

# Burma's choice, ASEAN's dilemma: “Disciplined Democracy” vs. “Diversity in Democracy”



by Khin Ohmar

## *Introduction*

*There has been a protracted political impasse in Burma between a military regime on the one hand and an ethno-nationalist and pro-democratic political opposition on the other. This stalemate rests on fundamentally opposing visions of the democratic system that should emerge: “disciplined democracy” or “diversity in democracy.”*

*Resolution of this stalemate can only be achieved if the root causes of political tension are fully recognised. While any emergent form of democracy in Burma that respects the human rights of all citizens will face serious challenges as it grows, the disciplined democracy espoused by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) will only perpetuate national and regional insecurity and instability. Therefore, taking seriously this dilemma requires a substantial political shift, particularly in governments of the ASEAN region, from a narrow focus on the SPDC's process of forging a “disciplined” democracy to acknowledging Burma's opposition forces' demand for a federal model of democracy that embraces ethnic diversity.*

It may be argued that such a “diversity in democracy” model poses political challenges to many Southeast Asian states. Nevertheless, for Burma’s decades-old political opposition, this approach presents the only durable solution to the profound human insecurity resulting from Burma’s ongoing political impasse and the legacies of colonialism. Sixty years of insurgency and counter-insurgency has proven that where widespread oppression continues, struggles for justice will always find ways to return, find other spaces in which to reinstate themselves.

While the SPDC seeks “reconsolidation” of so-called national unity through force, for which the sole purpose is to ensure the permanent role of the army in Burmese national politics, the Burmese opposition seeks genuine national reconciliation among all ethnic nationalities that constitute the Burmese nation-state in its modern form.

The primary intention of the SPDC is to reconsolidate the state of Burma in

its current structure of military-dominated central governance. Reconsolidation of this nature reinforces nation-building policies that perpetuate social, economic, political, and cultural divisions while enforcing legal and military unity.

The Burmese opposition forces, which include ethnic-nationalities leadership and pro-democratic forces inside Burma, in border areas and diasporically in developed nations, have drafted an alternative constitution based on a federal system that guarantees the rights of Burma’s minority ethnic nationalities. In the process of drafting this federal democratic constitution, the opposition movement has developed strategies to politically, not violently, address key factors which currently underlie the nation-state’s security.

The adoption of a federal constitution under the current political circumstances poses a significant challenge for the opposition forces given the decades of anti-federalism propaganda by the military regime. Nevertheless, the principles articulated in this draft remain pivotal to the possibility of peace and security. The important question is: which form of democracy will be the most resilient?

### **Four Factors Necessary for a Resilient Democracy**

Though this list is far from exhaustive, I will focus on four factors necessary for a resilient democracy in Burma. These are a mechanism for national reconciliation, a genuine acceptance of ethnic diversity, a fostering of practices of political citizenship, and an economic transformation to prevent further draining of human resources through forced migration.



*Karens of Burma continue to build their lives amid political tensions.*

www.joshuaproject.net

Analysing each factor in relation to the two competing approaches to democracy highlights the inability of the SPDC to achieve political stability through its proposed “disciplined democracy.” While the opposition’s demands for an inclusive and rights-based democratic system faces considerable challenges in implementation, it promises to be the more resilient model because it addresses the root causes of Burma’s insecurities.

## ...a democratic Burma must genuinely embrace the country’s ethnic diversity in the political structures of the state.

---

First, in the context of decades-long state perpetrated human rights violations, a democratic Burma needs a reconciliation process that deals with past grievances in genuine ways. Such a process must do more than allow for reconciliation between SPDC and ethnic nationalities leaders at the elite level. It must deal with both the rationale and the actual practices of these violations at the individual and local community levels. This is especially important when there is a history of communities (violently) mistrusting each other. It is not possible to develop a larger community without trust. Fundamentally, this is a state that cannot be forced or imposed – it must come genuinely from the people themselves. For this to occur, all people need to know what happened in the country. Why the *Panglong* Agreement of federal union formation was not honoured and turned to violence and a five-decades long civil war. Why rape and sexual

violence against ethnic minority women have been systematically and widely practiced by army troops with impunity in its war against ethnic oppositions. Why thousands of peaceful pro-democracy activists in the 1988 nationwide uprising were killed and hundreds imprisoned. Why there has been systematic massive forced replacement of civilians that uprooted an estimated one million peoples’ livelihood, leading them to become internally displaced, running and hiding in the jungles. Why forced labour was imposed and arbitrary killings took place. As the experience of South Africa has shown, addressing the root causes of conflict and seeking justice for human rights violations demands national reconciliation. There can be no healing without truth, no reconciliation without truth, and no peace without justice.

Second, a democratic Burma must genuinely embrace the country’s ethnic diversity in the political structures of the state. Burma’s history of ethnic minority oppression through cultural and religious discriminatory practices and rejection of any degree of self-determination has ensured that ethno-political insurgent groups such as the Karen National Union (KNU), the Shan State Army (SSA) and the Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP) will never stop fighting until justice has been achieved. We, the democratic political opposition, will never stop until peace and justice prevail. The political reality that cannot be ignored is the strength, determination, and resilience of our demands for justice and rights. Without agreed arrangements for self determination and equality for all democratically enshrined, it is not possible for the SPDC to claim a genuine appreciation of social diversity. For a democracy to survive given the ethnic diversity existing in Burma, equal rights

and opportunity must be enabled through a federal system of governance.

Third, a resilient democracy depends on the people's capacity to practice political citizenship through civil society empowerment. The SPDC has said in a press release, "every citizen of Burma can participate in the process of peace and stability of the country." However, people who express their political views are still arrested and imprisoned. Some of my close friends, the student leaders of 8888 democracy uprising who had already spent 14 to 16 years in prison were re-arrested three months ago for their peaceful initiatives towards national reconciliation.

Fourth, poverty is widespread and the economy has continued to suffer the effects of a growing deficit, skyrocketing inflation, shortfalls in energy supplies and foreign exchange, poor education, HIV/AIDS and drug problems. These disproportionately impact the life and livelihood of women, children, and the poor, particularly in ethnic, forced relocation and military-operation areas. The chronic deterioration of Burma's economy is at the root of massive human insecurity leading to widespread displacement through refugee flight and other forms

of forced migration. This represents a profound loss of human resources for the economy and society. People must have economic opportunities to survive but also to return to Burma. A democratic system must provide the political stability and foster hope sufficient to reverse this destabilising trend and foster conditions for post-conflict reconstruction.

### **Suggested Policy Directions for a Genuine Democratic Transition**

First, the ASEAN governments must support the development of a strong civil society inside Burma, among its exiled opposition forces as well as across the ASEAN region. They must also back a transformation of ASEAN values towards a rights-based focus rather than a "cultural" relativist one, and a recognition of the true and full nature of Burma's conflict and political stalemate.

Second, the non-interference policy of ASEAN should no longer be applied to situations of human rights violations and human insecurity in Burma and its spill-over effects in the region.

The non-interference policy runs counterproductive to many of ASEAN's own espoused commitments, including the protection of women and their rights. For example, the ASEAN declaration to stop violence against women has yet to be effectively implemented by any ASEAN government. These same governments are also failing to implement the articles of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or to take action on the UN Security Council's 2000 Resolution 1325 concerning the protection of women in

---

The non-interference policy runs counterproductive to many of ASEAN's own espoused commitments, including the protection of women and their rights.

situations of armed conflict. Several reports on the systematic rape of ethnic minority women in Burma by the military dictatorship's soldiers have provoked strong responses from governments around the world, yet no ASEAN government has raised these with the military regime.

Finally, there is an urgent need to recognise the essence of Burma's conflict. This means engaging with Burma's opposition forces. To date, our democratic opposition movement has been largely ignored by ASEAN. We urge their inclusion and consultation in visits by state representatives who can demand meetings with Burma's pro-democratic opposition parties.

### **ASEAN Civil Society to Contribute towards Democratisation**

Burma presents a strong case for ASEAN democratisation and stability as there already exists a strong, resilient, and viable political opposition to authoritarian rule. Yet, the "disciplined democracy" the SPDC is trying to establish maintains its authority by limiting people's rights and perpetuating discriminatory practices. This includes a constitutionally enshrined permanent leadership role for the military in politics. I want what Daw Aung San Suu Kyi wants – democracy with compassion, which means embracing diversity and allowing people to care for one another and enjoy their freedoms.

The challenge of transition is how to enable the emergence of a democracy that recognises ethnic diversity as constitutive of a peaceful, stable, and sustainable political community. As the struggle for political transition belongs to the people

of Burma, the choice is ultimately ours. However, increasing regional integration means that ASEAN nations' political, economic, social, and environmental security is also at stake. This makes the issue of transition to democracy in Burma a serious dilemma for ASEAN.

I am a political activist whose life is committed to struggle for a democracy that respects human rights. I am also a civil society actor representing a community living in displacement in Burma's borderlands and whose lives depend on the form of political transition that takes place in Burma. As those directly affected by the conflict and instability, we demand that our experiences and opinions be counted. We strongly urge the ASEAN community, both the governments and civil society sectors, to look beyond Rangoon for the reality of Burma's political struggles and join hands with us, the democratic opposition, to help bring about democratic change. Burma's victory will not belong to the Burmese people alone. It will be ours/yours. Now is the time for us, the people of ASEAN, to take responsibility, mobilise people power and prove with our collective solidarity to the leaders of our region and the ASEAN that we are the stakeholders and decision makers in our lives and it is our role and responsibility to transform life in our own region and this decision making process must be left in our hands. ■

---

*Khin Ohmar is a Policy Board Member of the Forum for Democracy in Burma (FDB). She is also the Coordinator of the Asia Pacific Peoples' Partnership on Burma (APPPB).*

---

*This paper was presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Civil Society Conference, 10-12 December 2006, Motebello Hotel, Cebu, Philippines.*