

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

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



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## PREFACE

In her celebrated collection of essays, Freedom from Fear and Other Writings [1991], Aung San Suu Kyi argues that the root of our freedom struggle is the revolution of the spirit. Thirteen years have gone by since its publication, yet the spirit of our revolution shows few signs of renewal; rather, it has become static while the world around us is dynamically changing. Our two giant neighbors, China and India, are improving the well-being of their citizens, while smaller countries in our region, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and even communist Vietnam, are laying sound foundations for their growth. Sadly, orthodoxy and intransigence have descended on our country, creating conditions that take a heavy toll on our people and hurt our nation's interests.

The ruling State Peace and Development Council, as well as the elected but ineffectual National League for Democracy and our non-Bama ethnic political groups, are still un-reconciled and hanging on to their entrenched views and approaches. They stubbornly insist on bringing about democratic change and national reconciliation in their separate ways. Additionally, governmental and NGO players in Asia and in the West have become mired in Burma's conflict even though their roles are secondary to those of the key opposing camps. They too are inflicted by "Burma orthodoxy."

While any homegrown solution is seen as stillborn by many, the fact remains that Burma's problems are solely ours to resolve. Well-meaning outsiders are concerned, but we citizens of Burma have no choice but to live with this confrontation each day. Responsibility to resolve our country's five-decade old conflict lies with us alone, for this is our struggle, waged in our name.

The problems of today's Burma did not begin with our generation, yet many hold the current government solely responsible for our myriad national problems: the political deadlock; the intellectual and cultural stagnation and stunted economic reform; lack of ethnic equality; the humanitarian and public health crises, and absence of political freedom. Earlier generations passed these on to us, the military as well as the civilians.

Five decades after Burma regained sovereignty, we are confronted with a stark choice: adhere to the destructive legacy of our forefathers, or end our national conflict and begin to realize our country's potential by pursuing jointly our collective national interests.

Attitudes and positions have hardened all around so the country remains polarized, both vertically and horizontally, with a siege mentality among the elites of opposing camps and their grassroots supporters. We are all responsible for this sordid condition whereby demonization and dehumanization prevails. We cannot make peace or seek reconciliation with demons. Peace and reconciliation are conceivable only among human beings.

Therefore we make an impassioned case for assessing our own contributions to this national nightmare. Our problems are man-made, not a product of historical inevitability, as such, we can resolve them. But we must first comprehend the deep cultural and political undercurrents flowing through our history. We urge our readers to examine our country's problems from a comprehensive angle, and invite all to view genuine, constructive change as a long and arduous process. It will never come from a watershed event or be a tangible product wherein a new and better governing system suddenly replaces the old one.

We have concluded, based on our 16 years of experience as democracy advocates, that we have lost sight of our ultimate mission - to set in motion a process of progressive change for all our peoples! Instead we continue arguing vehemently over One Best Method or Strategy to accomplish this worthy mission. The late Bogyoke Aung San said, "painful truth hurts." We fully concur. What is the salt good for if it does not bite? We expect our report to anger some, especially those elected 14 years ago.

The 16th century reformist Martin Luther (AD 1483-1546) found himself in a comparable situation and stated:

".our ears are made so delicate by the mad crowds of flatterers that as soon as we meet with a disapproving voice we cry out that we are bitten, and when we cannot ward off the

truth with any other pretext we put it to flight by ascribing it to fierce temper, impatience and shamelessness."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "Letter to Pope Leo X," in Eric Cochrane and Julius Kirshner, eds., *The Renaissance*, University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization Series, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.32.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In preparing this FBC Report, we drew inspiration from many conversations with compatriots in Burma as well as citizens abroad; we also reflected on national problems that predate our generation but still affect us all. We developed insights and knowledge of those problems following intimate involvement in the widespread 1988 uprising, some of us through armed resistance, others through non-violent initiatives; these experiences helped us assess the efficacy of both armed and non-violent forms of opposition.

The FBC has helped lead the international campaign to isolate and punish the military government. We have met diplomats and intelligence analysts in strategic studies communities as well as parliamentarians and statesmen around the world; we have met with *successful* revolutionary leaders, foreign investors, informed travelers and journalists, and interested citizens on five continents. Recently, we initiated conversations with officials in the present military government. This intensive and extended commitment has given us an informed grasp of the central question: what are effective long and short-term solutions for Burma's problems.

Our report is informed by recent meetings with dissidents, both prominent and "ordinary," within the plethora of opposition organizations, including the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (the exiled government); the Thailand-based National Council of the Union of Burma, the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, the Democratic Party for a New Society (in Burma); retired civil servants, military intelligence officers and senior members of the Burma Socialist Party Program (1962-88) who reside outside Burma; Burmese and foreign academics specializing in Burma studies, well-placed members of the country's business elite; informed religious leaders of different faiths who travel to and from Burma; leaders in the ceasefire efforts within the Karen National Union, and other minority refugees in the country's armed conflict zones.

We also consulted relevant publications which offer fresh insight into the country's problems.

Finally, our sincere thanks go to our main editor who wishes to be identified only as Mr. Z for political reasons. And we are also indebted to our colleagues Saw Kapi, Saw Myat Sandy, Dr. Myo Nyunt and Min Zaw Oo, all members on the FBC Executive Working Group who gave us critical feedback on numerous versions of the report. We have chosen to leave out Burmese prefixes for proper names such as *U*, *Daw*, *Ko* or *Ma* for the sake of consistency and clarity.

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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 ongoing 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.

# THE FREE BURMA COALITION REPORT

## Introduction

*It is ... the bounden duty of every true (Burmese) to revive the spirit of criticism... and apply it to every problem affecting Burma.*<sup>4</sup> - Aung San, 1935

The continuing conflict in Burma (Myanmar) has sustained itself by integrating new factors and players into its process until it has begun undermining our country's *national interests*. There is widespread recognition among most, if not all, key leaders that the political stalemate is hurting the interests of the country and her people.

## Framing “the Burma Question” from a Burmese Citizens’ Perspective

Publications on Burma analyze our problems from numerous perspectives, focusing on US and EU interests in Southeast Asia, Chinese and Indian interests, human rights, democracy, non-Burman ethnic groups, labor, the environment, and ASEAN interests--*or* a combination of the above; yet no analysis of our national security has been written by politically engaged Burmese citizens.

Others have identified the extreme imbalance of power between the military [*tatmadaw*] leaders and the civilian democratic forces. We believe this imbalance is a major impediment to change, for our highly polarized situation has

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<sup>4</sup> In his essay written while he was editor of Rangoon University Student Union Publication *Oway* (Fighting Peacock), Aung San exhorted fellow Burmans to practice and live the essence of Buddhism, the spirit of critical intellectual inquiry, rather than immerse in the rituals and forms of the religion, as they clamored for independence of Burma. He cited the famous lecture Lord Buddha is said to have given at Kalama village in what is now India as a response to how truth may be judged: “*Do not believe in anything because you have heard it; do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down from many generations; do not believe in anything because it is rumored and spoken by many; do not believe in anything because it is found written in your religious Books; do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. But after observation and analysis when it agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.*” See Aung San, *Burma and Buddhism*, The World of Buddhism, Vol. XXI, April 1935, No. 123, P. 132 (cited in *Journal of Burma Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1938, pp. 63).



vocal exiles around the world. In short, the government has, perhaps unwittingly, perpetuated a widespread perception that it is only interested in preserving its power. This view does not benefit tatmadaw or the broader civil interests of the country; it prevents all parties from moving in a positive direction to re-build our country.

Staunch critics of the current regime, the State Peace and Development Council [SPDC], believe their only interest is in retaining power, with neither ideological foundation nor serious concern for national interests. Meanwhile, the SPDC clearly is trying to launch market reforms, while the democratic West isolates and punishes Burma at the urging of Aung San Suu Kyi, General Secretary of the NLD. The Democracies view fundamental reforms as essential, but they demand incorporation of the NLD into the governing process, and they see no prospect for economic or political development until the two sides reach some reconciliation. Concurrently, the SPDC resists domestic pressure from the NLD, which in turn leads to more international pressure to conform to international standards of democratic governance. So the arguments go back and forth, in a circular fashion while attitudes have hardened, leading to 14-years of deadlock that confounds our country's national interests

Our military and civilian opposition leaders appear stuck in this “black/white” and “good/evil” quagmire, which ignores our history and the complexity of central issues. We see Burma as a society struggling to shake a self-imposed isolationist past. This legacy includes deeply fragmented social and political organizations; authoritarian cultural values that permeate the entire society; and a “we-know-best” mentality of leaders born into a society blinded by xenophobic half-truths and myths. Tatmadaw has become a state within the State, demanding excessive social control. Consequently, it is perceived as arrogant, yet without confidence because it practices “Might-is-Right-and-Pride-is-Everything”.<sup>6</sup> Key issues remain unresolved: ethnic inequality, humanitarian concerns, poor resource management and incompetent or unimaginative economic

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<sup>6</sup> This mentality and logic cost the Burman Kingdom its sovereignty as its ineffectual king and deluded court officials chose to confront the incomparably superior forces of Pax Britannica in the 1880s.

and business policies. These issues lie not only within the military government but within the dissident civilian leadership as well, which functions only as a symbolic opposition.

### **The Nature of Crisis in Burma**

We see pervasive rights abuses, widespread corruption, constrained civil and political liberties, poverty, diminished public health and educational services, unresolved ethnic conflicts, and corrosive use of force. Much ink has been spilled on this state of affairs since the 1988 uprisings. Indeed, most literature since the 1962 coup has focused on our sorry conditions, largely blaming incompetent and self-serving successive military governments. Because our problems are widely recognized and clearly measured by UN Social and Human Development Indexes, which reveals a vivid picture of our troubled country, we will not dwell on their evidence. We view them as a consequence of failures by all political parties, mass organizations, armed ethnic groups, the armed forces and our entire society's inability to reform structural problems since independence in 1948.

While we hold the ruling military government responsible for the continuing deadlock with the main opposition party– the NLD-- we reject the conventional wisdom that only our military officers are the source of Burma's problems. We are also critical of the idealized view that democratic forces led by the NLD leadership – most specifically, Aung San Suu Kyi – offer any real solution for our country's long-standing ills.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, we do not view the military as innately bad, incompetent and blame-worthy, nor do we see the 'democratic forces' as above criticism.

Our view is predicated on the assumption that Burma's problems are of such magnitude and complexity that real solutions require all leaders to re-think

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<sup>7</sup> To be fair to the NLD leadership, their pronouncements and our interviews indicate a grasp of the nation-building tasks they face should they gain power. But since 1988 the human rights struggle in Burma – and its international support campaign – has been fought with simplistic "good/evil" slogans. Social ills pose enormous challenges – poverty, ethnic and racial tensions, post-conflict reconstruction, resource management, institution building, the flight of many professionals, a massively expensive armed force, and especially, health and education crises. Neither the SPDC nor the NLD are equipped with policies, funds, or organizational skills sufficient to resolve these problems.

current policies which work against long-term national interests of our country. The FBC has revised our mission to get at the root of our country's multiple problems. For example, we do not see a two-way dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD Executive Committee and the ruling SPDC as sufficient; instead, we recognize that since gaining independence, many of our sage leaders sought a more loosely-structured state. They have argued against the Union of Burma concept; indeed, current minority spokesmen in the Constitutional Convention insist that our country can enjoy no reconciliation if the government in Rangoon insists on a unitary state.

### The War of Entrenched Positions

We find irony in both the military leadership and the NLD claims to represent the best interests of our nation when they publicly advocate only their favored solutions. Discussions about Burma's future have recurrently degenerated into contests between entrenched positions, ignoring the concerns of minorities. While the military government appears unwilling to compromise with its weaker, but election-legitimized rival, on its part, the NLD – and its Western supporters – refuse to accommodate the SPDC, and continually take a principled stand against it. This policy has been pressed by the United States and the European Community since the 1990 elections; tragically, it has led to increasing isolation and suffering by our people, although the sanctions policy is aimed at the SPDC.

### Prospects for the National Convention

The Constitutional Convention, which had been recessed in 1996, reconvened in 2004. Its stated objective is to resolve our prolonged national deadlock. This stalemate has exacted its heaviest toll on Burmese citizens - ordinary people of all ethnic backgrounds. Villages and towns, as well as our largest cities, lack vital resources needed to mitigate living and working conditions, while the country's elite prospers, civilians and military alike.

Acknowledging ethnic conflict as the central bone of contention,<sup>8</sup> the government seeks to respond to legitimate concerns expressed by minority leaders in terms of political equality, self-determination, and bill of rights for ethnic nationalities.”<sup>9</sup> In his remarks at the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 29, 2004, Tin Win, the Burmese government Minister from the Office of Prime Minister and head of the Burmese delegation, indicated that his government’s chosen venue to address the country’s long-standing problems is the National Convention currently in recess.<sup>10</sup>

The 13-ceasefire groups out of a total of 17 submitted jointly a set of suggestions and demands regarding these issues during the National Convention before it recessed on July 9, 2004. It appears many of their views will be rejected by the SPDC. Thus, unresolved ethnic problems remain despite ceasefire agreements with most resistance armies. Likewise, the ongoing constitutional process has ignored the “prisoners of conscience” issue; over 1300 members of opposition parties remain in prison.

Finally, the economic polices have greatest impact on the citizenry, yet they have scarcely been touched during the constitutional convention.

For its part, the NLD leadership has no pragmatic, national reconciliation initiative which accepts the military as a dominant political force, and which satisfies the latter’s concerns. In the official statement dated May 27, 2004, which was issued 12 days after the NLD declared its decision to boycott the National Convention, the NLD leadership declared as solution - or more accurately, its belief - thus: “The country’s political, economic and social crises can only be solved by calling the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (or parliament) composed of members

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<sup>8</sup> During the meeting between one of the report’s authors in Rangoon with Brigadier Than Tun and Colonel Hla Min on May 31, 2004, the latter emphasized that the government viewed ethnic problem to be the single most difficult and important issue facing the country.

<sup>9</sup> For different readings of the events and discussions inside the National Convention, see Robert H. Taylor, “Power-sharing the Key to Peace in Burma,” *The Strait Times*, August 26, 2004 and Ashley South, “Beyond the National Convention: Burma’s Ceasefire Groups Look Ahead.” *Irrawaddy*, September 2004. Available at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=4024&=z105>

<sup>10</sup> Kim Gamel, “Myanmar Defends Its Human Rights Record,” *Associated Press*, September 29, 2004.

elected and mandated by the people.”<sup>11</sup> Its attempts at mass mobilization have repeatedly failed [in part through disruptions by the government], so clearly it must engage in serious soul-searching to find some way to engage its political opponent, a way that is pragmatic and process-oriented, as opposed to sloganeering about democracy.

Likewise, political and armed organizations aspiring to represent our many non-Burman communities have not articulated clear national interests, beyond concern for their group’s self-expression and prosperity. One sees little effort in the search for common ground with the power holders. This has left the national political stage to two organizations – the NLD and the military government – both of which are predominately Burman, with each continuing to expound failed approaches to our national problems. These views are inherited from previous generations since independence, and lead one seasoned Burmese observer in Rangoon to lament, “the homegrown solution seems to be stillborn.”<sup>12</sup>

Assigning equal responsibility for the current stalemate to all stakeholders, especially the ruling junta and the NLD, may not seem fair to the underdogs; but is it not time to stop viewing our homeland through the prism of conflict? Might we try moving away from a “blame-game” formula to seek a new framework of “common problems, shared responsibilities,” among the primary stakeholders and their supporters, both within and outside of Burma?

### Supporting Democratization or Fueling Burma’s Conflict?

What is the proper role of the international community in our continuing conflict? The West has framed Burma as an issue essentially in terms of human rights by basing their policies on concern for Aung San Suu Kyi. She has become the sole icon for Burma’s well-being and freedom, and her situation is the yardstick used to measure the regime’s efficacy, or depravity. Edward Luttwak, author of *Coup D’etat* and a military strategist, observed: “You don’t really have

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<sup>11</sup> See Central Executive Committee, National League for Democracy, “National League for Democracy on Parliamentary Elections held on 27 May 1990, in Burma,” Available at <http://www.asistribune.com/showarticle.php?id=1459>

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, September 2004.



a Burma issue, there is only an Aung San Suu Kyi issue. The world applauds the generals when they give her flowers. It gets outraged when they clobber her.”<sup>13</sup>

While the SPDC has skeletons in the closet, has it really a worse record than Israel under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, which holds 5,000 Palestinians as political prisoners; or Uzbekistan with even more political prisoners, or Saudi Arabia with a terrible record of human rights abuses and absolutely no democratic tradition; or Pakistan with powerful anti-US Islamic fundamentalists and authoritarian rule by General Musharaf; yet, because these countries are each strategic assets for the US their human rights records are not allowed to interfere with governmental relations. These human rights violators are strategic allies, and Burma is not.

The European Union (EU) also maintain a common position toward Burma, by banning visas for senior officials and their families, and freezing their personal assets, however meager they may be. Two EU ministerial meetings with ASEAN were cancelled over seating the Burma’s delegate, and a diplomatic offensive continues against seating Burma at upcoming ASEM Asia-Europe summit in Hanoi.

This sanctions policy creates resentment toward the US and EU powers, as Asian leaders feel the West has been hypocritical and unreasonable in applying a double-standard of human rights to ASEAN, and Asia generally. Western hypocrisy, perceived or real, unifies most Asian governments in their support for Burma, when they argue that Asia’s problems – such as Burma – are better left to resolution by “Asian methods.” China, Japan and the ASEAN alliance are not known as defenders or promoters of political liberalism; rather, they follow a more pragmatic course by acknowledging the cries for human rights and democracy in Burma, but continuing to pursue economic and strategic interests with their resource-rich neighbor.

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Luttwak, personal communication, Goffstown, New Hampshire, USA, August 7, 2004.

## **Framework or Common Language for Burma's National Security Interests**

In light of such entrenched positions, only a comprehensive approach can hope to address the interests of diverse constituencies and players, and so we suggest a pragmatic path of gradual change toward an open, prosperous society.

Our analytical framework holds promise for establishing a common language of national security interests. Such language takes into account specific and historical concerns of key players (and their constituencies) including the current government, the National League for Democracy, non-Burman ethnic political parties, the ceasefire groups, and remaining armed resistance groups-- the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the Shan State Army (South) the Chin National Front, and the Arakanese League for Freedom.

The FBC once advocated removal of the current military regime in the style of the Philippine's victorious "People Power" movement. We felt the NLD could spearhead that action if the opposition was determined, well-organized and better funded. Other Burmese called for overthrow of the regime through military intervention by the United States or a US-led UN sponsored intervention, as in Iraq.<sup>14</sup> However, neither scenario has proved feasible. Our report addresses these approaches to highlight why "regime change," either through mass uprising or through US military intervention, remains a fantasy and a failed strategy.

In developing this national security/interests framework, we place Burma's political issues in historical context to lay a foundation for action to end the deadlock. Johan Galtung, an influential peace advocate, states that a peace plan has to work on paper – and in the minds of those affected by conflict, both the leaders as well as rank and file members – before it can work in real life.<sup>15</sup> So we ask:

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<sup>14</sup> In the wake of what many saw as a government-orchestrated ambush of Aung San Suu Kyi's motorcade on May 31, 2003, one of the report's authors was in Thailand. The FBC was one of the key activist groups that called for assisted regime change in Burma. With hind-sight, we saw our push as motivated by moral outrage and not based on careful political calculation that took into account the lack of strategic interest in Burma by Europe or the U.S.

<sup>15</sup> Johan Galtung, Personal Communication, Richmond Point, California, August 14, 2004. A Norwegian scholar with the University of Tromso, Norway. Galtung is an internationally

1) *What are the structural and foundational issues that must be understood by anyone interested in democratic change in Burma?*

2) *In what concrete ways might these issues be viewed to advance both short- and long-term national security interests of Burma, the consequence being a gradual, phased process of change?*

Finally, we seek a common language – and work plan -- to address the needs and interests of major international powers, especially China, India and the West. To preserve its power, the SPDC has proved it has no need for the United States or the European Union as allies. But if it seriously hopes to develop a modern, prosperous nation, then the SPDC needs to re-ignite relations and traditional trade patterns with the West. Burma needs the West for its national interests - economic development, intellectual growth, technological advancement, and investment capital – more than the West needs Burma. An increasingly integrated world economy and international system of nation-states, allows no country to pursue its security interests without considering global political and economic forces that impinge on its sovereignty. Weak third world countries lack influence over global forces and Burma is near the bottom of the UN's list of Least Developed Countries.<sup>16</sup>

After three decades of self-imposed isolation by Burma's socialist military leader, General Ne Win, his successors, Generals Saw Maung and Than Shwe, sought integration within the global market-system. Theirs is a collective desire, but it requires a minimally acceptable and legitimate form of government to realize its ultimate goal. Many observers and potential investors believe the current military leaders are happy being shunned as pariahs, and enjoy their

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recognized pioneer in the field of conflict transformation. He heads *Transcend*, the world's largest NGO working in international conflict-ridden areas. He has made a few trips to Rangoon to meet with the government officials.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson Mandela shared his first-hand experience as the first President of post-apartheid South Africa how the international developments frustrated his government's domestic policies to address economic, social and other issues confronting South African society and nation. See Nelson Mandela, "The International Poverty Gap: Peace, Reconciliation, and Eradication of Poverty: Our Greatest Challenges," Nancy Bearg Dyke, ed., *The International Poverty Gap: Investing in People & Technology to Build Sustainable Pathways Out*, A Report of The Aspen Institute International Peace, Security & Prosperity Program. (New York: The Aspen Institute, 2000), pp. 93-99.

denunciation in the United Nations General Assembly. We find that not to be true. Nor do we believe that the SPDC is riven by hardliners versus reformists; rather, what drives the 'hardliners' is their conviction that the West feels nothing but ill-will and hostility toward Burma. For them, the logical choice is to ignore the attacks and seek integration with more supportive powers, like China, our ASEAN neighbors, India and Russia.

### **Who are the stakeholders in Burma?**

Now, consider just who are the stakeholders in Burma's politics, what divides their loyalties, and what are their histories, concerns and interests as those relate to our country. Four distinct interest groups participate in the Burmese political system. They have divergent concerns and interests: most of which are determined by where they live-- in the ethnic minority areas where there is an active armed conflict, or in the SPDC-controlled areas – mostly throughout the central plains along the *Irrawaddy* River. They are the opposition National League for Democracy; non-Burman ethnic groups including 17 cease fire groups each of whom has its separate set of concerns and interests; armed non-Burman ethnic resistance organizations; the ruling SPDC and the Armed Forces, its primary base of power and support.

It is fascinating to observe that all these groups speak different political languages [and many use different languages] and have their own sets of internal logic, which make sense to their own bases yet may be incomprehensible to outsiders. Understanding each set of logic, concerns, and interests will be the first step toward exploring, finding and establishing commonalities and subsequently ways to accommodate and compromise where they diverge.

## The Public and Its Mundane Language of “Daily Survival”

*“Brothers and Sisters, let us become logs to feed the flames of revolution.”*

- General Sukharno, Speech to the Indonesian Nation, 1960

What does our Burmese public desire? And how do they wish to go about realizing their desire? What are the conditions under which they have been living since 1962 when General Ne Win imposed his authoritarian rule?

Like all peoples in conflicted, poverty-stricken nations, the minority peoples of Burma most definitely want their basic human needs met. They want to pursue their welfare in peace, within a stable social order. While potentially capable of thinking about all ethnic minorities or even the whole country, the bulk of the population is, and has been focused on such *real, pressing* issues as feeding their families, earning a living, worrying about health, about schooling for children, and a few about professional careers and advancement. As a result of years of isolation, their economic destitution, political repression and continuing political conflict, has atomized our society. Most citizens are resigned, their life-circumstances characterized by economic hardship and fear of persecution attendant in a police state where surveillance – not freedom - is the norm.

Communities in armed resistance zones have an added dimension in their basic, day-to-day worries, in addition to economic survival and fear of the government’s wrath. They remain vulnerable to being used for bases of armed resistance and impressed service by the advancing *Tatmadaw*. The army operates under the policies of “Four Cuts” – cutting off ethnic resistance from sources of 1] food and supplies, 2] new recruits, 3] information and intelligence and 4] linking – with their own families – who have chosen to resist rather than accommodate during decades of military offensives.

They may share the noble aspiration to restore freedom, but most Burmese have opted not to join the resistance or oppose military rule; they feel themselves to be indifferent and powerless as on-lookers. A protracted political tragedy has unfolded before their eyes, leaving deeply negative imprints on individuals and communities.

In spite of widespread discontent and distrust of the regime, most Burmese citizens do not channel their negative energies in political violence nor participate in the NLD. The American political scientist, Ted Robert Gurr, observes in Why Men Rebel that “...most discontented men are not revolutionaries. They may be angry, but most of them probably prefer peaceful means for the attainment of their goals to the privations and risks of revolutionary action. Assuming that their primary motive is to increase their well-being rather than to satisfy anger through violence, their optimum strategy lies intermediate between those of elites who would maintain order and of revolutionaries who would destroy that order to establish a new one... Their objective is to improve their own lot as much as possible.”<sup>17</sup>

Our country’s military government has allowed political and social space for political organizers and campaigns, but only associated with their political party, the United Solidarity Development Association [USDA]. The NLD is not allowed to mobilize citizens as active participants in their political process. While most people nowadays may not choose to risk lives or family well-being to gain democracy; in the 120 years since our Konbaung era, common people have sometimes formed a coherent opposition to ruling parties, hoping to renovate and restructure our State. Because of our national cohesion, we gained independence from the British colonial rule after the Burma Defence Army revolted against their sponsoring Japanese military in 1945. But people who join with the revolutionaries must be inspired by a vanguard party with leadership ability; at the very least, they should feel hopeful that change is conceivable and worth the risk.

In 1960, Sukarno roused Indonesians with his vivid rhetoric:

I tell you frankly that I belong to that group of people who are bound in spiritual longing by the romanticism of revolution. I am inspired by it. I am fascinated by it. I am crazed, I am obsessed by the romanticism of revolution ... Come, then,

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<sup>17</sup> See Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 355.

keep fanning the flames of the leaping fire of revolution! *Brothers and sisters, let us become logs to feed the flames of revolution.*<sup>18</sup>

Sixteen years have passed since the August 8, 1988 [commonly known as “8888”] popular uprising failed to send the military back to the barrack. In that interval most Burmese chose *not* to be “logs to feed the flames.” They have not found the NLD-led revolution capable of turning out their Tatmadaw rulers.

In her classic study, *States and Social Revolutions*, Theda Skocpol “downplays the degree to which revolutions are voluntary or purposive; people cannot *make* revolutions, she argues, revolutions *happen*.” Skocpol’s argument sharply contrasts with the conventional “voluntarism” view - that revolutions are made by groups of conspirators – instead, [she] stresses the importance of structural preconditions for revolutions. Indeed by any measure of deprivation – denial of liberty, economic deprivation, thought control - there do exist structural pre-conditions in Burma favorable to a social revolution. But these conditions prevail in many countries among the 190 members in the United Nations, yet few “masses” have successfully “risen up against the status quo.”

As the 8888 uprising demonstrated, political violence, which is part and parcel of popular revolutions, “happened” but did not lead to the desired outcome. Skocpol highlighted something which revolutionaries do not want to hear: *the most important historical consequence of revolutions in history has so far been strengthened power of the state.*<sup>19</sup>

The generals in power have consolidated their power, and the influence of the *tatmadaw* markedly expanded as “a state within the State,” at the NLD’s expense. In retrospect, our dissident strategy was predictable. The combination of international pressure from the Western democracies, and our effort to politicize

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<sup>18</sup> As quoted in Elie Kedourie “The Third World and the Idea of Revolution”, in E.E. Rice (ed) *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p.196, Italics added.

<sup>19</sup> For an excellent discussion of the three important works on revolutions, see Fred Halliday “Revolution in the Third World: 1845 and After,” in E.E. Rice (ed), *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp.129-152. The other two works aside from Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions* are *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* by Barrington Moore, Jr., first published in 1966 and *The Modern Concept of Revolution, Its Origins and Development* (in German) by Karl Griewank, published in Weimer in 1955.

popular discontent to create purposive, mass participation through the NLD as the vanguard of the popular revolt, has strengthened the generals' hand.

To date, the public has chosen not to support the NLD's efforts in any meaningful way, or bring about change; in retrospect, it was predictable and transparent to us making the effort. The massive popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi in particular has as yet to translate itself into serious popular acts that challenge the generals in power.

### **NLD: A Regime of Human Rights and Democracy<sup>20</sup>**

The NLD won a landslide election victory in 1990 with 61% of the popular votes and captured 392 seats out of a total of 485 in a parliament, yet it was never allowed to convene. It derives legitimacy from this popular mandate and has been given diplomatic and political support from the European Union, Canada and the United States. Its support groups abroad and along the Burmese borders receive modest funding from these western entities. The NLD also enjoys moral support from the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Commission and the International Labor Organization. Perhaps equally important, NLD General Secretary Aung San Suu Kyi has become an icon for the international human rights community, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as pro-human rights NGOs and grassroots citizens and activists. The NLD operates freely within the global framework of human rights and democratization, and enjoys high status among pro-democracy organizations struggling against military-ruled states.

The main issues for the NLD as an opposition to the SPDC, are concern for its political prisoners, repression of its organizational and political activities, and harassment and intimidation of its leaders and grass root supporters. The NLD has continually appealed to the SPDC to legitimate its role in governing the

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<sup>20</sup> A glance at the proclamations and statements issued by the NLD demonstrates amply its unequivocal embrace of political and civil rights-focused approach toward democratization in Burma. See the recent NLD statement in Burmese, <http://www.nld.org/bur/2004/04/27/20040427.htm>, dated April 27, 2004.



country. Its mode of operation is direct appeal to the citizenry for support by active participation in the push for reform and political settlement through dialogue.<sup>21</sup> Their long-term strategy is to bring a democratically elected government to power through a nation-wide, multifaceted, non-violent campaign.

## The Burmese Revolution under Aung San Suu Kyi's Leadership

What has this NLD strategy accomplished over the years since it emerged as a leader in the Burmese revolution?

In his essay *The Third World and the Idea of Revolution*, University of London historian Elie Kedourie points out that the term “revolutionary” refers only to “revolutions which have liberty for their objective.”<sup>22</sup> The NLD's attempt to bring change to Burma certainly qualifies as “revolutionary”. Sixteen years after Aung San Suu Kyi christened the 8888 uprising throughout Burma as the country's “Second Independence Struggle” in her major public address at Shwedagon Pagoda, there can be little dispute that citizens of all ethnic backgrounds and social classes desire freedom. She correctly focused on that goal in her book *Freedom From Fear* [1991]. No doubt the people of Burma wish - and deserve - to live in a free Burma—a goal we all share. But *how do we restore liberty and rule of law?*

In the NLD's official statement (in Burmese) released on the 16th anniversary of its founding, they offer guiding principles to seek peaceful resolution in Burma.<sup>23</sup> Those include: openness and sincerity (among all parties in conflict), national reconciliation, harmony, peaceful resolution, mutual cooperation, mutual understanding and mutual respect. In spite of repeated calls for dialogue and national reconciliation, the actual strategy adopted by the political opposition in Burma and the majority of its supporters, is change through a non-violent, popular revolution. But a serious attempt at revolution needs more than a popular icon and sanctions from the United States. It needs people's active

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, p.190.

<sup>23</sup> NLD Central Executive Committee (2004).

participation. A revolution, to be sustained, must be effective and goal-oriented; it needs infrastructure through which non-violent political defiance and resistance can be organized, unleashed, and coordinated as a campaign. But the ruling military junta has repeatedly interrupted the NLD's organizational efforts, leaving it as merely a symbol of popular discontent; one must ask-- is there still a revolutionary movement in Burma?

To answer that question, we examine the efforts made by the NLD at mass mobilization. One important initiative was the Political Defiance Campaign (PDC) or Strategic Nonviolent Struggle, which was conceived and planned by co-founders and advisors to the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (CRDB) and which was placed under the direct leadership of the National Coalition of the Union of Burma.<sup>24</sup> After starting the Political Defiance Strategy and its operation PDC in the early 1990s, they trained hundreds of Burmese citizens in the Karen National Union-controlled areas of Burma, on how to organize political defiance campaign nationally.<sup>25</sup> Under the leadership of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCUB), the PDC coordinated several political defiance initiatives, including inserting graduates of these courses over a decade ago into various minority organizations and the NLD.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (CRDB) was created in 1987, one year prior to the popular uprisings in Burma, by a group of Burmese political exiles, most prominently the late U Tin Maung Win. Several Americans who share the love of and concerns for Burma, including the late Louis Walinsky, Robert Nathan and Colonel Robert Helvey (retired), served as strategic planners and advisors to the CRDB. It became the first organized attempt at restoration of democracy by Burmese dissidents in exile since the armed resistance led by exiled Premier Nu, fell apart in the early 1970s.

<sup>25</sup> The opposition's organizational structures, internal politics, internecine fights, and strategic plans are all known to the military government. It is generally recognized that military intelligence has penetrated all dissident organizations operating in the KNU-controlled areas of Burma and along the Thai-Burmese borders. Security of confidential information is lax. The military intelligence services extract information regarding subversive activities from defectors or "returnees to the legal-fold." The situation is not helped by the general lack of professionalism among all dissident organizations with respect to handling sensitive or classified information.

<sup>26</sup> An American lobbyist who was involved in the Political Defiance Campaign based in the KNU-controlled areas of Burma gave the authors an example of what he considered feasible and effective act of political defiance - "Spray paint on a wall in Rangoon something like '(General) Than Shwe, we are not afraid of you!' When the guy and his entourage pass and see the graffiti that will drive chill down his spine." This is one of the 198 methods of non-violent actions listed

However, no formidable underground resistance network was successfully established, despite claims by leading dissidents to the contrary.<sup>27</sup> The objective of politicizing and mobilizing our citizens remains unrealized and unrealizable, because no rational Rangoon regime is going to allow the growth of a revolution aimed at driving it out of office and back to the barracks. Dissidents - and their Western supporters - never concealed their principled, but unrealistic objection to Tatmadaw as the largest stakeholder in Burma's national politics. Seasoned organizers and strategists involved in these political defiance initiatives, or familiar with similar initiatives in other countries under authoritarian regimes, have concluded that our political defiance campaign has, by and large, been a failure. Nor does it hold out promise to be any different in the future.<sup>28</sup>

As a concept, strategic non-violent struggle or political defiance has certain characteristics. It attempts to aggravate weaknesses of the military regime and sever its sources of power and pillars of support. It is believed to have the potential to effectively motivate most of the citizenry through many groups and institutions as the society struggles to end the brutal domination by the few.<sup>29</sup>

But our military government controls the population with a vice-like grip, a vast intelligence and security apparatus, offering little prospect for revolutionary change. However hungry and frustrated our citizens may be, they have chosen not to join hands with us, dissidents and our organizations. This is as true among our rural population as well as people living in cities and towns.

The Burmese public displays no inclination for another uprising, whether it be bloody or non-violent. Upon reflection and with experience, we believe it is

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in Gene Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*. (Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 1993). This booklet was originally published in Bangkok in 1993 by the now defunct Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (CRDB). The Burmese translation of it was the core reading for non-violent organizers.

<sup>27</sup> Some prominent Burmese political exiles have made unsubstantiated claims about the active resistance networks, especially among Burmese workers and laborers, throughout the country. After years of having supported and worked with Burmese exiles, a seasoned Scandinavian organizer with the Olaf Palme Institute in Stockholm pointedly remarked that there are few signs of dissident or activist infrastructure in Burma, which is essential for mass mobilization and strategic non-violent actions.

<sup>28</sup> In-depth discussions with various strategists, security analysts and successful leaders of the past revolutions and resistance in different parts of the world whose names we do not wish to release.

<sup>29</sup> See Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*.

rational that they prefer not to risk death by indiscriminate shootings, and long prison sentences preceded by torturous interrogations, until and unless victory appears likely. So, without popular participation, the NLD is left with only a handful of core members to carry out its organizational activities aimed at bringing the authorities to the dialogue table.

This is bad news for dissidents who seek revolutionary change, offering no compromise with “the thuggish generals.” Typically, odds are against any organization or party that aims to foment a popular revolt against the existing social order, and faith in a desirable outcome is essential because there are always unpredictable surprises in popular uprisings. However, faith in the revolutionary potentials of Burmese society alone is not sufficient if an organized, pro-revolutionary effort is to succeed, nor does the iconic authority of Aung San Suu Kyi, however global her charisma may be, offer a sufficient pre-condition for change in Burma.

Cursory comparison between the political realities on the ground in Burma and other, similarly oppressed, countries reveals how feeble our popular freedom movement is. Consider the ratio of Burmese citizens who are behind bars because of their opposition initiatives and views. The current number of 1,300 political prisoners for the entire populace of 52 million is an extremely low ratio, indicating how few Burmese citizens are now willing to risk their family well-being in active support of the NLD, its policies and its leadership.

In contrast, during the period between January and November of 2000, roughly 18,000 people were imprisoned in Sri Lanka under emergency regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The majority of the detainees or those arrested are Tamils, who make up only 18% of the total population of 19.4 million.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the government of Uzbekistan, a US strategic ally located between China and Russia, arrested 7,000 young men deemed to be political threats between 1999 and 2001. According to the United States State Department, out of the total population of 25 million, political prisoners number between 5,300

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<sup>30</sup> See Human Rights Watch website at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k2/asia1o.html> also see <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5249.htm>

and 5,800. These prisoners include both extremist Islamic political groups, secular political dissidents and human rights activists.<sup>31</sup> Or consider Israel. The Political Prisoner Solidarity Group reports that Israel, a key US ally, has over 6,000 political prisoners behind bars, including 76 women and 350 children, out of two-million Palestinians. The picture that emerges by comparing the NLD-led Burmese revolution and other active political struggles around the world depicts a Burmese public resigned not to support the dissidents or join in any revolutionary effort.

While there is no question about the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi as a heroine in the eyes many Burmese public, that popularity is a categorically different thing than public confidence in the NLD and its leadership to successfully confront and force the SPDC for change.

### The Politics of Symbolism and Its Inadequacies

Political confrontations create a war-like situation. In war, each party pursues any course of action it believes will optimize gains and strengthen its base and strategic capabilities. Conversely, it will attempt to raise the cost for the opponents and weaken the opponent's power base. In the current political context, neither the citizenry nor the NLD has been able to translate popular expression of love, affection and adoration toward the NLD leader into any programmatic political campaigns or initiatives. Even the barbaric attack against the unarmed motorcade of Aung San Suu Kyi at Depayin on May 30, 2003, failed to move our citizenry to concrete action. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese people of all ethnic and class backgrounds who showed up to greet the NLD leader simply melted back into their villages and towns in the aftermath of the attacks; none signed up for any organized political defiance campaign.

No revolution can succeed without popular participation in organized collective and purposive action and/or spontaneous uprisings. There can be no successful revolutionary effort without inspiration and guidance by the party

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<sup>31</sup> For further details, see US State Department:  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27873.htm>

leadership. Also the extreme imbalance of power between the regime and NLD, places the NLD at a sharp disadvantage. While the NLD's politics of symbolism have been useful in keeping alive hope for *change through purposive action*, it places over-reliance by all dissident organizations on the West and the western media. In the final analysis, internal resistance has become unsustainable and counterproductive as the struggle drags on. The NLD is no longer the vanguard of our long anticipated popular revolution; instead, one mortal figurehead has become a singular symbol, making further pro-democracy efforts extremely vulnerable.

We Burmese activists and dissidents cannot build a unified or effective opposition when the only opposition recognized by the outside world has become a single person. While she is a powerful symbol for democracy and human rights, she has proved not to be more than that; and tragically, it is inconceivable that we will be able to accomplish our revolutionary task of consolidating dissidents' power should she die or be silenced. Through unjustified dependence on Aung San Suu Kyi as our leader, we have overlooked the fragility of human life, as well as our society's continuous and growing needs, which have been dangerously overlooked.<sup>32</sup> Our "revolution" has refused to examine the underlying structures which have defeated all oppositional efforts since 1962.

## The Nature and Outcome of the NLD-led Revolution

In all modern social movements, especially the ones that have succeeded in "making a revolution" (for instance, those led by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua), there are key factors that made each tick. They include a shared vision of a new society guided by a capable leadership with both symbolic and strategic powers, which is sustained by a politicized and discontented citizenry wanting change in the existing order. A successful

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<sup>32</sup> One American architect of the campaign for Strategic Nonviolent Struggle shared with the late Louis Walinsky this painful observation in 1993: "We can no longer talk about the need for an end to the fragmentation of Burmese political groups. We must assume they are incapable of placing national interests above personalities..." What was true then is true now; it remains a self-destructive characteristic among Burmese dissidents.

revolution can follow from a popular uprising based on *politicized* mass discontent, led by a viable revolutionary party with able leadership capable of articulating the shared dream and inspiring citizens to act against the status quo.

Minor, peaceful equivalents of “hit-and-run” political defiance actions in full view of the public in the city centers of Rangoon, Pegu, Moulmein and Mandalay have failed to spark mass unrest.<sup>33</sup> Nor have they built or sustained internal resistance to either force the current military government into a dialogue, or removed the generals from their seats of power.

If one examines carefully what is generally depicted as the NLD-led pro-democracy movement against this yardstick, it becomes very clear that there is no revolutionary struggle worthy of its name currently brewing or being fomented under the NLD, its allied organizations, and its supporters.

One and a half decade since its inception in 1989, the NLD has lost its vitality, in the material sense of the word, in terms of organizational and strategic capabilities to challenge the regime in power. As early as 1995 the NLD leadership presented military opponents with the Party’s ultimatum. During the first press conference immediately following the release from her first house arrest in July 1995, Aung San Suu Kyi asked the generals to choose between “dialogue and utter devastation.”

Nine years after that daring ultimatum, the NLD is devastated while the military government has expanded and consolidated its grip on society – at the expense of the NLD. The party has suffered chronic paralysis when its leadership, specifically General Secretary Aung San Suu Kyi, has been placed under house arrest or kept in detention, which the generals have carried out habitually. On the level of the party administering, the NLD is in dreadful shape

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<sup>33</sup> There have been organized attempts, within and outside of Burma, to spark a mass revolt and/or to raise international media profile of the political situation in the country during the past 16 years since the legendary 8888 uprisings ended in a nation-wide bloody crackdown by the military. For the most recent example of such attempts, see “Lone Protestor outside U.N. Office in Myanmar Demands ‘Free Parliament,’” *Associated Press*, September 21, 2004. Two years ago in 2002, a Burmese law student in the capital city staged a lone protest. In 1998, 18 American, Indonesian, Malaysian and Philippino activists including a group of student activists from our coalition launched a coordinated political defiance initiative in Rangoon. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself has carried out several highly televised acts of defiance since her release from the first house arrest in 1995.

and has no prospect for any meaningful internal reform and renovation. Her deputies are clearly unable - or not allowed - to make decisions or take initiatives without her participation, except internal organizational matters. The General Secretary alone has the final say how to deal with the SPDC. Given the fact that the powerful, affluent Western governments and the international human rights community have accorded the general secretary papal infallibility, it is hardly surprising that the NLD decision making is solely in the hands of a single mortal leader, especially when it involves the most important issues such as policy decisions and dealing with the generals. Social organizations are polyglot. And as such there is a natural diversity of views, ideas and proposals within them. But it appears that it is not diversity or merit that is valued and appreciated within the NLD; but rather, loyalty to the party leadership is the most important operating principle. Dissent is neither welcome nor tolerated; nay-sayers are either verbally abused the top leadership or expelled from the party. Alternative views put forth by junior NLD leaders are dead on arrival if they contradict the established wisdom of the party elders in the Central Executive Committee. Indeed fear is not just confined to life in the Burmese society at large under authoritarian rule; it *is* also a norm with the NLD rank and file. NLD members fear the charges of treachery or working for the other side, a total humiliation for those who have made enormous sacrifices in all sincerity.

Because our movement since 8888 has become transnational in nature, there has been a drastic increase in the interactions between Burmese dissidents and their foreign supporters, including Western journalists and diplomats. The rank and file dissidents both within and outside of Burma have a common perception that the NLD top leadership looks down on our own people vis-à-vis Westerners. Even a Western journalist would get an easier access to NLD leadership than some former political prisoners who pay a visit to the NLD headquarters after their release from prison. There are a number of anecdotal stories in which NLD loyalists who *spent time in the country's notorious jails* being accused of cowardice if they had to work to feed their families and not be involved in politics everyday of the week.



One is hard-pressed to see a successful NLD without Aung San Suu Kyi. She remains a formidable challenge to the military government, capable of frustrating their legitimacy despite their attempts at economic development and successful ceasefire efforts, plus regional integration within South and Southeast Asia organizations and forums. She remains a rallying point for dissidents, both abroad and inside Burma who would otherwise find no common institutional focus to express their solidarity.

However, even while Aung San Suu Kyi remains alive and healthy, the symbolic power she holds does not serve as a catalyst for change. Most importantly, the entire opposition effort has come to hinge on a single mortal human being, a major weakness in the current strategy of change through pressure from within and outside of Burma.

This painful truth does not sit well with exiled dissidents, especially those out of touch with the realities inside our country: the extremely sorry state of the NLD, the public mood, the half-empty stomachs, the extreme power asymmetry between the military and those who oppose it, and the SPDC's willingness to use disproportionate repression and punishment to quell organized dissent.

Surely the West – with its intellectual resources and vast global reach of surveillance – is aware of this weakened state within the NLD, and its paradox?

### **What International Support?**

The West's effort to single out the SPDC's egregious human rights atrocities is seen by most expatriates as commendable. But this wholesale absorption by the NLD and its supporters into concern for human rights plays into the hands of some in the West with one over-arching ideological interest, to propagate and universalize human rights. This obsession omits glaring structural inequalities of the current world order which overwhelmingly serve short-term Western interests. To give a flavor, everyday 35,000 children die from hunger-related causes; 3 billion, that is, almost half of the world's people live on less than \$2 a day; the developing world suffer from 90% of the global diseases while it

receives only 10% the worldwide resources in health sector; and 1/5<sup>th</sup> of humanity are chronically hungry.<sup>34</sup>

The United States, the European Union and the Western-influenced international human rights movement promote a narrow definition of human rights. This interpretation 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. Princeton University's Richard Falk writes *"to create the sort of solidarity needed to promote the dignity of persons throughout the world, it is crucial to address economic deprivations associated with poverty as human rights issues."*<sup>35</sup> Wealthy, industrialized nations, specifically the United States is still unprepared to make this commitment.

While the West may be genuinely concerned about rights abuses, its push for political and civil freedoms disregard Burma's need to help create what Ernest Gellner calls, "conditions of liberty."<sup>36</sup> This pressure has arrested the SPDC's determined push to install a more progressive administration in the country. Indeed, continuing attempts by the US-EU to isolate Burma hampers her integration into the ASEAN and BISTEC economic zones, depriving our country of increased interactions with the outside world. Sadly, Burma and her people continue to reel from past legacies of self-isolation.

Because of the asymmetry in power, structure and organizational strengths, the NLD has been forced to look beyond Burma's border for support – from the West and international institutions. In this situation the NLD can grow and strengthen its party and strategic capabilities only at the cost of its powerful

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<sup>34</sup>Regarding the extreme global structural inequalities, see the statistical data compiled by the Aspen Institute International Peace, Security, & Prosperity Program in Nancy Bearg Dyke, *International Poverty Gap*, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> See Richard Falk, "Human Rights", *Foreign Policy* magazine, March/April 2004, pp.18-26. Falk laments that the United States has refused to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the two most important international covenants. The other one which it chose to sign is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Falk gives the reason for this national bias thus: *"(this comprehensive approach) exerts pressure on the United States and other prosperous nations that practice a form of market economics that does not take responsibility for homelessness, hunger and other manifestations of poverty."* (pp. 22-23).

<sup>36</sup> Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, pp. 188-189.

opponent, which no leadership in power with major economic, intelligence and educational assets will ever allow.<sup>37</sup>

## International Solidarity and National interest

Gene Sharp, former strategic advisor with Burmese exiles' Political Defiance Campaign or Non-Violent Strategic Action, cautions against the tendency among the oppressed to yearn for "foreign saviors." It is worth quoting Sharp at length: "Many people now suffering under a brutal dictatorship, or who have gone into exile to escape its immediate grasp, do not (really) believe that the oppressed can liberate themselves... These people place their confidence in external forces. They believe that only international help can be strong enough to bring down the dictators... This outside force may be 'public opinion,' the United Nations, a particular country, or international economic and political sanctions."<sup>38</sup> Sharp, however, is clear as to what really matters. He writes: "International pressures (such as embargoes, economic boycotts, expulsion from the international organizations, and so on) can be very useful... *when they are supporting a powerful internal resistance movement.*"<sup>39</sup> But he doubts such external actions alone can do the job (of ending the dictatorship) in the absence of a strong internal resistance movement.

Both the late Aung San, the founder of modern Burma, and Premier Nu, his fellow nationalist leader who followed him after his assassination in 1947, observed that no nations or movements could look beyond its borders for its national liberation or reconstruction efforts and succeed in the mission. Aung San and his young colleagues received substantial support from imperial Japan in 1941 when the their Naval Intelligence trained and turned them into nucleus of the Burma Independence Army, but Japan did in pursuit of its own strategic calculations. It needed to use Burma as a base to take India from the British while pursuing its imperial ambitions, under the slogan of "Asia for Asians." In

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<sup>37</sup> For an excellent discussion on the subject of vanguard organizations and available strategic options, see Gurr, *op.cit.* Chapter 10, "Causes and Processes of Political Violence: A Conclusion" pp. 317-359.

<sup>38</sup> See Sharp (1993). p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6, Italics added.



news of various forms of human rights crimes, border-crossing illegal migrant workers, trafficking of women and young girls, and narcotics trade *are* problems for Burma's neighbors in the region and constitute a concern for the international human rights community, and rightly so. Furthermore, Burma is located strategically as *the* link between South East Asia and South Asia; moreover our country is a resource rich nation endowed with natural gas, oil, minerals, teak and other hard-wood, fertile land, and a long coast which draws attention from both India and China with their respective strategic, geo-political and economic interests.

Naturally, neighboring Asian countries have national interests, including security concerns, which are closely tied to Burma. They put their strategic and structural interests above human rights and democracy, whereas the Western nations with no significant strategic interests in Burma take the moral high ground on the Burmese question of human rights, freedom and democracy. Several major factors help explain why an international consensus about human rights and democracy is inconceivable and can never be reached.

First, Burma emerged from 26-years of self-imposed isolation since 1962, with the 8888 uprising, and has since been caught in a web of geo-political and geo-economic competition among more prosperous, more domestically stable, more politically savvy, and more powerful Asian governments, namely India, China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia. In addition, Russia and France are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council with specific interests in the SPDC regime. These governments, and their economic and political supporters, tend to put such Burmese issues as human rights, democratization, the environment and public health on the back-burner. In addition, Asian governments generally have skeletons in their closets and are uneasy throwing rocks because they live in glass houses.

Secondly, Western nations that have been the most vocal critics of Rangoon level charges against the Burmese military rulers on grounds of human

rights for the simple reason that they can afford to do so. They do not perceive themselves to have other serious strategic interests in Burma.

Thirdly, the Western world is sharply divided over how to facilitate change in Burma. The EU takes a more moderate stance while Washington pushes for the policy of “no direct dialogue, no engagement, no incentives, but no serious stick” policy. This despite their ideological and political affinity on Burma.<sup>44</sup>

Even UK, the staunchest pro-democracy supporter within the EU, is not prepared to fully embrace the hard line advocated by the United States. Being the second largest investor in Burma, with \$1.4 billion, UK appears not to act unilaterally on Burma, wanting to accommodate the EU’s Common Position toward Rangoon. France and Germany, two of the EU’s most influential members, have broad ties with the Burmese government, and are consistent in their opposition toward more punitive measures.

To put it simply, Burma and her problems are generally viewed through two different lenses by relevant international players: one (Eastern) camp defines Burma strictly in geo-economic and geo-political terms<sup>45</sup> while the other (Western) camp, with the exception of Russia, France and Germany, defines it broadly in human rights terms.

These nations are indeed guided by radically divergent sets of concerns and interests. The United States, the European Union as a bloc, and Asian nations have adopted roughly three sets of policies (and strategies) as they try to appear to push Burma toward reforms.

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<sup>44</sup> Compare Washington’s stance with its policy of engagement with Kim’s autocratic government in North Korea, a nuclear power, that rules their deeply militarized, hermit country suffering from famine.

<sup>45</sup> A considerable amount has been written on the subject of what strategic, geo-political and economic interests have been pursued in Burma by Burma’s neighbors and what type of symbioses the ruling military junta has entered into. Since China may be the single most important foreign power to affect change in Burma, see Ko Ko Oo, *Contemporary Burma-China Relations (1948-1997)*, Draft Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 2001 for a thoroughly researched essay on the subject of Chinese interests in Burma. Ko Ko Oo, a former Burmese diplomat with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during General Ne Win’s Revolutionary Council Government, defected to UK in 1975 and passed away before he could finish his Ph.D. thesis.

These approaches or policies toward Burma problems include Washington's policy of isolation and sanctions, Asia's "Constructive Engagement" policy, and EU's middle-of-the-road, stick-and-carrots approach. To date, none of the policies laid out here has accomplished their stated objectives of bringing about change since Burma first drew attention from the international community in 1988 when it erupted into a series of political upheavals.

The United States pursues strong economic sanctions unilaterally while pushing governments of EU, ASEAN and Japan to join in its sanctions. Washington's Burma policies are predicated, among other calculations, on the "deprivation-will-lead-to-revolt" theory: that the middle class and poor villagers will rise up again in 1988-style popular revolts once they are hungry and oppressed enough. Sanctions, when kept in place long enough, should presumably deprive the SPDC of sufficient financial and economic resources to thwart the generals' efforts to consolidate their hold on the economy, thereby preventing development, which will in turn frustrate the citizens in their day-to-day attempts for survival.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, the Burma lobby in Washington believes Burmese generals will eventually blink, once they feel the pain of Washington's muscular squeeze. As of this writing, a Senate resolution was introduced in the U.S. Congress by Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Aung San Suu Kyi's staunchest American supporter in the Senate and a powerful Republican politician, calling for the U.S. to seek UN Security Council action against Burma on grounds that the military government is oppressing ethnic minorities and using rape as a weapon of war.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Although none of these strategic calculations have been written on paper, some of the Burma lobbyists in Washington and NLD supporters in the United States Congress who advocate the "Burma issue" have revealed this tacit, but typical logic behind sanctions and isolation. The authors have heard this justification for sanctions against Rangoon during our meetings with these individuals.

<sup>47</sup> Senator Diane Feinstein (D-California), who co-sponsored the September 22 Senate resolution, framed how Burma under the SPDC rule poses threat to "the entire Southeast Asia region." An excerpt from Feinstein's statement reads: "The SPDC has committed numerous human rights abuses and detained over 1,300 political prisoners. It has allowed the spread of HIV/AIDS to go unchecked. It has engaged in the illicit production and trafficking of narcotics. It has engaged in the trafficking of human beings. It has attempted to purchase weapons from North Korea, China,

For Burma's Asian neighbors, Washington just doesn't understand the complexity of the Burmese question. Further, the United States no longer has credibility in the eyes of the world as the champion of human rights and democracy in the world,<sup>48</sup> since the unearthing of its own less than honorable behavior handling prisoners of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and having flaunted international norms and treaties such as the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War. As for the U.K.'s push for human rights in Burma, Asians do not retain fond memories of Pax Britannica.<sup>49</sup> From Asian leaders' perspective, the way to deal with the authoritarian regime in their backyard is not unilaterally – or even with multilateral sanctions – but persuasion through engagement, economic and political incentives for the generals in power, and face-saving measures and venues.<sup>50</sup>

The European Union has adopted a Common Position on Burma, combining limited punitive measures such as a visa ban, freezing the regime's assets, and discouraging European investment in Burma; however, bi-lateral assistance in public health, poverty reduction, and humanitarian aid continues.<sup>51</sup>

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and Russia. See "Statement by Senator Diane Feinstein," released by the Office of Senator Feinstein, September 23, 2004.

<sup>48</sup> During a Congressional hearing of human rights subcommittee in July this year, Tom Malinowski, Advocacy Director with Human Rights Watch and former Clinton White House official, said U.S. credibility has been hurt seriously by the Iraqi prisoner abuse issue internationally. In his words, "It has hurt us very badly in all of the places where we are promoting human rights around the world...In Malaysia, American diplomats have told us very candidly you can't really criticize indefinite detention of dissidents anymore or abuse in prisons." See Dan Robinson, "Top US Official Defends Human Rights," July 7, 2004, Voice of America, Radiobroadcast Transcript.

<sup>49</sup> Reflecting the typical mood and attitude of Asian leaders, one prominent leader said bluntly and derisively that Britain is of no use in solving Burma's problems since the former colonial power was the one who left the mess there (and throughout Asia).

<sup>50</sup> In a radio interview with the Radio Free Asia Burmese Service on September 14, 2004 Ali Alatas, ex-Foreign Minister of Indonesia and the country's Special Envoy to Myanmar, said: "Well, you know the position of me and Indonesia - not only Indonesia but the entire ASEAN - we don't believe that sanctions are very effective and especially in a country like Myanmar, sanctions can even seriously hurt the livelihood of the ordinary people." See "ASEAN has better way to deal with Myanmar, Indonesian Envoy says," *Kyodo News*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> In our personal communication, a European diplomat and policy advisor to the European Union stressed the point in spite of the public posturing regarding EU's pro-human rights and support for Aung San Suu Kyi policy, EU has adopted a pragmatic, more realistic view that the NLD is no match for the SPDC and that dialogue is not possible. In a row between France and UK, a French diplomat was quoted as openly declaring Burma a "minor" issue which must not be allowed to hijack larger interests of the European Union in dealing with Asia. See Ewen MacAskill and



Finally, China's position on Burma vis-à-vis other external players is vastly different. Burma is fast becoming an important building block for Beijing's long-term strategy of development. The "sleeping tiger" is waking up to project its expansionist powers. After independence, observes the late Ko Ko Oo, a Burmese diplomat-cum-researcher, Burma spent much time, resources and energies thinking and worrying about Mao's China because Beijing was providing material and political support for the Burmese government's most serious enemy – the Burmese Communist Party [BCP]. Since the demise of the BCP in 1987, Beijing and Rangoon have moved closer together, and one can argue that they have entered into a relationship that never before existed in our history. Burma serves Beijing's geo-strategic, economic and development interests: it can offer China access to the Indian Ocean where it might build a nuclear fleet and project its naval power. China desires and needs to use Burma, with over 1,000 miles of Sino-Burmese border, as the land bridge between it and India, as well as Southeast Asia; Burma offers a nearby market and natural resource base for China's economically backward interior provinces. In return, Beijing can serve as Burma's guardian, strategic counsel, military advisor and protector against potential enemies. The SPDC may be uneasy about dependence on China for much-needed support, but it enables them to resist hostile pressures from the Anglo-American alliance. Out of pragmatic, survival instincts, Burma has embraced China as its "brotherly, *paukpau* neighbor."<sup>52</sup> Rangoon and Beijing have tied their knot in a way the West can not undo, short of military intervention or a complete reversal of its failed sanctions policy.

We conclude that 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

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Amelia Gentleman, "Britain and France fall out over seat at forum for Burma," *The Guardian*, August 27, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Historically the Burmese refer to their northern neighbor as *paukpau* or those who came from the same womb. For an historical overview of the Sino-Burmese relations, see Chen Yi-sein, "The Chinese in Upper Burma before AD 1700," *Journal of Southeast Asian Researches*, Vol. II, 1966, pp. 81-93. Reprinted in *Silver Jubilee Publication of the Department of Historical Research*, Rangoon: Ministry of Culture, 1982.

issue has taken the "movement" nowhere. The West may be genuinely concerned about human rights, and embrace the issue as part of its core values, but in global politics, the U.S. puts human rights – even its own preferred definition - behind trade and national security, or other strategic interests when they are seen to be at stake.

### **Washington Pushes for Democratic Burma, Asia Resists**

Sixteen years after the *Tatmadaw* leadership reasserted its control following the 8888 uprising which degenerated into anarchy,<sup>53</sup> the United States Senate passed unanimously a resolution on September 22, 2004 calling on the United Nations Security Council to take appropriate actions on Burma. The non-binding resolution frames the issue of Burma under the State Peace and Development Council as a “threat to security in Southeast Asian region.”<sup>54</sup> As such, the resolution yet again raised hopes - and possibilities - among the hard-liners in the Burmese expatriate opposition, that the US call for UN Security Council intervention is a clear indication that the United States is serious about democratic change in Burma.<sup>55</sup> This latest move among American politicians clamoring for change in our country seems well-meaning; however, it begs the question as to the impact it will have on the policies and behavior of the SPDC which feels under siege from the West.

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<sup>53</sup> On the streets of Rangoon and other cities during the popular uprisings, the mobs carried out in full view of the public acts of beheading of anyone *labeled* the agents or informers of the Burma Socialist Party Programme Party. Those who lived through these horrendous moments, it was the replay of 1789 - the French and their pay-back time against the old order on the collapse.

<sup>54</sup> See “Statement by Senator Diane Feinstein” (D-California); also see “Gallegly Burma Resolution Passes House, ” Press Release issued by the Office of Congressman Elton Gallegly (R-California), October 7, 2004

<sup>55</sup> According to one Rangoon resident who regularly listens to foreign radio broadcasts of Burmese language services, exile leaders and commentators are currently putting the spin that Russia and China are likely to abstain if and when the Security Council takes up the Burma issue, putting in circulation the (hoped for) international intervention in Burma’s political affairs. Personal Communication, October 1, 2004. But the truth of the matter is that the attempts have been made at UNSC to raise the question of Burma as recent as the week of October 4-8, 2004 as an item outside the formal UNSC agenda by one of the non-permanent member of the Security Council. It is learned that the attempt to get a Burma discussion was rejected quickly by other countries present.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom among the proponents of isolating and punishing the Burmese generals, international pressures have not secured Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom, let alone any positive changes in Burma. To the contrary, the policy has only tightened their control. So why does the Western pressure on Rangoon fail to accomplish its strategic objective of reconciliation and restoration of democracy in our country?

First, worldwide resentment of the United States' unilateral projection of its power has become palpable. Indeed, a Council on Foreign Relations report, "Renewing the Atlantic Partnership," by an Independent Task Force co-chaired by Henry A. Kissinger and Lawrence H. Summers, identifies this resentment as a major new development in international relations, (even) in many European countries.<sup>56</sup> A well publicized public opinion survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press also notes that America's image abroad has eroded.<sup>57</sup> While the United States can instill awe and fear around the world, it has lost moral authority on issues intangible issues like human rights and democracy; consequently this latest anti-Burma resolution from Congress is sure to be viewed skeptically in Asian capitals.

Second, continuing erosion of the United States' international image coincides with the growing, positive perception toward China's rising power. While Washington has taken off its velvet gloves in conducting foreign policy, Beijing's new leadership projects a more astute image.<sup>58</sup> It's explosive economy requires raw materials from South East Asia, a result of policies formulated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 when he launched domestic economic reforms and moved away from Mao's command economy. Equally important, he stopped supporting (Communist) revolutionary movements in neighboring countries.<sup>59</sup> This

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<sup>56</sup>Council on Foreign Relations, "Renewing the Atlantic Partnership," Report of an Independent Task Force, 2004, p.12.

<sup>57</sup> See the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties," March 18, 2003 at <http://people.press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=175>.

<sup>58</sup> Consider the Australian press' (and public's) radically different receptions toward the state visits to Australia by American President George W. Bush and Chinese President Hu Jinto in 2003.

<sup>59</sup> Ko Ko Oo, *Contemporary Burma-China Relations, 1948-1997*, pp. 4-5.

attitudinal change is apparent in ASEAN's pragmatic acceptance of China as a trading partner by the Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN], which was created in 1967 primarily out of fear of Mao's Red China.<sup>60</sup> Noting this change in global alliances as a result of the widely unpopular Iraq war, Dr. Helen James, a Burmese scholar and former advisor to the Australian Prime Minister's Office, writes pointedly that *"many Southeast Asians no longer fear China as they did four decades ago, and are preparing to plug into China's increasing economic power to bolster their own economies as the U.S. economy has weakened. If current trends continue, in five years time this bloc could be strong enough to take a more independent stance toward the United States."*<sup>61</sup> It is not coincidental that ASEAN continues to resist Washington's push for multilateral action against Burma's State Peace and Development Council. Their resistance is rendered even more effective by India's decision to take an equally pragmatic stance toward Burma. Even Australia, an enduring U.S. ally, does not follow U.S. pressure for sanctions against Rangoon.

Third, support for a different tact in ending our stalemate is growing among Burma experts, as well as enduring pro-democracy supporters. Without China's "heavy-lifting," change in Burma is inconceivable.<sup>62</sup> From Beijing's perspective, Burma may already be too valuable a strategic asset to allow a pro-American government to be installed in Rangoon. In addition to becoming a market, Burma is a depository of natural resources, including natural gas and oil, useful to economically backward Yunnan. As noted above, our country offers

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<sup>60</sup> In the meeting with one of the report's authors on May 31, 2004, Colonel Hla Min expressed his government's positive view toward the way China projects its influence in the region, particularly in Burma. This current government's view contrasts sharply with the representative view held by previous generations of military leaders in Rangoon since 1948. In the 20-page hand-written letter dated 23 February 1973, sent from his jail cell in Insein prison, former Brigadier Aung Gyi who was 2<sup>nd</sup> in command in the Revolutionary Council government in 1962 expressed his acute concerns over the successful military campaigns by the Beijing-funded Burma Communist Party in northern Burma. See *Contemporary Burma-China Relations, 1948-1997*, pp.36-38.

<sup>61</sup> Helen James, "King Solomon's Judgment," in John H. Badgley, ed., *Reconciling Burma/Myanmar: Essays on U.S. Relations with Burma*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, vol.15, no. 1, March 2004. p.65.

<sup>62</sup> Without exception, politicians, strategists and diplomats in Asia agree that to be acceptable to Beijing, change in Burma must be in accord with the Chinese own long-term strategic interests.

Beijing access to the Indian Ocean where it is believed to have an interest in building a nuclear sub-marine fleet in the future; moreover, both China and India are expanding the old “Burma road” as their fast growing economies seek new trade routes less susceptible to interruption by pirates in the Straits of Malacca.

Fourth, Kipling’s old East-West divide has re-emerged due to the “principled” stance taken by the European Union over Burma’s inclusion in the Asian-Europe Summit (ASEM) held in Hanoi on October 7-8 this year. Asia’s most influential governments--Tokyo, Beijing, Jakarta, New Delhi and Bangkok—as well as little Cambodia and Laos have threatened to boycott ASEM if the EU, under pressure from the U.S. and U.K., insist on barring Rangoon from the summit.

Fifth, is it not unreasonable to expect the SPDC to capitalize on its geo-political location and resources, such as hardwood, non-ferrous metals, natural gas and oil to fend off the effect of the West’s sanctions. The SPDC has successfully built a geo-political and economic support base with neighboring states that do not welcome American unilateralism. Three nuclear powers - Russia, China and India - have adopted pragmatic policies toward Rangoon, in knowledge and technology transfer, trade, infrastructure development, and security cooperation. Even Washington’s key strategic ally - Israel - embraces the Burmese military leadership, continuing uninterrupted five decades of bi-lateral, assistance.<sup>63</sup> Israel is currently training over 100 Burmese state’s scholars in agriculture and development. No less than 600 Burmese state’s scholars in science and technology are now studying in Russia to help our country acquire nuclear technology, including building a working reactor north of Pinyinana. West Germany has helped build an arms factory in Burma. Like Japan, Israel and Yugoslavia, it has remained supportive throughout General Ne Win’s self-

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<sup>63</sup> Burma was the first non-Western country to recognize Israel’s independence after WW II. There has been unbroken cooperation between the two countries over the past 50 years. Several thousand Burmese, military personnel and civilians, have trained in Israel in many different fields including counter-intelligence, agriculture, social welfare, science and technology. Personal Communication with Louis Walisky, former Economic Advisor to the Government of the Union of Burma (1953-58), Washington, DC.

imposed isolationist rule. Today German private industry continues to invest in economic projects, including mine and gas exploration.

The real picture which emerges after examining the Burma's relations with other countries, apart from the U.S. and U.K., reveals failure by Washington in its sanctions policy. Apart from concern for the SPDC's nuclear ambitions, the United States seems not to view Burma as of strategic importance or even a potential trade partner. Noteworthy is the fact that Washington has taken a "principled" stand toward Burma on human rights and democracy, probably because it sees no strategic or economic interests in Burma: it would appear to have nothing to lose in taking its principled hard-line stance on human rights.

The result of Washington's decade-long push to isolate Rangoon is ironic and tragic: it is the United States 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 National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, and its supporters a false and unrealistic hope that the United States is prepared to squander even more political and diplomatic capital on its Burma policy.

Washington needs to use - and does use - any and all leverage it has in pursuing *real* U.S. interests in the international arena, which include trade, energy, bilateral security cooperation from other national governments supporting its strategic interests, especially the global war on terror: preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the acquisition of WMD by Islamic fundamentalist non-state actors. But human rights and democratization are American concerns – apparently not national interests; irrespective of who wins presidential elections this November, these American interests will not change. They constitute the building-blocks of U.S. foreign policy. The only difference will be how they are pursued.

Burma's generals have repeatedly called Washington's bluff, for they know that despite strident calls for reform and release of Aung San Suu Kyi, the

United States has no leverage within Burma, especially since Washington has lost credibility with other nations on issues of human rights and democratization.

In light of these several factors, it seems the NLD's heavy reliance on Washington has created the unrealistic expectation that its intervention can resolve its problems. In reality, however appealing are Aung San Suu Kyi and her election-winning NLD party, they remain locked in political stalemate with the SPDC, to the detriment of Burma's long-term progress. Neither the NLD nor Washington is ready to acknowledge this unpalatable fact.

The State Peace and Development Council has adjusted to the political realities and concluded that Washington is not going to modify its obstreperous Burma policy.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, the generals willing to break with Burma's self-imposed isolation, seem to have accepted a Burmese future devoid of meaningful interactions with the United States.

Our Free Burma Coalition has played an important role in raising media awareness, building an activist infrastructure, and initiating high profile consumer activism over the past decade. Our effort was remarkably successful in the push to increase sanctions and isolate Burma under the military rule. That our effort may have seriously delayed progress towards democracy in Burma is a bitter pill.

## **Shifting Political Activism: From the NLD to One-Dimensional Exiles**

In this section we examine the role and contributions of exiles from Burma who have become a visible force supporting the NLD's call for democratic change through ever greater sanctions, more isolation and increasingly punitive international measures.

Even compared to other exile communities, Burmese expatriates are few in number and non-existent as a voting bloc in democracies where we have taken refuge. No politician ever changes a position because he or she is worried about

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<sup>64</sup> During the May 31, 2004 meeting with one of the authors in Rangoon, both Colonel Hla Min and Brigadier Than Tun said explicitly that on its part the SPDC deemed more important to tend to the matters of internal political stability than dance to Washington's tune.

the “Burmese vote.” But in rallying behind Aung San Suu Kyi, we have found a powerful niche in the global human rights community and a powerful connection to some political establishments which have embraced us because of a variety of motives, some genuine and some self-serving. Our foreign allies include foreign ministries, the popular media, foundations, established NGOs, multi-lateral institutions and legislative bodies such as the US Congress and the UK Parliament, and perhaps most important, sympathetic students in universities around the world.

We have gained political power in part because our arrival on the world scene came at the same time as the boom of the Internet, which drastically increased our networking and organizing capabilities<sup>65</sup> and helped us gain attention for the tools we were using as well as our message. The Internet also helped us bridge the considerable distance between us and our country, and helped us play a strong secondary/support role in supporting the NLD and other opposition forces in Burma. We have also wielded considerable weight by serving as active links between the NLD as Burma’s main opposition, and its Western supporters. Most of us have suffered under the Tatmadaw’s rule and some of us were tortured in prison or by soldiers in the field; consequently we all celebrate our freedom from oppression, hopelessness and isolation. Nonetheless, many of us suffer from trauma and its psychological baggage -- as do members of every exile group that has escaped oppression.

Two things distinguish us from those who remain in Burma. First, we exiles no longer experience their daily reality. Second, we 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 conflict resolution. For us outside, it remains a theoretical exercise, while increasingly citizens within Burma complain they no longer feel connected to exiles. Many people in the country say that they can’t comprehend

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<sup>65</sup> See Zarni, “Resistance and Cyber-communities: The Internet and the Free Burma Movement”, Ann De Vaney, Stephen Gance & Ran Ma, eds., *Technology and Resistance: Digital Communications and New Coalitions Around the World*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 71-88.



the language of exile supporters who discuss Burma's problems on BBC, VOA, Radio Free Asia or All-India Radio.

## The Exiles: Promoting Democracy and Truth *the Burmese Way*

*We must be the change we want. - Gandhi*

In our zealous effort to condemn the military government in Rangoon, we have focused on how evil, heinous and outrageous the regime's behavior is, while glorifying our international effort to bring about change from abroad, and our faith in both the masses and our leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Despite noble intentions, our efforts have sadly come to mirror the media censorship practices of the military government in Rangoon. We exiles have evolved into journalists, reporters and staff writers for radio broadcast services who put spin on stories to fit the "conventional wisdom" of those formulating U.S. policy. We have urged citizens to "hold out" while we exile leaders work to "overthrow the evil regime." Too frequently, exile leaders in both media and politics have exaggerated or even fabricated stories, believing they have propaganda value in bonding with listeners inside Burma. Last year, the Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB) and the Washington-based National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) brought to the United States the two Burmese eye-witnesses who survived the May 30, 2003 attacks on the NLD leadership and its motorcade near *Depayin* village by thugs reportedly affiliated with the USDA, the military's grassroots political wing.<sup>66</sup> The two survivors testified before a Congressional Sub-Committee and presented their eye-witness accounts of what transpired during that dark day. One turned out to be a total fraud who was not even at the scene when the attacks took place, while the other was genuine. The pervasiveness of the rights abuses by the military government throughout our country has been well-documented by many independent international researchers and human rights and labor organizations. Many reliable reports by human rights and government organizations will attest to

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<sup>66</sup> For a related wire news story, see "Two Witnesses to Myanmar Violence Seek UN Protection in Bangkok," *AFP News Wire*, July 4, 2003. They also testified before Thailand's Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

the seriousness of this problem. The State Peace and Development Council itself has admitted to some of the rights abuses committed by its troops and security forces, such as the practice of forced labor. Because of the obviously brutal history, there is no need to further sensationalize the Burma story with the purpose of soliciting the world's sympathy or to further polarize the already highly fragmented society.

It is a cliché to say “the first casualty of war is truth.” Sadly, the excessive zeal of many exiles to paint the victim-hood of our people living under the authoritarian rule of SPDC pushes them to butcher facts and truths.<sup>67</sup> While clamoring for “democracy back home” many exiles do not tolerate diversity of ideas and approaches. To give an example, in what appears to be a coordinated effort to silence dissenting voices within the pro-democracy camp, the leading exiles and expatriates including Dr. Sein Win, Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin, who is Prime Minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, formally objected to the Voice of America Broadcasting Board of Governors when the VOA Burmese Service Program aired views critical of Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD.<sup>68</sup> The Prime Minister also questioned the accuracy of some of the facts which the VOA aired with specific respect to the US government involvement and encouragement of Burmese citizens to have dialogue among themselves.

Conversely, the die-hard supporters of the NLD within the Radio Free Asia Burmese Service would cover up or omit facts that may be discouraging or demoralizing to the NLD leadership and its rank and file members. To give an example, in July this year the Radio Free Asia Burmese Service broadcast a two-

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<sup>67</sup>For a typical cry of the victim-hood of NLD members and elected representatives who confront the regime, see Bo Hla-Tint, “Testimony before the 107<sup>th</sup> Session of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Committee on Human Rights of Parliamentarians,” 111<sup>th</sup> IPU Assembly, Geneva, 27 September 2004. Although factually correct, the testimony has the characteristic tone not of a revolutionary but of a victim.

<sup>68</sup>The other two dissidents who were involvement in the coordinated attempt to squash non-orthodox views within the opposition are Aung Din (a.k.a.) Chit Ko Ko of the US Campaign for Burma and Tin Maung Thaw of the now largely defunct Committee for the Restoration for the Democracy in Burma (CRDB). According to the Director of the VOA Burmese Service U Khin Maung Htay, the Board responded in writing that to broadcast different views is in accord with professional journalistic codes and the policy of the VOA. Khin Maung Htay, *Personal Communication*, September 2004.

segment interview with one of the report authors breaking the news about his one-day official trip to Rangoon where he met with representatives of the SPDC. In the broadcast interview, the RFA program omitted a key dimension of a path-breaking, if controversial, initiative to foster citizens' dialogue while the leaders remain stuck in their entrenched positions. Because the American officials involved considered the Second Track Diplomacy or Citizens' Diplomatic effort to be in line with the overall American policy of encouraging dialogue and reconciliation among the Burmese themselves, they made the trip possible by assisting both authors throughout the planning and execution phases of the initiative.<sup>69</sup>

However, the RFA interview sensationalized - and distorted deliberately - the story by making it out to be a one-man political stunt, a political rescue mission. To belabor the obvious, the editorial decision makers, as well as dissidents-cum-reporters on the staff within the RFA Burmese Service are acutely aware of the fact that the NLD has become heavily dependent on Washington in particular and on the West in general for its war of positions vis-à-vis the generals in power. Therefore, it may have made sense to their supporters in the RFA Burmese Service to cover up or distort the involvement of the United States Government in the Second Track effort not blessed by the NLD leadership. From their view, the USG involvement could potentially be construed as a sign that Washington may take a softer line toward the generals, something which they think would be demoralizing for the NLD leadership, hence the deliberate omission of facts in reporting.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> For the record, the Burmese who were informed about the trip or involved in one or all phases of its planning since January 2004 include: Dr. Alice Khin Saw Win, former physician to Aung San Suu Kyi; retired professor U Kyaw Win, a personal friend of Aung San Suu Kyi; Dr. Kyi May Kaung of the ICID-Burma; Aung Thu Nyein, Vice-chair of the Democratic Party for a New Society; Min Zaw Oo, Saw Kapi, and Dr. Myo Nyunt all of whom with the Free Burma Coalition; and Dr. Tun Kyaw Nyein and Bo Kyaw Nyein, the then members of the Burma Strategy Group of the Free Burma Coalition.

<sup>70</sup> Indeed whether Washington was encouraging leading dissidents in exile to talk directly with the generals is a serious issue for the NLD. In response to the news reporting on Zarni' trip, U Aung Shwe, Chairman of the NLD, called a meeting with NLD youth specifically to discuss what the youth leaders thought about it. Additionally, on the notice board at the NLD headquarters in Rangoon, the officials posted a copy of the transcript of the subsequent RFA news story where an unidentified State Department official responded with a concise answer that the trip was not made

Likewise, the Burmese exiles with the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma broadcast news that has propaganda value, without checking any facts, thereby violating standard journalistic codes. Recently, Htay Zaw, a former NLD organizer now residing in Japan and son of the nationally acclaimed poet *Kolay Inn-wa Gon-ye*, circulated an email corrective in Burmese language, responding to the factually incorrect, but politically motivated broadcast story about *Da-dar-oo*, the town he knew intimately as his family came from the area. Further, he appealed to his fellow exiles who have now become journalists to not play fast and loose with the truth in reporting.<sup>71</sup>

When individual exiles speak their mind or reach a divergent conclusion, most exile groups controlling the networks work to marginalize the criticism through slanderous personal attacks, and by ostracizing “deviants” to maintain the prevailing orthodoxy. For instance, in direct response to the FBC Statement dated 9 December 2003 welcoming, in principle, the National Convention as a potential forum for discussing our country’s deadlock between the NLD and SPDC, many exiles accused the FBC of capitulating to “the enemy” because they thought the FBC’s conditional welcome would put pressure on the NLD leadership and they by no means wish to see the NLD compromising with the generals.<sup>72</sup> The email

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at the request of the USG. *Personal communication with an NLD friend in Rangoon*, July 2004. Similarly, the Chiang Mai-based US Government-funded *Irrawaddy* magazine in Thailand also ran a brief story in its Intelligence, stressing the U.S. government’s denial of its support and involvement in the initiative. See the hard copy, August-September 2004 issue of *Irrawaddy*, Vol. 12, No. 8.

<sup>71</sup> There have been repeated incidents of reporting of false or incorrect news by the DVB, which it has to retract when someone presents factual evidence countering the broadcast news.

<sup>72</sup> Now the West is calling on the SPDC to invite back the NLD and other parties to the NC, see “Chairman’s Statement on the Fifth Asia-Europe Meeting, Hanoi, October 8-9, 2004”, Press Release dated October 9, 2004. Also see “4 October 2004 Press Statement by Adam Ereli, Deputy

list serves are chronically littered with verbal abuses, below-the-belt personal slanders, and outright demands to expel anyone who questions the policy and wisdom of the NLD leadership, especially Aung San Suu Kyi. Legitimate criticisms toward the failures, shortcomings and inefficacy of the NLD leadership are, without fail, met with attempts to intimidate and cow, including open death threats posted on public list serve.<sup>73</sup> It's darkly ironic that many dissidents adopt the behavior and thought patterns of those they struggle against. *To promote democracy and truth, they abandon democracy and truth.*

The politics among exiles is too frequently based on old memories and emotions, particularly our feelings for kith and kin, as well as hatred for the regime in power. Although few of us are economically or politically successful, most of us are better off than our countrymen, with greater opportunity for self-fulfillment than possible among our fellow citizens inside Burma. While the conflict remains alive in our minds and memories, distance has given most exiles time to become more detached. This has afforded us the luxury of pushing for idealist and dangerously unrealistic solutions. Unfortunately, most of us have chosen the simple route of clamoring for change, irrespective of the day-to-day realities experienced by ordinary citizens of Burma. We have tended to feel great satisfaction and a rise in social status through our principled opposition to the SPDC. This satisfaction derives from “doing the right thing,” regardless of

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Spokesperson, the United States State Department”, Distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Available at <http://usinfo.state.gov>

<sup>73</sup> Both authors of this report have received death threats, have remained subjects of personal attacks by exiles from all walks of life - doctors, engineers, assembly-line workers, academics, and so on - who will not tolerate any word of critique or criticisms of the policies and strategies of the NLD, as well as demonstrably ineffectual leadership of its leadership.

whether it produces the desired and intended outcome, and sometimes even when it even produces the opposite.

Now consider some factors that help explain this self-satisfaction, and the political assumptions that under-gird our push for change through pressure and punishment of the regime in power. By embracing belief in change through international pressure and mass mobilization, without exploring other alternatives, material and financial benefits accrue to some dissidents. For example, two dozen members of our Parliament, MPs elected in 1990, fled to escape possible prison terms and scattered across the globe – mostly to Australia, Thailand and the United States. Each receives a small monthly stipend from some Western governments, distributed through the exile government headed by Dr. Sein Win, Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin and himself an MP-elect, who keeps an office in Washington, D.C. Moreover, hundreds of dissident families living along the Thai-Burmese border survive with foreign assistance, living in difficult conditions as “the illegal” on Thai soil.<sup>74</sup> While only a small percentage of dissidents earn their living by doing exile politics full-time, most receive some funding through donor governments – the United States, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Scandinavian countries, as well as the European Union- mostly through NGOs and governmental propaganda organizations. For example, the Burma Project, the Southeast Asia Initiative, and the Open Society Institute are all sustained by the George Soros Foundation. Invariably, they advocate the NLD line and express reverence for Aung San Suu Kyi. As a consequence, human rights groups throughout the West have come to pin all hope for change in Burma on her policies and initiatives.

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<sup>74</sup> The border-based dissidents have to spend an enormous amount of time thinking about trendy projects trendy and “sexy” in the view of powerful Western funding agencies. Pained by the difficult situation in which they find themselves, our less fortunate fellow exiles have bitterly complained to us about profoundly unequal power relations that have come to characterize their dealings with the Western donors, NGOs, etc. Also see Khin Maung Soe, “Burma in the News Interview: General Saw Bo Mya of the Karen National Union on KNU-SPDC Talks,” *Voice of America Burmese Service*, February 26, 2004 (transcript of the broadcast interview).

## Exiles, Political Symbioses, and Manipulations<sup>75</sup>

Missing is any critical analysis of where the NLD (and its *primarily* human rights agenda) fits in with global ideological and geopolitical trends. This leaves the leading exiles vulnerable to manipulation by non-Burmese organizations which use them for their own ends. Human rights, environmental, and other international/Western NGOs, as well as powerful governments seem to use our fellow exiles to advance their own ideological and financial interests.<sup>76</sup> To give a concrete example, during the first-ever Burma Day Conference sponsored by the European Commission (EC) and held at the EC in Brussels on 8 October 2003, the head of the Thailand-based international consortium of Burmese refugee relief organization gave a power point presentation on the historical overview of the Burmese refugee situation and yet chose not to touch on the central issue of how aid delivery was made possible by the Burmese armed organizations.

Everyone familiar with the Burmese refugee situation on the Thai-Burmese borders knows two things: that the Karen National Liberation Army troops provide armed escorts to relief workers and aid them in their aid delivery to various refugee and IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) or IDP populations and that security is a central concern for relief workers, not to mention refugees who live in remote camps. The relief NGO director did not even make mention of the role of the armed resistance groups in his organization's relief effort. Nor did he bother to say that Burmese villagers, refugees and IDPs themselves, as well as their brethren in the armed resistance groups, were his partners who actually go out to "the field" and collect raw data, putting their lives on the line. Instead, he

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<sup>75</sup> An in-depth analysis on this topics, see Min Zaw Oo, *Illusions and Realities: The Free Burma Movement* (forthcoming FBC report).

<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, when asked if the United States would be open to granting political recognition – not even arms - to our armed resistance, some senior staffers in Congress said to the authors that the United States does not support armed struggles. This answer was given *after* the U.S. invaded Iraq on unproven claims of Saddam's WMD threat. Rarely have Burmese dissidents been invited to present alternative views or comment on tried and failed strategies and policies. Those who are brought in as "dissident leaders" operate within a limited policy framework. Even when some have expressed interest in new ideas, those dissidents with prior relationships to the donors and powerful government officials have typically blocked or marginalized attempts to generate fresh approaches.

conveniently went on to make policy recommendations, extolling the virtues of the Alternative Roadmap for Democracy crafted by the Brussels-based Burma opposition group, namely Euro-Burma Office, and endorsed by the Thailand-based Ethnic Nationalities Strategic and Coordinating Committee (ENSCC).<sup>77</sup> The same refugee relief organization is said to oppose the current attempts by Western governments to resettle significant numbers of refugees from the Thai-Burmese border to third countries. The rationale implicit in this quiet opposition is that having a large number of refugees is a good political issue to discredit the Burmese military government.<sup>78</sup> Never mind the fact that life in refugee camps holds out no hope for their future and their families.

This problem of Western and Western-based NGOs putting spins favorable to their organizational, ideological and personal agendas is not isolated. It is structural in the sense that regardless of who is in charge, the NGOs will be first and foremost answerable to their funders, patrons and benefactors - as opposed to our country's national interests or our people's collective welfare.

To further illustrate this structural problem, the Burmese-born, New York-based director of the Burma Project and Southeast Asia Initiative at George Soros' Open Society Institute in New York categorically stated where her primary loyalty was when she pointedly remarked: "I am a Soros' employee. And I can't do anything that would displease George (Soros)."<sup>79</sup> It is natural that individuals, Burmese or foreigners, will not bite the hand that feeds them and that they will put the policies and priorities of their organizations before our country's needs and interests. But what is problematic is that by virtue of access to resources and networks, these individuals come to wield an inordinate amount of power within

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<sup>77</sup> One of the authors was present at the same Burma Day Conference where the NGO director gave his power point presentation.

<sup>78</sup> Personal communication with a Western diplomat, June 2004.

<sup>79</sup> Both report authors were present on the occasion when the Burma Project Director made known where her primary allegiance lies. One of the authors organized a 3-day strategy meeting of all prominent exiles at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia in February of 1999. Also in attendance were: Dr. Sein Win, Zaw Oo, Dr. Thaung Htun and Harn Yawngwe, all with the Burmese government in exile; the late Dr. Chao Tzang Yawngwe, Dr. Vum Som, U Kyaw Win, Dr. Marjolaine Tin Nyo (or Law Yone), Dr. Kyi May Kaung, and Dr. Maran Laraw, all independents.



our democracy movement. And they do use it to press their organizational and personal agendas in all Burma meetings.

Take, for instance, the actual encounter between a Karen National Union (KNU) leader and a Washington-based Program Officer of the National Endowment for Democracy, created by the Reagan Administration with the view toward weakening or infiltrating leftist organizations in the former Eastern Bloc. Prompted by the rumors that the KNU-led National Council of the Union of Burma [NUCB] in Thailand was seeking international support for armed resistance within Burma, the American program officer made a direct threat to his grantee - a 60-year old, seasoned revolutionary leader - that NCUB could lose the NED funding if the rumors were substantiated.<sup>80</sup> It is starkly ironic that a junior member of the U.S. foreign policy establishment would make such a threat to a Burmese revolutionary leader on grounds that the KNU and NCUB might step up its armed resistance for freedom and self-determination while the United States was carrying out massive “surgical air strikes,” inflicting on Iraq massive “collateral damage.”

The same program officer had also unveiled the threat of funding cuts to the editor of *Irrawaddy*, the Chiang Mai-based, pro-opposition magazine, because the Burmese editor was penning and publishing editorials and articles highly critical of the United States invasion of Iraq.

There is, however, a danger in suggesting that the assistance Burmese dissidents, within Burma and in exile, have received from the West is based on sinister motives. Certainly one needs to avoid drawing the unfair and untrue generalization that all Western governments and NGOS supporting the call for human rights in Burma are driven only by self-interest and self-righteousness. The long and drawn out “Burmese revolution” has turned the Thai-Burmese border into “an NGO growth zone” while enticing Burmese dissident organizations to transform themselves into project-based NGOs.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The Burmese participants in that meeting shared with both authors this sordid affair. The report authors picked up the three-members of the Burmese delegation immediately after the meeting at the NED building in Washington in the fall of 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Khin Maung Soe’s VOA interview with General Bo Mya, September 2003.

Part of the problem lies in their refusal to be open to alternative ideas and approaches. None have been entertained seriously. These powerful players disregard any idea or course of action not in accord with established orthodoxy - democratic change through sanctions, isolation, threat, and punishment. This is established wisdom that has demonstrably failed as a policy tool in accomplishing stated policy objectives.<sup>82</sup> The closed minds of influential policy circles in Washington and London does more harm than good to all efforts to bring about constructive change in Burma.

### **Prospects for Change**

*Will the military leadership be the first to blink under the current intense political climate, with the United States stepping up its efforts or polemic, and seeking ways to get the UN Security Council to act?*

Before one can answer this question even in the abstract, one needs to know the nature of the regime, the dynamics within the power structure and the predisposition of its leaders, as well as the officer corps. A significant percentage of the *Tatmadaw* voted for NLD candidates in the elections in 1990, but this is no longer a sufficient reason to assume the conflict between the NLD and the government to be between the top leaders. The long-standing “cold war” between these two antagonists has polarized not just the two organizations, but the entire society; creating two states-of-mind divisible under two opposing ideologies. While the NLD has evolved into a party with an international standing, the military government today is substantially different from the organization the NLD ran against in winning the election 14 years ago. The military government has evolved by design and by circumstance.

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<sup>82</sup> Former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, an influential supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi and a prime mover regarding U.S. sanctions policy toward Burma, told one of the authors that U.S. sanctions have not worked because no other nation has joined the United States’ push for more sanctions against Rangoon. But she advocates stepping up efforts for multilateral sanctions as a remedy, not engagement. Personal Communication, Georgetown University, March 2004.

## The Military Junta and Its Governance Structure

Consider this simple analysis of where the current government draws its support and how it exercises power: its power, like any authoritarian rule, comes from coercion through the armed forces; and its instrument of control is the state security apparatuses, the intelligence and police networks. Fear is the most dominant feature of the existing social order. We believe this to be true.

However it is fitting to recall U Nu's observation that governments which come to power through coups "*do not derive their authority lawfully from the people but have to seize it with the aid of arms, they begin to suspect everyone they see, and the need for repressive measures overshadows their minds to the exclusion of thought for the prosperity of the people.*"<sup>83</sup>

He, like most exiles, had a natural propensity to view authoritarian military government as a monolith. But a closer look reveals that 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 subordinate officers build their careers through their loyalties. Burmese culture, civil and military, is riven by such personal affinities, why should our military be any different?

Power not only tends to corrupt; it also has divisive impact on those who wield or attempt to "acquire" it. This was true of civilian politicians within the Burmese nationalist movement after gaining independence, recall how Nu, Tin, Kyaw Nyein, and Ba Swe – split into a "mad scramble for power" in the 1950s. This was also true of successive generations of *Tatmadaw* leaders since the Burma Independence Army was founded in 1941. Their major difference with the civil political parties was the military's discipline and functionally cohesive organization, which absorbed the shock and ripples of internecine struggles between men of ambition with different national visions and divergent interests.

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<sup>83</sup> Premier U Nu, "A Word to Our Defense Forces," Address at the formal opening of the War Office on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 1948. See Thakin Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy: Translation of Selected Speeches by PM U Nu*, (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1949), p. 105.

However effective in performance, or better endowed financially, or mission-oriented and cohesive when compared with their democratic opposition, the SPDC remains competing groups of officers joined together by fear of a common demise. Their “National Ideology” is instilled in successive crops of officers graduating from the Defence Services Academy and the Officers’ Training School.<sup>84</sup> In pious declarations, it states that *Tatmadaw* is the only truly national institution with the people’s interests at heart. Yet, it is a dynamic power equilibrium, maintained by competing interests among different camps with divergent schools of strategic thought, in terms of how to maintain cope with a modernizing society, yet eventually relax their grip.

It is entirely correct to assume that military’s power is concentrated solely at the top of the chain of command. A handful of generals constitute the ruling inner circle, but they cannot exercise their power without a vast apparatus of control, punishment and rewards. Those within the apparatus execute orders from above, motivated by incentives and also ridden by fear of persecution.

However, the top leadership allows varying degrees of autonomy for their regional commanders, in combat operations as well as in the economic realm. Bribery and corruption have become integral to governance. Indeed, soldiers with guns cannot be controlled easily from above only through coercion alone. Fear may be a sufficient tool for social control among unarmed citizens, but men [and women] with ambition need also to quench their thirst for control over their own lives if their loyalty and services are to sustain the overall operation, expansion and preservation of the governing system.

*Tatmadaw* has different chains of command, rather than a single command center from which all orders originate and get relayed downward. A case in point is the top leadership who handle Burma’s international and foreign affairs. They appear to genuinely wish to end or drastically reduce the use of forced labor. They do so because they are assigned to deflect international criticisms and fend off condemnation. For them, the practice of forced labor offers no benefits as

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<sup>84</sup> See Ba Than, *The Roots of the Revolution: A Brief History of the Defence Services of the Union of Buma and the Ideals for which They Stand*, (Rangoon: Defence Services Historical Institute).

crisis managers within the government. They may even recognize – and publicly admit – that this deplorable practice is structural and linked with ethnic conflict and the attempt to put it down militarily.<sup>85</sup> However, local and regional military commanders in regiments and townships often see forced labor usage as essential to accomplish missions assigned from above. Forced labor offers a way to project their power locally, or use it to satisfy sadistic urges. Most probably, economic and financial returns accrue to officers using forced labor, because it has become an established tradition to bribe superior officers with money or expensive gifts earned through the work of unpaid laborers. Central command must struggle against a tendency by regional officers to become warlords vying for wealth, career mobility, and power.

Aside from these dark aspects of corruption, members of Tatmadaw and civilians within the many different branches of government, operate within the same ideological framework. They are trying to serve the interests of the nation. Perhaps too frequently, they define the nation's interests in a self-serving way that equates their personal interests with those of the nation.

## Mechanisms of Controlling Civilians under Military Rule

The military leadership in Rangoon now assumes that the West will retain sanctions and try to step up pressure against it. In the words of one Southeast Asia-based Burma analyst, the generals have adjusted their expectations and strategic calculations to this reality – that the world's sole superpower views them only with venom and hatred. For them, the price of “keeping the lid on” is small when measured against the cost of the country's unraveling if some externally induced change process gets out of hand. Seen from this perspective, the choice to continue resistance against the sanctions is the only viable alternative to caving into the NLD's demand to accept the changes endorsed by Washington.

To keep the lid on, so to speak, the military government has paralyzed and choked the NLD as a political party in terms of its ability to mount an effective mass mobilization or foment a mass revolt against the military government.

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<sup>85</sup> See *Journal of Democracy*, 2003, 24(1), 10-11.

Under the current arrangement there are sufficient safety valves open, especially for the characteristically restive youth. Signs abound that instead of politicizing and channeling their discontent into revolutionary activities, the public is adjusting to the economic demands of living under military rule. The popular culture and society is shifting toward cooperation with the regime to improve their lot. And the regime is responding with various rewards to those civilians prepared to accept the status quo. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) is one such mechanism, a mass party [with 16 million members] pressed upon every village and town as an institutional solution for discontented citizens. It has become an instrument of control, as well as an avenue for upward mobility.. Educational and study tours abroad offer a way to expose USDA members and leaders to international affairs, as well as a significant reward for “good, constructive behavior.”.

The previous Burma Socialist Program Party [BSPP] government of General Ne Win covertly encouraged growth of an underground economy, a “Black Market,” to ease the frustrations of economic hardship while shutting off society from the outside world. In contrast, the SPDC has legalized economic activities considered “illegal” under the BSPP regime, including the cross-border trade. It now turns a blind eye to endemic corruption among the officialdom, viewing it as entrepreneurship and private sector development, a culturally embraced means of making ends meet for State employees. The regime’s formula of control is much more complex than use of coercion and fear, although these two elements are part of the system’s management practice.

To put it simply, the senior generals have placated the ambitions of its “men on horseback” and their families by allowing them degrees of administrative and revenue-collecting authority and special privileges, while encouraging the citizenry to develop private businesses. Corruption and devolution of administrative decisions are not by-products of a government trying to preserve itself; they are the very instruments of governance the generals purposefully implement. Consequently, these important changes within the military need to be understood.

## The Evolutionary Changes within the Military Elite

In analyzing the military establishment, one must not overlook its adaptive capabilities. Ideologically, there is still a common thread between different generations of military elite: the cultivated belief that *Tatmadaw* alone can serve the nation as a uniquely national institution capable of safeguarding Burma's sovereignty and defending her territorial integrity. However, how the various military factions relate to the nation and what they each perceive as its interests is changing as individuals retire. They have fostered a corporate mentality with the dimensions of a distinct social class through its own institutions – schools for the children of the rank and file members, academies and universities in different fields, technological institutes, their own hospitals, their own TV station and many of their own publications. But it would be a mistake to treat the present generation of military officers the same as those who served General Ne Win in the BSPP government (1962-88). Although many of the top brass served under him, the current political milieu and ideological outlook toward the outside world is vastly different. During the socialist period, isolationism and distrust of capitalism were hallmarks of the officer corps. This was reflective of General Ne Win's personal outlook and disdain for the capital-holding class and institutions. In contrast, many of the current officer corps desire interaction with the wider world, at least with other Asian countries. Some generals have become marketing salesmen seeking foreign investment and business opportunities – for the country and for themselves. Technological advancements around the world such as satellite dishes and the Internet have also made inroads in today's Burma. Large entourages of Burmese officers are seen in Asian capitals accompanying their leaders when they attend regional meetings and sports events, as well as state visits to Beijing, New Delhi, Tokyo, Singapore, Manila, Jakarta, Islamabad, and Bangkok. Several thousand young military officers are now studying in Israel, Russia, China, Philippines, Germany, and Australia.

Indeed, the military leadership has developed many adaptive capabilities since General Saw Maung seized the reins of power in his bloody crackdown of the uprisings in September 1988. Since then, the senior leadership has been drawn towards two strategies of modernization, which 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. They have scarcely traveled outside Burma and are more cautious about foreign influences. The "internationalists" absorb new ideas and study other governments, both authoritarian and pluralistic, and seek the best of possible worlds, both long-term institutional survival and dominance, as well as rapid economic growth. More confident, they are less daunted by the progress. The more insular officers, by contrast, are less prepared and less confident because they are less exposed to the outside world. For them, it seems a harsh jungle inhabited by powerful and malevolent powers, led by the United States. In spite of its relative small size, Burma to them is still a center of the universe. Their attitude resembles that of American politicians who speak proudly of not needing passports – they have no need for the rest of the world!

Many dissidents, some diplomats, and several Burma watchers have written off this 'split theory' as disinformation the military promotes to buy time and patience for the snail pace of change. However, no astute student of Burma's military politics can miss this important development within *Tatmadaw*. Even if the NLD could develop enough capability to call for a general strike, or other dissident organizations could tie their hands through non-violence, the task of renovating the existing order can never succeed without the cooperation of the outward-looking and confident military officers. They currently have a siege mentality - that the powerful West has unfairly singled them out with repeated threats of "regime change." This reaction is widely shared by officers who are outward-looking as well as their more insular brothers, and potential reformists



within the military feel sanctions force them to use their talents and new-found confidence for repressive rather than constructive purposes.

Also, although no serious dissident groups now threaten Burma's sovereignty, the top generals are taking no chances – hence their high level of surveillance and military build-up. Their arms purchases extend from Israel, Pakistan, Poland, Sweden, Serbia & Montenegro, South Africa, Singapore, Russia, China and possibly even to North Korea. Some generals in the insular camp may even entertain nuclear ambitions, reasoning that is the only language Washington understands, witness the six-power talks on North Korean issues hosted by Beijing, solely because North Korea purports to own the Bomb.

Increasingly, the SPDC is gaining trade and aid from key neighbors – China, India, Bangladesh and the nine other ASEAN nations--as well as Australia and Japan. It has active relations with Israel, Pakistan, France, Germany and Russia, so it no longer needs the United States or European Union for regime survival. Unless the Burmese military commits a clear cut, well-publicized campaign of *ethnocide*, its neighbors will not likely abandon the military government in Rangoon.

*If the military government has successfully formed alliances, how has the NLD and the ethnic minority opposition fared in building alliances?*

## **Politics of Resistance Alliance in Burma since 1988:**

### **NLD as a Mirage?**

Repeated strategic failures and leadership inadequacies by pro-democracy and ethnic minority organizations constitute a fundamental structural weakness blocking our push towards democracy. These failures can not be easily addressed or remedied, considering that political correctness - not critical political analysis or honest self-reflection - reigns in Burma's democracy politics. The stage is set for continuing deadlock. The decisions our leading organizations and umbrella groups have made and the ideas they pursue have had serious consequences.

Forming and sustaining alliances among pro-democracy organizations is a worthy goal. For that reason, the alliance groups and their efforts at unanimous

support for the NLD were embraced by the international community, particularly those sympathizers within Burma's pro-democracy movement, who eventually introduced a concept calling for "tripartite dialogue."

If one had to simplify our complex political setting in one sentence, it would read: *Tatmadaw* has allied itself with ex-members of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB),<sup>86</sup> most visibly the Wa, while the ethnic resistance movement of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) joined hands with those elected members of parliament who fled to their "liberated zones" after the 1990 elections were ignored by the junta. Historically speaking, the situation is much more problematic, for alliance politics in Burma has amounted to little more than a cosmetic showcase concealing fractions and temporary coalitions.

As the ethnic minorities became increasingly peripheral – both to the mainstream course of politics in Burma, and to the central government in particular – the resistance movement became peripheral in the frontier areas. It need not have turned out this way, for there was a period that constituted a new dawn for change in Burma. There was high anticipation for dramatic change following the democracy uprising and turbulent events from 1988 - 1990. Students and activists fled the cities to join ethnic minorities armies in their "liberated zones" on Burma's frontiers after General Saw Maung's coup in September 1988. It was a historic moment with promise for democracy, but it turned into a false-hope within the resistance movement. To understand the opposition movement to the fullest extent possible, one must comprehend the failures within the context of alliance politics on the border.

After Aung San Suu Kyi became a "larger-than-life" leader, thanks to the international media and myriad of support groups including our coalition, the government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma [NCGU] enjoyed her blessings, so both new and old outlawed groups rallied

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<sup>86</sup> Later, the *Tatmadaw* also gained more allies through the ceasefire groups and the break-away minority organizations groups all whom constitute the "Group of 17" in the Constitutional Convention.

behind NCGUB.<sup>87</sup> It was the only group to claim legitimacy outside of Burma. Consequently, most opposition partners coalesced behind the NLD.

However, the Karen National Union [KNU] emerged as an alternative center of attraction, for in addition to having the oldest opposition army and political organization, it also sheltered the opposition newcomers after the uprising, it had stood tall against the military since independence. But since the NLD won the election and other opposition groups joined them to make a common cause—our slogans became jargon, such as democracy, legitimacy, tripartite dialogue, national reconciliation, and federal union. On the surface, the opposition groups seemed united in supporting the NLD, which became the center for international support in all forms. Internally, various minority groups under the SPDC's control, as well as those outlawed and based within the "liberated zones," unflinchingly supported the NLD. Yet, it consistently refused association with the outlawed groups. Recently released statements and declarations reveal the nature of this alliance, from the vantage of those opposition groups based along the borders, especially the KNU.

In 1996 Gen. Tamalar Baw and P'doh Mahn Sha led the KNU delegation twice to Moulmein for talks with no success. Following the failed negotiations, the military government launched massive military offensives against the Karens. Most of the time these have been against Karen villages that are in the KNU controlled areas. Even during these darkest hours of the KNU, neither the NLD as an organization nor any of its leaders made no mention of their support for the KNU or the political path KNU has taken. *There has never been any direct contact between the KNU leadership and the NLD's policymakers.* Since 1990, the presumed rationale for the NLD to not have direct contact with the KNU was because the KNU was considered an outlawed, armed "insurgent organization" and the NLD was a legitimately elected political party. When the SPDC (then SLORC) contacted the KNU directly for talks, the NLD, as a dominant political party, could have requested that the SPDC give it an opportunity to meet with the

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<sup>87</sup> Between 1995 and 2003, the FBC printed and distributed literally thousands of postcards, T-shirts, wall posters of various sizes, and several major websites to promote Aung San Suu Kyi as a symbol for concerned citizens around the world to rally behind.

KNU in the interest of resolving the country's long standing armed conflict and ethnic issues. But, it failed to make such a strategic move.

The NLD leadership has chosen not to show any public support, solidarity or even appreciation for the armed resistance groups, or for their attempts to find solutions to pressing issues confronting their communities. These failures are of national importance, and are perhaps too sensitive for some of our allied organizations to even discuss. However the NLD may also have denied any public support for the KNU out of fear that the military government would be extremely sensitive to any sign a symbolic alliance between the mainstream NLD and ethnic minority groups, ceasefire or armed.<sup>88</sup>

### National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB): In the Shadow of the Mirage

There is also this distinguished group: the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which was formed at the headquarters of Karen National Union (KNU) in December 1990 and led by Dr. Sein Win, who remains the only exile leader blessed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, his first cousin.<sup>89</sup> The group drew a very distinct line between the coalition government, comprised of elected members of parliament, and the DAB. This new political alignment, again, was rather misleading. The groups along the borders, non-Burman ethnic groups or otherwise, had voluntarily promoted the NCGUB as their staunch alliance group to advocate their cause internationally on their behalf. The groups along the border areas recognized readily the NCGUB parliamentarians' claim to

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<sup>88</sup> See Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (London: Zed Books, 1999, Second Updated Edition), pp.439-440.

<sup>89</sup> This is an unspoken, but commonly accepted fact among all dissident groups and supporting Western governments. More than one messenger to and from Aung San Suu Kyi and dissidents in exile shared with the authors that the NLD leader stressed that Dr. Sein Win would be the one to support and to rally behind in the advent she was under house arrest or jailed. There is a widely shared conclusion among dissidents, both within and outside Burma, as well as the Western patrons of Burma's democratic movement, that Dr. Sein Win is not cut for the leadership position he has occupied since 1992. The top leadership decision to anoint her cousin the alternative revolutionary leader is one of the greatest tragedies of our collective efforts to bring about change in Burma. This is little more than an act of nepotism the institutionalization of which we are fighting.

“mandate from the people.” But the NCGUB, like the NLD, failed to reciprocate the alliance support it received from the groups on the ground. It was a strategic failure that impacted the “movement” as a whole, far more than simply an organizational weakness, because few groups along the border had opportunities to travel internationally for advocacy or fundraising purposes, whereas the NCGUB has enjoyed that advantage since establishing itself in Washington, D.C. in 1995.

The NCGUB had consistently presented itself as a group of elected members of parliament and therefore has legitimacy to represent Burma, but it failed in two areas: to view the problems strategically and not just morally;<sup>90</sup> or to present Burma’s problems both comprehensively and realistically. Its over-reliance on the supremacy of the parent NLD leadership, and the international recognition of Aung San Suu Kyi, who in turn had only severely restricted connection with outside world, was a self-defeating policy that the NCGUB has failed to recognize. Its political calculations have centered on a single icon, rather than on action on the ground. Indeed the affiliation between the NCGUB and other groups along the border has been very superficial.

Most seriously, the ideological conflict at the root - namely the unresolved question of political relations between non-Burman ethnic groups with any Burman-dominated central government and the State - has never been addressed constructively and strategically by the parties involved. Over the past 30 years since the late Premier Nu and his deputies launched their armed resistance under the banner of the Parliamentary Democracy Party in the late 1960s, successive waves of resistance to the central (military) government in Rangoon have collapsed without resolving the issue. One key factor that destroyed previous attempts at a unified front against military rule was the issue of self-determination. In 1972, U Nu and his Burman armed resistance leaders refused to assign equal political weight to the issues of democratization and ethnic self-determination as long as non-Burman armed resistance movements were led by

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<sup>90</sup> Even the so-called ‘higher moral ground’ is questionable, because it does not lead to the solution, but merely gives a sense of self-fulfillment.

the KNU and other minority armed organizations. This stubbornness caused the alliance politics effort to be abandoned by all parties, followed by collapse of U Nu's armed resistance.<sup>91</sup>

The NLD believes and advocates that 'democratic principles' must be the foundation for resolution of Burma's political and ethnic problems,<sup>92</sup> reflecting the mainstream opinion among Burman majority dissidents. Aung San Suu Kyi remarked, "*Once you have democratic institutions, you have the proper means of conflict resolution;*"<sup>93</sup> however, Martin Smith, in "Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity," writes that "*(F)or such reasons, NLD officials never publicly accepted the deliberations at the National Convention nor the ceasefire agreements, which, they claimed, were secretive and the result of discussions between armed protagonists.*"<sup>94</sup>

For ethnic minorities, especially for the armed resistance groups, the NLD's rigid adherence to a democratic principle which enshrines their dominance offers no glimmer of hope for their war-devastated communities. Further, this principle has little relevance to the day-to-day life of ethnic minorities, especially those in the armed conflict zones. People in active conflict facing landmines and ambushes want the bloody conflict to stop at any cost. Democratic principles do not have a place in war zones where people are looking for a place to hide or an exit route to run for their lives. For these people, anything that would make their lives a little easier – which is no less than ending the war – has to be their first priority. It also seems rather clear that for the majority of our minorities, and for the general population in Burma, talk of democracy matters less than the pressing need to stop the bloody conflict, end the deadlock, and vitalize the economy. Be it parliamentary democracy or State paternalism, most Burmese will readily accept any government that does what it should do for the people – create a situation where normalcy is restored and human security is guaranteed. Most

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<sup>91</sup> See Tin Maung Win, *Politician and Politics*, (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Khit Pyaing), pp. 465-470.

<sup>92</sup> Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 439.

<sup>93</sup> Far Eastern Economic Review, May 7, 1998. Cited in Smith, p. 439.

<sup>94</sup> Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 439. (Italics added).

certainly, an “endless state of war” is not a foundation upon which to install democracy.

Our opposition movement is plagued by fundamental dissonance among principal organizations and their constituent communities, with alliances build on convenience and political correctness. It can not - and has not – achieved any desired outcome. Perhaps the only fruit Burmese alliance politics has produced is to begin discussions of federalism as a way for peaceful coexistence in our multi-ethnic country.

Owing in significant part to the NLD’s inability to either end the country’s main political deadlock, or sustain the initial mass movement, which could potentially remove the SPDC from power, support for, and belief in, the NLD to deliver the goods has declined seriously among ethnic resistance organizations. The minorities who gave unequivocal support to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD did so not simply to remove the SPDC or the military regime, but with great expectations of resolving the problem politically rather than militarily. That is probably the area where NLD has failed the most.

There really has never been any great expectation that the NLD would be the messiah or advocate for the ethnic minorities, but its legitimacy might have bridged the gap between the ruling junta and the many opposition minorities. That genuine hope was never close to being realized.

## Does the Mirage Really Carry Any Water?

The precariousness of Burma’s political struggles over the past five decades gives no clear indication as to what can be expected positively. Although the country had been closed for 26 years, owing to General Ne Win’s isolationist policies, Burma increasingly and undeniably has been reintegrated into the greater region of Asia and enjoys a significant exposure to the outside world, in spite of the West’s attempts to keep Burma isolated. Yet, the stage is set to keep the deadlock in place for the foreseeable future. We have offered some of the evidence that the failures and flaws are attributable to all parties involved –

strategically or otherwise – and clearly all parties must bear responsibility to break the deadlock.

The failures have not been because of the lack of common interests, or the absolute impossibility for alliance relations, but for want of a strategy, ineffective leadership, and distrust among groups and individuals. The State Law and Restoration Council (SLORC), the predecessor of the SPDC, had systematically dismantled each alliance group, by taking apart its forces through their cease-fire process. The insurgent armies had no defense against such an attack, and the NDF suffered greatly and eventually becoming a barely surviving alliance organization. To be sure, entering into a cease-fire agreement was not necessarily a cause of failure in alliance relationship; but they failed to envisage an end-game scenario that would accommodate the realities on the ground after each member of the alliance had weakened the NDF. It eventually paralyzed the organization.

The discrepancies between the conclusions drawn by each group – the ruling regime, the NLD, the NCGUB, the non-Burman ethnic groups – explain why the situation has been in a deadlock for so long. While the ruling regime appeared to think that the KNU was trying to gain international support by allying itself with the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi; yet, on the one hand, the NLD did not regard the KNU as anything more than an outlawed armed protagonist. And the regime believed the KNU was trying to persuade the ceasefire groups to re-enter armed resistance when the KNU hosted an ethnic nationalities meeting known as Mae Tha Raw Hta seminar, it was actually the occasion when debates first took place within the KNU as to how to redefine the strategy of the Karen struggle.

### **Ethnic Conflict in Burma: Politics of Historical Memories**

We have just demonstrated how enormous are the difficulties that exist in forging alliance between the dominant Burmans and the country's ethnic minorities. Clearly the continuing conflict in Burma is not simply fought in terms



of restoring democracy and human rights. It must be emphasized that there is a deeper politics of historical memories, which continues to serve as one of the biggest obstacles to national reconciliation.

Each minority community needs to retain its sense of self, its collective memory, yet the government's vision of the Burmese nation-state, they have come to view as colonial power. It is radically different from what their own communal and ethnic memories teach them. Should any one group operate with racial or ethnic superiority – as Burman Buddhists have often done – it is certain to trigger deep resentment and forceful, dysfunctional expression of ethno-nationalisms of the most intense kind. The value of memories, like anything that is human and socially constructed, has its limits. When two competing memories collide, as it were, the reliance on memories sets back the clock of history (of a nation) to day one of independence, where the primordial sentiments surge. It is no longer fruitful to use the past events or memories as a guide.

Unfortunately, it is inconceivable that these differences in memories can be sorted out in any mutually satisfactory way, given the sorry state of hardened ethnic distrust and irreconcilable versions of these memories among different ethnic communities each of whom view Burma as their ancestral home.<sup>95</sup>

For instance, the military leaders and the great majority of Burmans share a belief that the present day Burma developed in a linear fashion straight from the founding of the first Burmese kingdom at the central plains of Pagan in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>96</sup> Only the British colonization of the Burman Kingdom disrupted this

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<sup>95</sup> For an excellent, concise treatment of Burma with specific reference to intense ethno-nationalisms-driven political conflict both during the parliamentary democracy regime and the early days of General Ne Win's rule, see Clifford Geertz (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, New York: BasicBooks, 1973, pp. 286-289.

<sup>96</sup> Burma's best known historian Than Tun noted that there were only two classes in pre-colonial Burma under indigenous monarchs: the ruler and the ruled. The ruled or "the subject people" under Burmese kings comprised of multi-ethnic communities. Than Tun's snapshot of history indicates there was a total of 18 different racial and/or ethnic groups, including Kachin, Chin, Shan, Myanmar, Mon, Rakhine, Karen, Kachin, Indians, Siamese, Manipurans, and so on within Burman kingdoms between 1666 AD and 1879 AD. See [Oefx&f\(a' qutvm\)/ jrefmorif ±hiy#wmf &eluf , kuntsubmay/ 2003/ pm - 131 - 132?](#)

historical development. They believe in the accounts of their mighty, expansionistic empires with subordinate alliances made up of multi-ethnic and multi-language communities, including the Shan, the Arakanese, the Mons, and so on, encompassing the present day Burma and its political boundaries and, at times, stretching into neighboring India and Thailand.

A wildly different version is in circulation among non-Burman ethnic groups. In his report on State Constitutions Drafting Process, General Secretary Lian H. Sakhong of the United Nationalities League for Democracy [Liberated Area, Sweden] writes: “The Union of Burma is a nation-state of diverse ethnic nations (ethnic nationalities or nationalities), founded in 1947 at the Panglong Conference by pre-colonial independent ethnic nationalities such as the Chin, the Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Rakhine (Arakan), Myanmar (Burman) and Shan based on the principle of equality. *“As it was founded by formerly independent peoples in 1947 through an agreement, the boundaries of the Union of Burma today are not historical.”*<sup>97</sup> This is a representative view among many non-Burman ethnic groups in Burma.

These divergent - and obviously irreconcilable - memories die hard, and there is no way a common thread out of these divergent histories can be drawn. Despite the polemics of federalism, some of the ethnic groups such as the Shan appear to have kept their independence aspirations.<sup>98</sup> The Burmese military leadership is fully aware of these centrifugal tendencies backed up by corresponding or supporting historical memories of various ethnic communities.

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<sup>97</sup> See Lian H. Sakhong, “Report on State Constitutions Drafting Process,” in Chao-Tzang Yawngwe and Lian H. Sakhong, eds., *Federalism, State Constitutions and Self-Determination in Burma*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: United Nationalities League for Democracy [Liberated Area] Press, 2003, p. 60 (Italic added). A Chin, Sakhong penned his “Background History” of non-Burman ethnic peoples, specifically the Kachin, the Chin, the Shan, and the Karenni, along the political theme being that “they were independent peoples during pre-colonial period. Ibid. pp.60-70.

<sup>98</sup> As an example, Shan Herald News Agency (S.H.A.N) puts out a monthly news letter INDEPENDENCE. In spite of its disclaimer that it is an independent news group, S.H.A.N. is an unofficial on-line publication, with direct links to different Shan dissident groups, both the armed Shan State Army (South) and legal organizations inside Burma and members of the Shan diasporas. There are also other mono-ethnicity-based publications and political on-line communities where only the issues concerning homogeneous ethnic groups are allowed or encouraged to discuss.

How should Burma proceed if its histories are tortured and unhelpful? If her past is no guide – and then perhaps her future – more accurately, how the parties want Burma’s future to be – the vision for a future Burma - can serve as a blueprint. Such a vision born out of civic, national debate is solely needed, and so are the leaders who are equipped intellectually to appreciate this process and not allow themselves to succumb to powerful primordial sentiments in the process. No doubt the flames of ethno-nationalisms of Burma will continue to burn, given the fact that many non-Burman ethnic communities have felt that they have been deprived of equality, politically, culturally and economically under the Burman-dominated rule for so long. The distrust and fear of the Burmans commonly shared by non-Burman groups throughout the country began long before the nationalist army headed by Aung San came into existence in 1941.

### **The Common Bond:**

#### **the Armed Forces and the Dominant Ethnic Burmans**

Earlier, we noted that the Burma’s Armed Forces has become a state within the State (of Burma), with its own short- and long-term plans designed to ensure the institutional survival, dominance, and reproduction in the country.

We wish to emphasize one structural issue that can help explain the longevity of the army as the dominant political force. The NLD may be the most popular brand name and symbol of democratic change or the push for it. But it is the *Tatmadaw* which the majority of people have come to view as the institution which can repel any threats, external and internal, to the country’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. Throughout Burma’s society, not excluding the Burman majority communities, there is widely shared a great deal of animosity and even hatred toward the armed forces and the military officers at all levels, not just the top brass. However, most Burmese have a sense of Burman-centered nationalism and feel some ideological affinity with their military rulers, more than our cosmopolitan, “enlightened” Burman politicians

who speak a language littered with words like “federalism” or “self-determination.”

Suffice it to say no Burman politician, however popular, has articulated where he or she really stands on the question of minorities’ right to self-determination, including the right to secede from the Union of Burma. They all take the majority position, that under no circumstances is secession of any group acceptable. For no matter how much animosity between the people – especially the Burmans or those who have bought into this Burman-centered nationalism or worldview – and the Armed Forces personnel, they all drink from the same ideological well-spring.<sup>99</sup> This shared ideological bond serves as an unbroken structural linkage between the armed forces and the majority Burman. It is a bond based on ethno-nationalistic emotions that give the great majority of people a strong sense of belonging to a national community in which they are dominant. It is a much more powerful bond than that which may have developed among NLD supporters subscribing to a set of liberal political values and beliefs with no root in the native political culture. As far as the Burmese majority, their blood is still thicker than friendship. While Burmese wish to befriend and adopt liberal values and outlook, when push comes to shove, they will go with their blood ties at the expense of equality and ethnic justice.

This structural bond of ethno-nationalism plays out even among relatively sophisticated dissidents in exile during discussions, on-line or otherwise, that touch on ethnic equality, self-determination and re-constructing alternative histories of Burma and the ethnic communities. When juxtaposed with the ideological discourse of human rights and democracy, it is elevated as the mainstream ideology among the NLD-led democracy movement.

Likewise, Thai- and Indo-Burmese border-based dissident organizations and armed resistance groups always encounter occasions, formal and otherwise, in which the position taken by Burman dissidents resembles that of their ideological

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<sup>99</sup> For a historical discussion of how the previous, wave of Burman armed resistance against Rangoon by the late Premier Nu fell apart once the issue of self-determination surged to the fore of “jungle debates” between his Burman followers and colleagues and the ethnic minority armed groups, see [Wikipedia: Ethnic cleansing in Burma/2000? pm - 465 - 471?](#)

kinfolks – the members of the military government – and its official view toward ethnic relations in the country. Indeed, in the half-century since independence, the Burmans (and their minority brethren) are still mired in what Clifford Geertz terms “the pattern of primordial dissidence.”

## **Roots of Burmese Authoritarianism: Cultures as a Structural Barrier toward Progress?**

*“The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” - Karl Marx<sup>100</sup>*

Ethno-nationalisms fueled by primordial dissidence are not the only kind of barrier in crafting a modern political state. Many indigenous ethnic groups clamor for equality with the historically and militarily dominant Burmans. Lack of political maturity and authoritarian tendencies embedded in the political cultures of Burma have become emblematic of Burmese dissidents as another serious barrier against progress.

Earlier this year, East Timor’s Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta, who was their leading dissident in exile for 25 year, and who personally assisted the Burmese dissidents in exile, was on the mark when he said, “Based on our own experience and my observation of the Burmese armed struggle, my advice is that those of us who fight for freedom or democracy often fight more among ourselves than we fight the adversary. Factionalism is one of the most common failings of those in the struggle for democracy and human rights. First and foremost, the Burmese should show real maturity, responsibility and leadership by putting aside their personal egos or minor political differences.”<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, in his characteristically blunt fashion, the late Aung San (1915-1947), the visionary founder of modern Burma, admonished his fellow Burmese

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<sup>100</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> Jose Ramos Horta, Interview, *Irrawaddy*, February 6, 2004. Available at <http://www.irrawaddy.org>

thus: “Generally speaking, in our (colonial) nation, most people think politics is about climbing on an elevated platform or stage and start blabbering and speaking ill of others. That’s not politics. That is a tasteless, meaningless act meant to please the crowd. Some politicians and politically minded youth mistake this kind of blabbering for doing politics, while their heads get swollen.”<sup>102</sup>

Unfortunately, this serious defect in our political culture continues to be an impediment for resolving our country’s problems. Lest we commit the sin of treating our rich cultures – including the mainstream “national,” predominantly Buddhist culture of Burma – in a deterministic way, as if cultures and cultural communities did not change over time, we hasten to define what we mean by culture. We view any given “culture” as the dynamic context in which past and present political, economic and sociological events and processes pass through.<sup>103</sup> We hold no culture to be inherently democratic or authoritarian. We reject this false dichotomy. Our position is simply that in the Burmese political context, there have been both democratic/egalitarian and authoritarian/top-down *tendencies* and *practices*. Our critical reflection on the political cultures of our own country, however, leads us to believe still unfolding processes have not been conducive to the evolution of Burmese cultures to a point where democracy can emerge as a way of life, not as an imposed formal political process with the trappings of well-functioning liberal democracies in the West.

Nearly 50 years ago, the late Maung Maung Gyi wrote a highly original thesis on Burmese socio-political roots. He made a scathing observation about the pattern of political behavior prevalent among Burmese. In his preface to “Burmese Political Values: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism,” Maung Maung Gyi identified authoritarianism as the bedrock of Burmese political

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<sup>102</sup> မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံတော်၏ အခြေခံဥပဒေ (၁၉၇၃)။ အပိုင်း ၁၀၊ ပုဒ်မ ၁၀၀။ (Translated by the report authors).

<sup>103</sup> We are aware that we are skating on thin ice here as the use of culture as a powerful explanatory factor has been made problematic by post-structuralism-inspired “Third World” scholars. The study of culture carries its colonialist historical baggage with it as it has been used to justify (European) domination and exploitation of the rest of the humanity. However, as long as cultures remain the mediums and contexts through which political and economic events and processes take place, we feel an objective analysis of Burma’s cultures can help explain some of the political events - the precipitating events and processes that led to the final collapse of a parliamentary system of governance in 1962 - or the repeated failures of pro-democracy struggles.

values while stressing that it is “still strong, pervasive, and practiced by most states at present throughout the globe, even in democracies.”<sup>104</sup> He pointed out that upon the withdrawal of the British from Burma, there were ample opportunities for nationalist leaders to nurture the seed of liberalism and lay a solid foundation so that liberal democratic institutions might thrive. However, he held responsible nationalist leaders of the time for privileging their personal ambitions and scrambling madly for power, instead of nurturing and strengthening the new democratic institutions and culture.<sup>105</sup> Coupled with the armed ethnic and ideological conflicts, the politicians’ “mad scramble” for power brought an end to the short-lived experiment with parliamentary democracy as the *Tatmadaw* intervened and wiped out all trappings of democracy. While in office, Premier Nu himself made the same observation about his fellow politicians – former colleagues in the victorious nationalist movement by which he and they rode into office. Nu observed thus:

Politicians are at times apt to be certain devils, ‘the more they get, the more they want.’ After tasting power, they are often unwilling to relinquish it, and indeed often want more power, while those who have not yet obtained power want to have power. Thus, the Haves and the Have-nots among the politicians, in their struggle for power, are wont to use every means, fair or foul to attain their objective. If defeated at the polling booth, they feel disposed to appeal to the barracks, that is to say, to the Defence forces and to other armed forces like the Police.<sup>106</sup>

The 26-years-rule of the late General Ne Win and another 16 years of the current military rule have revived and solidified the centuries-old values, beliefs, behavioral patterns commonly shared by all groups in society throughout the country’s histories. Even the exiles who have escaped the literal control and manipulation at the hands of the current rulers fail to shake off the culture’s profound impact, living thousands of miles away from Burma and after so many years in open societies. Successive waves of anti-military movements and pro-

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<sup>104</sup> See Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism*, (New York: Praeger, 1983), p.2. For the most recent critical reflection on the contemporary Burmese revolutionaries, see Hre Mang, “Burma Political Review: Revolution,” *Mizzima*, May 18, 2004. Available at <http://www.mizzima.com>

<sup>105</sup> For a brilliant satire and scathing depiction of Burmese parliamentary democracy leaders and their post-colonial, post-independent politicking, see Maung Htin, *Burma’s Political Sage*, (Burmese language).

<sup>106</sup> Thakin Nu, *Towards Peace and Prosperity*, p. 104.

self-determination resistance have done virtually nothing to foster an organizational and communal culture along the lines of liberal democratic thinking. Instead they have deliberately facilitated the cultural continuity which reproduces authoritarian political behavior, cashing in on the anti-democratic culture for their own ends.

We contend that the problem of authoritarianism that permeates the entire society in Burma has become a vicious cycle since independence whereby our country's ruling elite have neither committed sufficiently themselves to the emergence of a civic or democratic culture (as in the case of civilian politicians during their 14-years of parliamentary democracy period); nor have the military found it in their interests to commit themselves to such a crucial mission, (in the case of the successive military governments since General Ne Win's rule in 1962). The leading dissident organizations and parties that oppose the military rule have done little to encourage or foster democratic thinking and civic norms.

Whatever the explanations, our key point is that any attempt at affecting change in Burma will necessarily have to take into account this gloomy reality – a deeply authoritarian society that is reeling under four decades of military rule. Citizens have been isolated with old habits and traditions, without exposure to liberal ideas, of which democracy is one. The relevance of culture as a social process in which political affairs are conducted can not be overemphasized. The late Professor Maung Maung Gyi writes: “True, political culture is not the sole determinant of how a system operates, yet it is the major contributory factor and kingpin to the entire political process. Political attitudes, beliefs, conventions, mores, traditions, and values acquired over the centuries die hard.”<sup>107</sup>

While it is understandable that ordinary people within Burma continue to suffer from this authoritarian outlook which encourages them to depend on the “Big Leaders” as their sole hope or messiahs, it is astounding, in retrospect, that we exiles and politically interested expatriates have not grown in terms of our socio-political practices and outlook. The stagnation in intellectual growth and evolution (for better) among Burmese exiles is not owing to the lack of exposure

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<sup>107</sup> Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values*, p. 9.



to democratic cultures and norms, and way of life. Therefore, it must be attributed to our lack of desire or willingness to think and act democratically. Lacking appreciation for, or political skills to engage in, the give-and-take of democratic compromises has seriously hindered efforts to build genuine solidarity and alliance among those of us who opposed military rule. Equally important, even the educated exiles demonstrate an amazing lack of appreciation for systematic understanding of various forms and venues in which democratization can - and do - take place in societies under authoritarian regimes around the world.

### **Understanding Democratization**

The greatest irony regarding our country's political deadlock is that there is no disagreement as to what type of government Burma should have. Ethnic nationalities, the current military leadership, the National League for Democracy and other legal political parties and the people of Burma all proclaim a form of representative government loosely termed "democracy" to be *the* desired form of our future government. Of course, what is being contested doggedly is the questions of what type (of democracy), through which venues, how soon, and under whose leadership.

We realize that the word "democracy" has been thrown around in the discussions about Burma since the country's popular uprisings in 1988 ended in a bloodbath. Beyond its discursive use, there does not appear to be any clear agreement or serious efforts to formulate and establish a common understanding and acceptance of just what democratic change or democratization means. The Open University political scientist David Potter offers a process-oriented definition of "democratization" thus: "*Political change moving in a democratic direction from less accountable to more accountable government, from less competitive (or non-existent) elections to fuller and fairer competitive elections, from severely restricted to better protected civil and political rights, from weak(or*

*(non-existent) autonomous associations to more autonomous and more numerous associations in civil society.”<sup>108</sup>*

We wish to nudge those concerned with the deleterious impact of the 14-year political stalemate upon Burmese society, to move away from product-oriented change to more process-focused change. Toward that end, we find Potter’s textbook definition of ‘democratization’ immensely useful in that it enables us to think of democratization as a change process which can be set in motion through more than one single course of actions. As Potter points out, all explanations of a political phenomenon (for instance, democratization or social change) combine agency and structure, that is, the actions, choices and initiatives of persons, organizations and groups that are causing the phenomenon *and* “a set of physical and social constraints, a set of opportunities, a set of norms and values that shape or determine the content of the actions, choices and initiatives.”<sup>109</sup>

David Potter comes up with seven different, ideal-type factors which explain the phenomenon of democratization. We list them here, providing a brief summary for each factor:

- ✍ *socio-economic development*, indicates positive correlations between social change toward a more democratic government and economic development measured in terms of rising per capita income;
- ✍ *social divisions*, is a central feature of structural explanations of democratization, resulting from capitalism-induced class divisions;
- ✍ *historical legacies*, explains why certain post-colonial societies under a particular type of colonial regimes (for instance, Japanese versus British colonialisms) possess more favorable conditions for democratization than others;
- ✍ *state power and political institutions*, examines the relative strengths and weaknesses that exist between the State and civil society institutions and which helps us understand why a very strong and almost autonomous state

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<sup>108</sup> David Potter, Democratization, “Good Governance’ and Development,” in Tim Allen and Alan Thomas (eds.) *Poverty and Development into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.365-382.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p.370.

vis-à-vis a very weak civil society - such as the case of present day Burma - provides a most unfriendly setting for democratic change;

- ✍ *civil society*, explains why the proliferation of autonomous or semi-autonomous groups - students, women, trade unions, church members, farmers, the environmentally concerned, lawyers and other professionals - can be a contributing force behind democratization;
- ✍ *political culture and ideas*, points out why certain societies and cultures are more conducive to democratization than others, although the use of culture as an explanatory factor has been controversial; and finally
- ✍ *transnational and international power*, reminds students of democratization and why democratization can not be understood only in terms of internal/domestic structures and forces, especially when the effects of international economic and financial processes, the global division of labor, global communications, and global ideological trends can be positive or negative for a country's democratic change.<sup>110</sup>

Of course, these are simply generalized categories of explanation for democratization. In reality the consideration of any one factor always involves others.

In the most recent research publication entitled Reconciling Burma/Myanmar: Essays on U.S. Relations with Burma, published by the National Bureau of Asian Research, a group of Burma scholars take up the issue regarding prospects for democratization in Burma and the efficacy of conflicting policies adopted to realize that end. Critiquing what the report's authors see as the inefficacy of sanctions and isolation by the United States, it advances a common thesis that by concentrating on the end *product* of elections (in Burma), the United States has ignored the all-important *process* of democratic transformation."<sup>111</sup> We believe the United States is not the only actor which has become entrenched in its position insisting on the product of change. The

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid. pp.370-374.

<sup>111</sup> The National Bureau of Asian Research, *Reconciling Burma/Myanmar: Essays on U.S. Relations with Burma*, John H. Badgley, ed., NBR Analysis, Volume 15, Number 1, March 2004, p. 9.

leadership of the NLD itself has become hardened in its official view that the democratization process begins with the ruling State Peace and Development Council, permitting the NLD and other election-winning parties to convene the *Pyithu Hluttaw* or People's Parliament.<sup>112</sup>

On the other hand, having practically nullified the elections results, the SPDC can not argue with any credibility that evolutionary change in our country is the way to go. Even if the path the de facto government has chosen may make ample sense, it sounds self-serving. Thus our country remains stuck in political deadlock. Intransigence on the part of primary opponents and their supporters, both domestically and internationally, have seriously arrested our process of democratic change. And the heaviest burden is, naturally, placed on the 52 million people in whose name all parties are working.

### **Why We as a Nation Are Stuck**

In the highly polarized world of Burma's politics, the dangerously fundamentalist worldview - "you-are-either-with-or-against-us" - permeates all social and political actions and processes. This narrow view of the world has hampered tremendously any rational discussion about how best change process in Burma may be set in motion. In the minds of those who clamor for change in our country, there is almost inerasable imprint that change only takes place when the old guard is replaced either through violent overthrow or peaceful transfer of power, from the ancient regime to the people's representatives or populist leaders.

Earlier in this essay, we cited Theda Skocpol's argument against the voluntarism view of revolution - that revolutions are *made* by a group of conspirators; rather, she put forth a radical view that revolutions *happen*. We have been involved in an effort to sustain a purposive social movement aimed at restoring freedom in Burma over the past 16 years. We have come to the painful conclusion that it is not enough to pay attention to which human agency or change agents can shape the course of our history. To paraphrase Marx's observation

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<sup>112</sup> National League for Democracy, NLD Central Executive Committee Statement on the 16<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of NLD, September 27, 2004.

about historical change, human beings make attempts to change the prevailing circumstances of history the creation of which they had no part.

What we have done in this report is examine critically the conscious efforts by all of us, both “small” and “big” players, who share the Burmese peoples’ aspirations to live in a free, dignified, and secure national and local society. Additionally, we have looked at both structural and historical factors impeding change in our country. We have also reflected critically on the unique phenomenon of disproportionate - and unjustified - faith in the capacity of a single person, or agency, to change our condition, most specifically in Aung San Suu Kyi. We believe by concentrating almost solely on the agency - the leader of the election-legitimized party - we have done serious harm to our own understanding of the role historical, political, economic and cultural structures play in any societal transformation. While she is an asset to our country, in helping realize the citizens’ quest for peace and reconciliation, there is only so much symbolic politics can accomplish in undoing the deep structural factors that stand in the way of installing a new regime of human rights in our country.

Based on our first-hand experience as vocal exiles at the forefront of efforts to push for change, we now comprehend where and how we have all been stuck. Power asymmetry between “our democratic forces” and “their repressive military establishment” is, we acknowledge, a major obstacle on the path toward reconciliation in our country. But it is not the only one. We believe there is a pressing need to shift our focus to the forms, the venues, and the collective responsibilities that may enable change to happen, for change is a process, not a product.

## **Conclusion**

### **“Common Problems, Shared Responsibilities”**

Fifty years after Burma regained sovereignty, our generation faces the daunting task of re-making Burma. Enormous economic, cultural and political

problems have plagued our country since emerging as an independent state in 1948. They antedate our generation. Our older compatriots tried their best to address these problems - through the parliamentary system of government, by open armed revolts, in chronic non-violent uprisings, and through national seminars and transnational activism. Their - and now our - inability to resolve our problems reveals their magnitude.

We do not blame any single institution or one leadership circle for failure in not resolving the outstanding issues. Rather, in this report we call attention to the historical and structural nature of the “Burma issue.” Our generation, both civilians and “men on the horseback”, is confronted with the historic task of re-making our beleaguered homeland. Ours is a raging contest over the form and substance of the State, a contest fueled by diverse institutional priorities, interests and historical memories, as well as concerns of key leaders and their supporters.

The humanitarian crises, economic stagnation, social and moral decay are caused by endemic corruption, ethnic distrust, and political repression. They both feed, and follow from, the perpetual political crisis in our country. The continuing political deadlock dims hope for resolving our many crises. Importing solutions hatched in Washington, Brussels, London or Beijing will not work. The well-meaning but ill-informed advice pouring in from international sources have not helped us, the citizens of Burma, move forward.<sup>113</sup> The paternalistic words about human rights and democracy echoing in the hallowed chambers of Congress and in parliaments of the West only obstruct our effort to disentangle our structural problems. We have found no quick fixes. These are *our* problems the consequences of which we children of Burma bear commonly, no matter where we are or what our ideology may be. We must find *our* solutions.

The first step toward finding a solution lies in viewing the problems *not* simply as the NLD’s or the ruling State Peace and Development Council’s or our non-Burman ethnic communities’; but rather as *our* common problems. Common

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<sup>113</sup> For an example of well-meaning, but misguided one-size-fit-all prescription for change in Burma, see Desmond Tutu, “Peace Laureate’s Detention Tests the World”, *International Herald Tribune*, October 6, 2004. Tutu labels Burma’s generals “state terrorists” and depicts, implicitly, change in our country as an event which puts Aung San Suu Kyi as head of the government, through “maximum diplomatic and economic pressures” on the military government.

problems call for shared responsibilities. The cardinal principle guiding our search for a solution is the pressing need to set in motion the process of change. Our multi-polar society lives with a siege mentality, reflected in our hotly contested effort to define our State, with a signature political correctness dominating our politics, both within and outside of Burma. This attitude is not conducive to finding any solutions, either short-term or lasting. The prevailing power asymmetry causes mistrust and animosity among key players who stick to their scripts to placate uneasy support bases. With few exceptions, each group is placing their own interests above those of our country; none can claim to be safeguarding Burma's national interests if they are hurting the well-being of all our people.

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. Our fundamental conflict is not ethnic or religious as was Yugoslavia, or is Chechnya or Israel today. No, ours is the unfinished business of making a modern state out of myriad national races and ethnic communities. Our national interests are coterminous with those of all our people's.

We view our people's interests as having political, economic, humanitarian, strategic, and cultural dimensions. We recommend resolving the current impasse on several fronts: political, economic, humanitarian, strategic and cultural.

*Political* - The issue of power sharing including self-determination was discussed by representatives of ceasefire groups and the SPDC representatives, as well as those individuals invited by the National Convention Convening Council, in the National Convention (NC) reconvened between May 17, 2004 - July 9, 2004.<sup>114</sup> All other parties boycotting the NC, namely the National League for Democracy and the United Nationalities League for Democracy, should be invited again to join this national forum.

The SPDC should continue its good faith effort to make this forum a genuine

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<sup>114</sup> During 2 ½ hr long meeting in Rangoon on May 31, 2004, Brigadier General Than Tun told an author of this report that power sharing was the main issue discussed in the National Convention.

national dialogue with participation by key representatives from all legitimate organizations. Those who have chosen to boycott the NC should help transform the forum into a legitimate, respectable political venue. The right to self-determination should not be viewed as an immutable absolute. Our political structure should be checked against the overall need of the country, especially to keep alive this national conversation about ethnic relations.<sup>115</sup> Bogyoke Aung San expounded this view on self-determination: “(T)he various demands of democracy, including self-determination, are not absolute, but are a small part of the general democratic world movement. Possibly in individual concrete cases, the part may contradict the whole; if so it must be rejected.”<sup>116</sup> On their part, the current administration should demonstrate broad-mindedness and empathy for minorities who want a say in running their own affairs within our nation-state. Likewise, the NLD leadership should review its entrenched position which holds that “national reconciliation” begins by convening the *Pyithu Hluttaw* [People’s Parliament] comprised of MP elected in 1990. Further, the NLD should recognize the positive developments under SPDC rule, especially the 17 ceasefire agreements secured since 1989, as well as the on-going SPDC-KNU ceasefire negotiation, something it has chosen not to do.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> For Aung San, the solution to the persistent demands of self-determination is to eliminate the grounds of hostility and reduce it to a minimum by ending national oppression. See *အမျိုးသားရေး* (Nationalism) / ဘုရားရှင်၏ နိုင်ငံရေးစာတမ်းများ / အပိုင်း ၁၇ / ၁၉၄၅-၁၉၄၇ / အမျိုးသားရေး စာတမ်းများ (၁၉၄၅ - ၁၉၄၇) / အပိုင်း ၁၇ - ၃၀၇။ Writing in 1999, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Dean of Harvard’s Kenney School of Government, makes a similar argument: “(A)lthough it is true that sovereignty stands in the way of national self-determination, such self-determination is not the unequivocal moral good it first appears. In a world where there are some two hundred states but many thousands of often overlapping entities that might eventually make a claim to nationhood, blind promotion of self-determination would have highly problematic consequences.” See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Redefining the National Interest, *Foreign Affairs*, 78: 4, (Jul-Aug, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>117</sup> Colonel Hla Min, SPDC spokesperson and head of the research department of the Directorate of Defense Services Intelligence bitterly complained that the ex-generals in the NLD leadership never acknowledge these separate ceasefire agreements which his government considers their accomplishments. In his words, “unlike us, the ‘new generation’ these ex-generals were ‘the old guards’ whose past policies fueled the ethnic armed conflict in our country. Under their orders, we had to go to the frontlines and fight the minorities. We are doing things differently and more constructively. Instead of acknowledging what we have accomplished in this respect, they keep



*Economic* - the SPDC should begin reviewing its economic policies and practices. Its current policies have neither helped the poor nor promoted genuine economic growth. For instance, its uncontrolled and unbudgeted military spending includes items such as building a massive new command bunker near Pyinmana, a \$10 million nuclear research reactor, and purchasing expensive MiG-19s. This makes no economic sense. The SPDC has not published a national budget for several years. Its agricultural policies miss global market signals, and ignore mechanisms that could help village tillers, while favoring new corporate agricultural investors. On its part, the NLD still calls for more economic sanctions, a policy also endorsed by some non-Burman ethnic political groups, which fails to help when the opposing camps should be exploring overlapping areas of cooperation to address our country's economic interests. 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.

*Humanitarian* - Our national interests are not served by the flow of refugees running away from low intensity armed conflicts, forced labor, as well as their forced relocation. We have large number of internally displaced persons in the Shan, Mon and Karen areas, and continuing detention of prisoners whose crimes were non-violent acts of dissension—which is a blight on our society. Additionally, the spread of HIV/AIDS, serious malnutrition among our youth, decaying public health system, and extremely poor quality education at all levels of schooling severely damages our people's future well-being. A significant portion of our national budget should go to improving our public health services and educational institutions, as well as initiatives aimed at our country's human resource renewal. A productive and vibrant labor force is a pre-requisite for entry into a highly competitive global economy. It cannot be created out of an unhealthy people, malnourished, poorly educated and with

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on deriding us.” Zarni's personal meeting notes - Meeting with Brigadier Than Tun and Colonel Hla Min, Rangoon, May 31, 2004.

few skills. This humanitarian crisis poses the gravest threat to our country's well-being. Our people should be our greatest asset as a nation-state. Only our people - *not* natural gas reserves, teak forests, rubies, rice or uranium - can serve as the driving engine for our emergence as a modern, developed prosperous nation. The central paradox here is that the humanitarian crisis is the direct result of unresolved, overarching political problems. Burma cannot wait to resolve this pressing humanitarian issue until key players in national politics find political solutions. The humanitarian issue is a common national problem - we must address it immediately and not wait until all serious political differences are resolved.

*Strategic* - All national governments, de facto or otherwise, are tasked with pursuing our national 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. This meets the geo-political and strategic vision of our forefathers, especially Bogyoke Aung San, who held a vision for a United Nations of South East Asia on the eve of our independence in 1948. Resolution of our political conflict should be addressed in ways that do not harm our country's long-term strategic interests. On its part, the SPDC should seriously consider other dimensions of our national security and broaden their strategic vision for Burma. Our two giant neighbors, China and India, are improving the well-being of their citizens, their greatest national assets, while smaller countries in our region, Thailand,

Malaysia, Indonesia and even communist Vietnam, also lay strong foundations for their rapid economic growth. We must not be left out of this positive regional trend.

*Cultural* - Contrary to the conventional, but historically unsupported view espoused by many non-Burman minority leaders, our cross-fertilization of cultures and ethnic communities was not the result of British colonial rule, direct or indirect, that dominated our country for 120 years. Rather, it was the ingenuity of our ancestors who embraced our multi-lingual and multi-ethnic cultural milieu within their empires. Some of our kings were centuries ahead of the multiculturalism now advocated by the West. For example, the *Myazedi* stone inscription erected in 11<sup>th</sup> century Pagan was inscribed in four different languages. The intermingling of cultures and communities was a truly positive aspect of our Burmese history. Our diverse communities often lived peacefully in spite of what anthropologists find throughout the world, *naturally* prejudiced ethnic and racial attitudes that create “in-group and out-group” traits. The nature and process of making and re-making a modern nation forces all multi-ethnic countries to pursue unique approaches toward building a single national identity. Without a common bond of loyalty, no country can be built nor sustained peacefully. 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. Successive policies by central governments, both civilian and military, have not been conducive to creating a multi-cultural environment. To the contrary, they have advocated assimilation through banning the use of non-Burmese languages and literature in schools throughout the country.<sup>118</sup> The SPDC

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<sup>118</sup> For a detailed, historical discussion of the educational and cultural policies of the successive governments in Rangoon since 1948, see Zar Ni, *Knowledge, Control and Power: The Politics of*

should review and assess this counterproductive policy aimed at cultural assimilation. Burmese is the lingua franca of our citizens and Buddhism is the bed-rock of our main culture, so the majority *Myanmar or Bama* have nothing to fear from other races and groups. Both officially and through daily encounters, the *Bama*-dominated government should recognize and respect our other cultures, languages and customs. Existing cultural and educational policies which make our ethnic groups feel they are second class citizens in their own ancestral land should be modified.

Holding the current government responsible for our myriad national problems is counter-productive. The political deadlock; the cultural and intellectual stagnation and stunted economic reform; lack of ethnic equality; public health crises; and absence of political freedom are all problems earlier generations passed onto us. Over a half-century after regaining sovereignty, we are confronted with a stark choice: adhere to the destructive legacy of our forefathers, or end our national conflict and realize our country's potential by pursuing jointly our collective national interests.

In this paper, we believe we have demonstrated the need to comprehend Burma's problems structurally, historically, politically and culturally. We believe our diagnosis can help promote genuine, constructive change within a long and arduous process. We strongly argue against the perspective that change is a product wherein a new and better government system suddenly replaces the old one. We do strongly support the view that our needed changes are a process requiring broad-mindedness, a strategic vision, bold leadership and competence. The greatest challenge facing our generation is to find constructive ways to guide this process together. Hopefully this paper offers a step in that direction.

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*Education in Burma under Military Rule (1962-88)*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1998.

## 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<sup>?</sup>

May Oo

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**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.

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<sup>?</sup> 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**

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