmar;
- o To assist in the transition to democracy in the Union of Myanmar;
- o To assist in the economic integration of the Union of Myanmar into regional and global markets.

Possible Participants in the Multi-Party Talks:

1. ASEAN - 3 seats (Thailand, Laos & ASEAN Chair)
2. China
3. European Union - 2 seats (Presidency & Commission)
4. Japan
5. Russian Federation
6. South Asia - 2 seats (India & Bangladesh)
7. Union of Myanmar
8. United Nations – 2 seats (S-G Representative and UN Resident Coordinator)
9. United States of America

Possible Concrete Benefits from Multi-Party Talks:

- Coordination of increased humanitarian aid. This is particularly relevant in light of the current crisis after the cyclone.
- Coordination of technical assistance by the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Japan, China, India and others.
- Coordination of economic strategies in the region.
- Coordination of strategies to combat HIV-AIDS, infectious diseases, drugs, human trafficking, environmental degradation, transnational crime, etc.
- Peaceful transition to a democracy.

Role of Burma's Neighbours

India's policy towards Burma is based on the strategic containment of China, the security of its energy needs, and the insurgencies in the northeast. But China is already the country with the most influence on the Burmese generals. India cannot hope to balance China's influence without quickly losing both its friends and credibility in the international community. No amount of goodwill gestures or the sale of arms at friendship prices will tip the balance in favour of India. Its concern for the security of its energy needs cannot also be addressed by cosyng up to the generals. They will sell energy from Burma to whoever they believe will benefit them at any particular time. The only way India could hope to secure its energy supply is if Burma were to change and adopt open market policies. In such a case, its energy resource would be sold to the highest bidder, and not for political considerations. The economic development of Burma would also open up India's northeast. India has tried very hard by political means to resolve its problems in the northeast. Much has been achieved but until the northeast develops economically, the problems will remain. Therefore, the key to success for India's strategic concerns is a stable democratic and competent government in Burma.

China's Burma policy is based on economic development and stability. Its eastern seaboard has developed by leaps and bounds. But there is an imbalance with western and south-western China. To correct this imbalance and develop the west, China needs access to the Indian Ocean. In the 1990s China poured resources into Burma to encourage the generals to open up a sea route for China's Yunnan province. The Burmese generals did not deliver. Another fact that worries China is that the Chinese do not want their economic development to exceed their neighbours by too great a rate and expose themselves as a prime target for jealous competitors. They want the neighbourhood to develop in tandem with them. Burma, however, is a black hole and it is drawing unwanted attention to China by its wrong-headed policies. An emerging strategy concern

for China though is its energy security. As China develops, its need for energy will increase dramatically. Most of China's oil supplies today come from the Middle East. These crucial supplies reach China via a circuitous route through the Straits of Malacca. In any confrontation with the USA, the Straits would become a choke point for these vital supplies. An alternate strategic supply route through Burma is gaining popularity.

The Chinese have, therefore, already decided that the status quo in Burma is not in their national interest. In spite of the veto in January 2007 at the UN Security Council, China is actively working with the UN to help bring about change in Burma. It is not interfering in domestic Burmese affairs but it is helping to create a climate where Burmese stakeholders may solve the problem themselves.

Therefore, a Multi-Party Talk on Burma would benefit both India and China.

Thailand's policy towards Burma has been one of exploitation and appeasement, and keeping the Burma Army at a distance. Faced with an unpredictable and belligerent neighbour, Thailand has generally had a buffer zone along its long undemarcated borders. But if both southwest China and northeast India were to open up with a democratic and stable Burma, Thailand could benefit much more from these two gigantic markets than merely exploiting Burma's resources.

Bangladesh could also benefit more from a stable and open market economy in Burma in terms of its food security. It would also benefit from not having to periodically host Rohingya refugees and add a burden to its already overloaded infrastructure.

Even Laos would benefit because it will have more access to markets in the west. Its access to China to the north would also be enhanced.

Therefore, in conclusion, a Multi-Party Talk on Burma including the Burmese military and Burma's neighbours would benefit all concerned. What is needed now is the political will - both domestic and international - to bring it about.

The alternative is to do nothing until the crisis can no longer be ignored. The situation after the cyclone should be a lesson that we cannot afford to wait.

Thank you.

¹ "Burma in Revolt - Opium and Insurgency since 1948", Bertil Lintner, 1999, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, and "Burma - Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity", Martin Smith, 1991, Zed Books, London, UK.

² "Burmese Nationalists Movements 1940-1948", 1989, Kiscadale Publications, Edinburgh, UK.

³ "Making Enemies - War and State Building in Burma", Mary P Callahan, 2003, Cornell University Press.

⁴ "Index of State Weakness in the Developing World", Susan E Rica and Stewart Patrick, 2008, Brookings Institution, USA. www.brookings.edu

⁵ "Peace and Conflict 2008", J Joseph Hewitt, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, and Ted Robert Gurr, 2008, Center for International Development and Crisis Management, University of Maryland, USA. www.cidcm.umd.edu

⁶ "Six-Party Talks" - North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia & the USA.

⁷ "Quartet of International Mediators for the Middle East" - The UN, the EU, Russia & the USA.

⁸ Attachment to letter of Saw Ba Thin Sein, Chairman, Ethnic Nationalities Council, Union of Burma, to Ban Ki-Moon, United Nations General-Secretary, 24 September 2007 - "Multi-Party Talks", Concept Paper.