

**Common Problems, Shared Responsibilities:
Citizens' Quest for National Reconciliation
in Burma/Myanmar**

*Report of a Citizen Exiles Group
The Free Burma Coalition*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Burma: Conflict and Problem

Discussions about Burma's future have degenerated into contests between entrenched positions, not pragmatic solution. Daily realities of the ordinary Burmese people continue to be ignored while the key players in the country's politics keep repeating their policy prescriptions.

Since they went to the polling booth fourteen years ago the Burmese people have watched helplessly while the contest of wills on the part of the top leadership gets mired in political deadlock.

The military government appears unwilling to compromise with its weaker, but election-legitimized rival, the National League for Democracy. Encouraged by its supporters in Washington, London and Brussels, the NLD, on its part, refuses to accommodate the State Peace and Development Council as it reiterates its principled, but unrealistic stand against it. Tragically, this has led to increasing isolation and suffering by the Burmese people.

The extreme imbalance of power between the military [*tatmadaw*] leaders and the civilian democratic forces is a major impediment to change in Burma. But it is not the only barrier toward the country's progress. A deeply felt sense of siege mentality inflicts all sides, creating a highly polarized situation. In such a political climate, genuine dialogue or exchange of ideas remains very difficult to sustain. Worse still, this polarization is not confined to the leadership in opposing camps; it has had a profound spill-over impact on society, fragmenting the country. Institutions and communities of differing allegiances have resulted in a domestic "Cold War."

Within the pro-democracy movement both at home and abroad, as well as Western policy circles, insufficient attention has been paid to the dynamic interplay between the key political players and the fundamental issues. We pin our hope on the iconic Aung San Suu Kyi as *the* catalyst for change, making her freedom a benchmark for progress while overlooking new windows of opportunities and making ourselves oblivious to a diversity of ways in which

democratization can - and does - take place in the developing world. If it is truly our ultimate goal to bring about change, we should stop spending so much time and energy on quibbling about how to bring it about.

The problems in today's Burma emanate from her conflict-ridden history which includes almost three decades of self-imposed Socialist isolationism, her authoritarian cultures, 1,000 years of feudalism exacerbated by 120 years of British colonial rule, a short interval under Japanese fascism, pseudo-democracy under U Nu, and overly-ethnicized national politics.

The prognosis for our stalemate is that without good-faith and bold efforts by the ruling SPDC and the NLD, the conflict in Burma will continue. Considering policy trends and intransigence in both Rangoon and Washington, our country will, in due course, become the "Cuba of the East," where the U.S. policy is crafted to punish the leaders and end up punishing the citizens themselves.

Burma's Political Stakeholders

Four distinct groups participate in the Burmese political system. They have divergent concerns and interests. They are the ruling State Peace and Development Council with its power base *Tatmadaw*, the National League for Democracy and its vocal supporters in exile, non-Burma ethnic groups including 17 cease fire groups each of whom has its separate set of concerns and interests, and armed non-Burman ethnic resistance organizations.

The State Peace and Development Council [SPDC]

Most civilians and activists have a natural propensity to view authoritarian government as monolithic. Yet, the SPDC's power equilibrium has been maintained by competing interests among different camps with divergent strategies on how to cope with a society reeling from the self-imposed isolationism of the previous generations of military leaders. In its operation *Tatmadaw* has its own checks and balances to stabilize and ensure institutional

survival and preservation. Senior officers within *Tatmadaw* vie for dominance, and their subordinates build their careers and seek economic rewards through their loyalties to the officers.

The *Tatmadaw's* “National Ideology” instilled in successive generations of officers states that *Tatmadaw* is the only truly national institution with the people’s interests at heart. They also share a common belief that they are under siege by the powerful West. Confronted with Aung San Suu Kyi as the favorite of the West, the generals are taking no chances. They have put in place a formidable machinery of surveillance and social control.

What many people don’t recognize is that there *has* been change in the *Tatmadaw*. Today’s *Tatmadaw* is no longer the institution which it was when a significant portion of its rank and file voted for the NLD in 1990. The military leadership has developed many adaptive capabilities since 1988. The old generation military leaders were against the capital-holding class and banned cross-border trade. The new generation, by contrast, proactively seeks foreign investment, facilitates the booming cross-border trade and participates in every economic club that welcomes Burma.

Not unlike the opposition, the *Tatmadaw* leadership is divided into two camps, with the spill-over impact on the institution at large, vertically. But the camps are not necessarily moderates and hardliners: essentially one camp is more internationally exposed, with confidence about going out to the world and dealing with challenges that come with novel endeavors; the other camp is constituted of those who spent most of their careers combating “insurgents” in our country’s remote areas. The latter group’s attitude resembles that of American politicians who speak proudly of not needing passports – they have no need for the rest of the world! The SPDC considers 17 ceasefire agreements its signature accomplishment.

There has been an active, on-going struggle between the two camps over how to find the best strategy to develop the country’s economy - and to a lesser extent, liberalize politically while maintaining its dominant institutional and leadership role in the national politics. Absent a major intervention from outside,

the outcome of this struggle, more than anything, will determine the path of Burma's democratization and development.

The National League for Democracy

Fourteen years after its 1990 election victory, the NLD leadership has no pragmatic, national reconciliation initiative which acknowledges the military as a dominant political force, implying that there can be no reconciliation without the transfer of power.¹ In spite of its repeated calls for dialogue, the only position adopted by the political opposition in Burma and the majority of its supporters, is change through a popular non-violent confrontation. But a serious attempt at revolution or confrontation needs more than a popular icon and sanctions from the West. It needs the people's active participation and the infrastructure for resistance.

The party's insistence that "the country's political, economic and social crises can only be solved by calling the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (parliament)" made up of elected members of parliament has gotten it nowhere.

NLD General Secretary Aung San Suu Kyi remains massively popular, both at home and abroad. However, that popularity has not helped much in her protracted struggle to bring about change *her* way. The central paradox of the NLD is that Aung San Suu Kyi is both the party's greatest asset and its greatest liability.

The Burmese Exiles

Like many of the world's exile communities, Burmese expatriates are few in number and non-existent as a voting bloc in democracies where they have taken refuge. But in rallying behind Aung San Suu Kyi, they have found a powerful niche in the global human rights community.

¹ Two months ago, U Lwin, the NLD spokesperson and a member of its Central Executive Committee, was quoted as saying on the NLD's Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma that he didn't believe that "the SPDC is ready for national reconciliation because it is not ready to transfer power" (to the elected representatives).

Two things distinguish the exiles from those who remain in Burma. First, we exiles no longer experience their daily reality. Second, they no longer feel the daily pressure to resolve, in a realistic way, the conflict that besets our families and communities in our country. Meanwhile, those inside, on the ground, have adjusted to the need for resolution in the country. For those outside, it remains a theoretical exercise. Increasingly citizens within Burma complain they no longer feel connected to exiles. And yet exiles have become a visible force supporting Aung San Suu Kyi's call for change through ever-greater sanctions, more isolation and increasingly punitive international measures.

Burmese exiles, in their zeal to discredit the military government in Rangoon, have done their best to publicize the army's blatant abuses, smug in their efforts to bring about change from abroad and their support of the iconic leader Aung San Suu Kyi. But while clamoring for "democracy back home" many exiles have closed their mind to that fundamental principle of democracy: diversity of ideas and approaches.

The Non-Burman Ethnic Groups

Burma's opposition movement is plagued by fundamental dissonance among principal organizations and their constituent communities. On the surface, the dissident groups seem united in supporting the NLD, which has become the center for international support.

However, the ideological conflict at the root, namely the unresolved question of political relations between non-Burman ethnic groups and any Burman-dominated central government and the State, has never been addressed constructively and strategically by all sides. Alliances built on convenience and political correctness cannot - and has not - achieve any desired outcome.

The NLD believes and advocates that 'democratic principles' must be the foundation for resolution of Burma's political and ethnic problems, reflecting the mainstream opinion among Burman majority dissidents. But for our country's non-Burman ethnic groups, especially for the armed resistance groups, democratic

principles and empty slogan that offers no practical help for their war-devastated communities.

Burma's Cultures: A Barrier to Progress?

Lack of political maturity and authoritarian tendencies in our cultures have become a serious barrier to progress. While rejecting cultural determinism as an explanation for democratic change, or lack of it, we argue that still unfolding processes in Burma have not been conducive to the evolution of Burmese cultures to a point where democracy can emerge as a way of life. Democratization is a long, complex and arduous process, entailing more than the installment of "transparent, accountable and good governance," as the NLD claims.

The problem of authoritarianism that permeates the entire society in Burma has become a vicious cycle since independence; our country's ruling elite have neither committed sufficiently themselves to the emergence of a civic or democratic culture, nor have the military found it in their interests to commit themselves to such a crucial mission. The leading dissident organizations and parties that oppose military rule have done little to encourage or foster democratic thinking and civic norms. Citizens have been isolated with old habits and traditions, without exposure to democratic ideas.

The current attempts to isolate the country further deprive our culture and politics of the opportunities to evolve from the politics of personalities to the politics of mission.

The International Community

Burma and her problems are generally viewed through two different lenses by the international community: one (Eastern) camp defines Burma strictly in geo-economic and geo-political terms and the other (Western) camp in human rights terms. Both camps have adopted different approaches toward Rangoon. The West's sanctions and isolation policy creates resentment toward the US and EU powers, as Asian leaders feel the West, especially the United States, has been

hypocritical and unreasonable in applying a double-standard of human rights to ASEAN, and Asia generally. Driven by its own strategic interests, the United States has remained silent in places with comparable human rights abuses.

The United States, the European Union and the Western-influenced international human rights community promote only a narrow definition of human rights. From the perspective of Asian leaders, the West's interpretation of human rights focuses solely on political freedom, at the exclusion of economic deprivation confronting most Burmese as well as several billion people in the age of unprecedented wealth and technological advancement.

This lop-sided push for political freedoms disregards Burma's need to help create what Ernest Gellner calls, "conditions of liberty."² While the West may be genuinely concerned about rights abuses, the punitive attempts to isolate our country has arrested the process of her reintegration into important economic and political zones. This deprives our country of increased interactions with the outside world. Consequently, our country and our people continue to reel from past legacies of self-isolation.

The result of Washington's decade-long push to isolate Rangoon is ironic and tragic: it is the U.S. that has become isolated on Burma; no other nation that matters to the survival of the SPDC accepts Washington's sanctions policy. Tragically for the future of democracy in Burma, Washington's vociferous pro-sanctions, pro-isolation policy has given the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi a false and unrealistic hope that the United States is prepared to squander even more political and diplomatic capital on its Burma policy.

Unlike fascist Japan which, out of its own strategic calculations to invade India through Burma, helped the late Aung San and his young nationalist comrades to build the "Burma Independence Army" in the 1940s, neither the United States nor the United Kingdom has a comparable strategic plan to "liberate" our country and move Burma away from the current geo-political or geo-economic orbit of China, India and AEAN.

² Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, (London, Penguins Books, 1994), pp. 188-189.

In the final analysis, the human rights issue provides only a weak link between the NLD and the international community. Of all the international ties among communities and nations, concern for human rights is the weakest, compared to trade, security, and other functional relations. Consequently, this issue has taken the democracy movement nowhere.

Common Problems, Shared Responsibilities

Over a half-century after regaining sovereignty from the British colonial rule, we are confronted with a stark choice: adhere to the destructive legacy of forefathers, or end our national conflict and realize our country's potential by pursuing our collective national interests in ways our various institutions and players can complement one another. We strongly advocate the view that our needed changes are a process - not a product - requiring broad-mindedness, a strategic vision, bold leadership and competence. Our greatest challenge is to find constructive and complementary ways to guide process together.

The first step toward finding a solution lies in viewing Burma's problems *not* simply as the NLD's or the ruling SPDC's or our non-Burman ethnic communities'; but rather as *our* common problems. Common problems call for shared responsibilities.

We recommend resolving the current impasse on several fronts: political, economic, humanitarian, strategic and cultural.

Political - The issue of power-sharing was the central issue discussed at the National Convention currently in recess. The SPDC should continue its good faith effort to make this forum a genuine national dialogue with participation by key representatives from all legitimate organizations. All other parties boycotting the NC including the NLD and United Nationalities League for Democracy [UNLD] should be invited again to join this national forum. The boycotters should help transform the forum into a legitimate, respectable political venue. The right to self-determination should not be viewed as an immutable absolute. On

their part, the *tatmadaw* leaders should demonstrate broad-mindedness and empathy for minorities who want a fair say in running their own affairs within our country. Further, the NLD should recognize as positive developments under SPDC rule, the 17 ceasefire agreements secured since 1989, as well as the on-going SPDC-KNU ceasefire negotiation, something it has chosen not to do.

Economic - The SPDC should begin reviewing its economic policies and practices. Its current policies have neither helped the poor nor promoted genuine economic growth. The NLD and non-Burman ethnic groups should seriously rethink their determined, but misguided opposition to economic integration of our national economy within the regional and international economic system. It severely hurts our people's economic needs. All opposing camps should be exploring overlapping areas of cooperation to address our country's economic interests.

Humanitarian - Our national interests are not served by the flight of refugees running away from conflicts, forced labor, as well as forced relocation. A significant portion of our national budget should go to improving public health services and educational institutions, as well as initiatives aimed at our country's human resource renewal. The humanitarian issue is a common national problem. We must address it immediately and not wait until all serious political differences are resolved. A productive and vibrant labor force, a pre-requisite for entry into a highly competitive global economy cannot be created out of unhealthy people, malnourished, poorly educated and with few skills. Our people, not our country's non-renewal natural resources, are our greatest asset as a nation.

Strategic - All national governments, de facto or otherwise, are tasked with pursuing our national strategic interests. Resolution of our political conflict should be addressed in ways that do not harm our country's long-term strategic interests. We believe the SPDC is following the right course in this area of concern. Under its leadership, Burma has become integrated with Asia in an

unprecedented fashion. Our governments and political groups will rise and fall, but integration of our country into global trade and cultural associations is in the long-term interests of our people. The NLD and other opponents of military rule would be wise to cease trying to frustrate the SPDC's efforts to pursue our country's strategic interests bilaterally with China, India, Australia, Russia, Thailand, Japan, or by joining trade and geo-political clubs in Asia and elsewhere. The bi-polar Cold War era is long gone, and we should participate in the revised strategic alliances in our region, as well as around the world. On its part, the SPDC should seriously consider other dimensions of our national security and broaden their strategic vision for Burma so as to encompass dimensions of it can be addressed effectively.

Cultural - Making a modern nation involves creating a common political identity, while integrating different cultural, linguistic and ethnic communities within it. Inevitably, the cultural content of those who constitute a majority of our population will heavily color Burma's national culture. But that does not mean that the dominant group or the government should denigrate or demean our other proud cultures. We *must* revise our educational policies which make our ethnic groups feel they are second class citizens in their own ancestral land. Only then will all of Burma's ethnic minorities participate fully in our efforts to build a viable civil society.

ABOUT THE FREE BURMA COALITION

The FBC was founded at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1995 as a Burmese-led political initiative to support the National League for Democracy and other democratic forces within Burma. With its high profile, successful Pepsi Boycott and other grassroots initiatives, the coalition grew to become one of the Internet's first and largest human rights campaigns. Between 1995 and 2003, it led effective campaigns for the divestment of roughly 100 multinational corporations from the military-ruled Burma. Since the fall of 2003, taking a 180 degree turn, the coalition questions openly the effectiveness of Western sanctions and isolation as a way of fostering democratization and open society in Burma. Recently, the coalition has spurred a widespread debate both within the country and internationally as it has launched its advocacy work for national reconciliation at all costs. It seeks political support from leaders and politicians, as well as government officials in Asia, Europe, and North America for democratization through various venues in Burma. In 1997, Aryeh Neier, President of the Open Society Institute, Soros Foundation, nominated the coalition for the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Award for its successful grassroots activism.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Zarni

Former teacher and tour guide from Mandalay, Zarni (b. 1963) is founder and director of the Free Burma Coalition. He came to the United States prior to the 8888 Burmese popular revolt for further studies. For the past 16 years Zarni has been involved in the exiles' push for the democratization in Burma. He is the editor of Free Burma Coalition Manual: How You Can Help Burma's Struggle for Freedom [1997] and author of book chapters and essays on Burma's politics, culture and education. Zarni travels extensively to Asian and European capitals to seek support for Burma's democratization. Also he has trekked through some of the armed conflict areas of Burma with his friends in the Karen National Liberation Army. In May this year, Zarni made a controversial day-trip to Rangoon where he held meetings with representatives of the ruling State Peace and Development Council. He is currently spearheading a Citizens' Diplomatic Initiative in support of national reconciliation. He was educated at St. Peter's Boys School/State High School #9 in Mandalay, the University of California, the University of Washington and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he earned a Ph.D. with the thesis entitled Knowledge, Control and Power: The Politics of Education under Military Rule (1962-88). He was a recipient of the merit-based Nonresident Tuition Fee Fellowship Award from the University of California [1989-1991], a fellow in the Rockefeller Foundation Next Generation Leadership Program [2001-03], and a member of the Georgetown Leadership Seminar, Georgetown University [2004]. As assistant professor, Zarni taught at National-Louis University in Chicago for a few years. He left teaching in summer of 2000 to develop the Institute for Community and Institutional Development, Burma, Inc., a long-term leadership and educational initiative to train talented Burmese with a keen interest in Burma's democratization and reconstruction.

May Oo

An advocate for peace and reconciliation in Burma, May Oo (b 1972, Kyaukkyi) is Director of Communications with the Free Burma Coalition, the organization of which she has been a member since 1996. May Oo fled the country following the crackdown of Burma's 8888 popular revolt and took refuge in the Karen National Union-controlled areas of the country. During her stay there, she lived through several major military offensives by the Burmese military regime. In 1993 she came to the United States as a refugee and has been very active in the exiles' efforts to help bring about change in Burma. As the founding head of the Women's Affairs Department of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (in exile), May Oo was involved in the United Nations human rights initiatives sponsored by the UNHCR, the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW). She was elected president of the Karen National League (1997-2002), an umbrella network of five Karen organizations in North America, Australia and Thailand. She was a James J. Robinson Fellow in Indiana University Law School and a Snyder Research Scholar (2002) at the Lauterpacht Research Centre for International Law, University of Cambridge, UK. May Oo read international law in public health at Indian University at Bloomington where she earned a LL. M with the thesis entitled Governance and Public Health: Analysis on Malaria and Public Health Law in Burma. She also holds a BA in Speech Communications from San Francisco State University. Since coming to the U.S., May Oo has made twenty four trips to the Karen National Union-controlled areas of Burma.

FBC EXECUTIVE WORKING GROUP[?]

May Oo

See “About the Authors.”

Min Zaw Oo (b. 1972) has been involved in the pro-democracy movement since he was 16. Following the bloody crackdown of 8888 popular uprisings, he left Burma for Singapore. Subsequently, he went to the Thai-Burmese border and joined the armed resistance led by the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF). In 1996, the year he left the border for the United States to resume his university education under a United States Information Agency Scholarship. He completed his undergraduate studies in public relations and political science at the University of Maryland at College Park. Min Zaw Oo then went on to pursue his graduate studies at George Mason University Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolutions. In 2001, he completed a M.S. thesis entitled Conflict Analysis on Potential Political Transition in Burma: Conflict Mapping and Potential for Reconciliation. After his graduation, he joined the staff of the Institute for Community and Institutional Development - Burma, Inc. as its Thailand coordinator. From 2001 until 2004 (with a short interval), he lived and worked among his fellow dissidents in exile in Thailand intermittently. He is currently Director of Strategy with the Free Burma Coalition.

Myo Nyunt (b. 1938) was Assistant Lecturer and Lecturer of Economics at the Institute of Economics, Rangoon, from 1966-79. He served as an economic analyst for the Agricultural Price Committee, Ministry of Trade, in Burma and held executive and advisory positions in Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Australia. He was Assistant Secretary, Provincial Economic Planning and Economic Policy at the Ministry of Finance and Planning in Papua New Guinea (1983-89). Since 1996, Myo Nyunt has been conducting research on political economy of change in Burma a researcher and founding member of the Burma Studies Group, Edith Cowan University. He is a regular participant in international Burma seminars and conference and a contributor to the book, Economic Development: A Strategy and Vision: A Study by Burmese Economists (2000). He holds a MS in Economics from the University of Rangoon and a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics from the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

[?] The FBC Executive Working Group of the Free Burma Coalition has endorsed the report “Common Problems, Shared Responsibilities: Citizens’ Quest for National Reconciliation in Burma/Myanmar.”

Saw Myat Sandy (b. 1973, Rangoon) studied briefly at the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT). Her engineering studies ended when the popular unrest swept the campuses across the country, originating from her school in 1988. She continued her studies through "Distance Education Project" of the University of Rangoon and finally earned a Bachelor of Art in English Literature in 1991. She worked for UNICEF in Rangoon until she left the country for Thailand in 1993. From 1993 until 1996, she worked in Bangkok and devoted part of her time to helping Burmese Refugees along the Thai-Burmese borders and to aiding the struggle for democracy in Burma. In 1996, she went to Germany to further her education. In 2002 at the University of Münster she completed her MA with a thesis entitled Burma: A Country in Meaningful Transition? Currently, she is working on her Ph.D. dissertation which examines the problems of democratic transition in multi-ethnic countries such as Yugoslavia and Burma.

Saw Kapi (b 1970, Kyaukkyi, Burma) joined the nationwide student movement in Toungoo in 1988. After the military coup on September 18 1988, he left Burma proper for the liberated area controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU) to join the KNU's armed resistance and spent almost five years there until he came to the United States in 1993 under the U.S. refugee resettlement program. He continued to be involved with the KNU as a country representative for the United States until July 2004. Saw Kapi holds an M.A. in Economics from the Center for Development Economics at Williams College and BA in International Relations from San Francisco State University. He is University Evaluator at the University of San Francisco in San Francisco.

Zarni

See "About the Authors."