

Burma: Badly Battered but Believing

Interview by Nina Somera

Silent and Steady Witness.

Said to be built in the 6th century, the Shwedagon Pagoda has not only been a religious and cultural landmark, but also the stage for political movements in Burma especially at the turn of the 20th century. It has hosted protests by students and workers. It was also the site where Aung San Suu Kyi delivered an address to 5,000 people and called for the end of the military regime back in 1988. The Shwedagon Pagoda was again filled with jubilation and later tension with the monks-led Saffron Revolution in 2007.

Photo by Jean-Marie Hullot from Wikimedia Commons

Long-time free Burma campaigner Debbie Stothard talks about the fear, suffering and frustration of the Burmese people who have endured the excesses of the junta regime. She tells us how Burmese women and their communities remain courageous and hopeful for better days, for freedom.

Interview by Nina Somera

How would you describe the sense of fear in Burma?

Most people from Burma constantly have to struggle with fear of some sort. There is a great sense of insecurity. No matter what they have accumulated in their lives, material security is constantly at threat. We have seen that when fortunes have been lost due to the arbitrary policy or targeted action by the military regime.

In rural Burma, for example, millions have been denied the right to grow food to feed themselves. They have been forced to grow cash crops for the military. They may have been subjected into forced labour or the regime simply confiscated their lands and gave them to others or declare the areas as free fire zones.

In the urban areas we have seen a similar process where there is a state-sanction



Rohingyas

The Rohingyas are among the ethnic minorities that are suffering repression under the military regime. Recently they hogged the headlines as photographs taken by tourists were leaked, exposing the bad treatment of Thai authorities who seized the Rohingyas' boats traversing Thailand's waters. There are reports that after arresting the Rohingyas, who were said to be a "threat to national security," Thai authorities removed the engines of the already unseaworthy boats and towed them back into the waters. One capsized with four confirmed deaths and 300 other people missing. Meanwhile, the Burmese junta has also refused to acknowledge the Rohingyas as citizens. It claimed that the Rohingyas were Bengalis.

Sources: Allard, Tom (16 April 2009). "Rohingya not our problem, Burma tells Bali meeting." URL: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/rohingya-not-our-problem-burma-tells-bali-meeting-20090416-a7md.html>; Human Rights Watch (26 May 2009). "Perilous Plight." URL: <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/05/26/perilous-plight>; Mizzima (27 February 2009). "Burma sets condition for accepting Rohingya migrants." URL: <http://www.mizzima.com/archive/1776-burma-sets-condition-for-accepting-rohingya-migrants.html> and Refugees International (12 January 2009). "Thai Government Recklessly Imperils Migrant and Refugee Lives." URL: <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/press-room/press-release/thai-government-recklessly-imperils-migrant-and-refugee-lives>

Photo from Rohingyaboatpeople.com

taxation system. The moment you start a small to medium enterprise that seems to be making money, the local commanders will demand a share from the profits.

In early 2003, there was a liquidity crisis because banks imposed moratoriums on withdrawals. The regime did not respond to it adequately. So many businesses closed down because they could not pay the salaries. In 2005, the price of fuel went up by 900 per. In 2007, the fuel also increased by 100 per cent.

Sometimes we don't even see the insecurity that permeates the foreigners in Burma. Most aid agencies, even United Nations (UN) agencies and diplomats are not even allowed to leave Rangoon without official permission. And there has been this sort of Stockholm syndrome when people start accusing people in the democracy movement instead of looking at the root cause that stems from the regime.

How would you describe the people's sense of citizenship?

Because of the way the regime has been running the country for two generations, people do not

have a very good sense of citizenship. In fact, some ethnic and religious minorities are denied citizenship.

Look at the Rohingya, for example. This Muslim minority group has been so badly treated and disenfranchised since their lands were taken away from them. And then during the boat people crisis, the regime even refused to acknowledge that they were from Burma.

There are at least two million undocumented Burmese people in Thailand. They will never get their documents since the regime refuses to acknowledge them.

Mutual responsibility is more of a cultural concern rather than a conscious political identity. People's sense of citizenship has been so eroded with the years of abuse and

No Way but to Move.
Ethnic refugees from Eastern Burma move out of their homes towards the border to escape repression by the military regime.

Photo from the Burma Campaign UK



neglect. During cyclone Nargis, when the naval vessels of the United States, United Kingdom and France were offshore, waiting for the goods to be delivered, many Burmese in Rangoon were so frustrated, asking, “Why aren’t they coming, why are they waiting, why are they not coming to deliver the aid to us?”

The movement is much stronger than people recognise or realise. But let’s face it, there is no freedom of movement inside as substantive dialogue is difficult. But when we sit down, most people are on the same page.

Some people were explaining that it would be an attack of sovereignty, an act of war if these crafts come in without permission. But they could not understand this. They said, “They are not our government, they are abusing us. Just give us the aid.”

One of the frustrations of classical diplomats and academics in dealing with Burma is the fact the Burmese democracy movement always calls for UN and international intervention and this goes against this classical concept of sovereignty. And yet for the Burmese people, sovereignty is a bad word because they don’t enjoy its benefits, even the smallest benefit of citizenship.

How much premium does the junta really put on the military to keep it loyal?

There is a big problem with child soldiers. Some children are forced to join the military especially when they are caught in compromising situations like in a nightclub, that their options are either to go to jail or

join the army. In some extreme cases, they are taken out of school.

Sometimes teenagers have a sense of being macho, of becoming a warrior. But when they enter the military, they find out that their salaries are not enough. Recently the regime stopped providing rations. Thus we have a big problem of defectors because of the bad conditions.

It is just the higher ups who are enjoying the benefits. I remember speaking with a Major who defected, I said, “You must have given up a lot.” And then he said, “My salary was not enough. To earn, one must be at least a business agent for the generals.”

Do you see that as an opportunity for the movement to be stronger?

The movement is much stronger than people recognise or realise. The problem is in the way diverse sections of the movement express themselves.

But let’s face it, there is no freedom of movement inside Burma. There is a regulation that you must be registered to a household. That means that if you are staying somewhere apart from your household, you have to register at least temporarily to the local authorities where you are staying for that night. Otherwise, the head of the household where you are staying can be jailed for seven years.

In Rangoon, after the Saffron Revolution, households were asked to put the photos of every member outside the house so that the local officials can check whether there are unauthorised guests or unauthorised absences. So the opportunities to meet and discuss are very limited. In the border areas, most groups are also limited in their movement.

As substantive dialogue is difficult, people express themselves differently. But when we sit down and analyse and have a dialogue, most people are on the same page.





Saffron Revolution

In September 2007, thousands of monks bravely marched through the streets of Rangoon to protest the exponential increase of fuel prices, which has aggravated the already poor condition of Burmese population. Referred to as the Saffron Revolution, after the colour of the monks' robes, the action elicited hope especially as monks are highly revered in Burmese culture. Carrying Burmese flags, the monks also called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners. But in a matter of days, the Saffron Revolution came to a halt as the

junta ordered a brutal crackdown. 1,400 monks and 6,000 of their supporters were arrested, around 200 were killed and scores fled the country. Although they failed to oust the military regime, the Saffron Revolution has been deemed a wake-up call, exposing the insecurities of the regime.

Sources: Burma Campaign UK (nd). URL: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/burma/campaigns/crackdown>; Buncombe, Andrew Buncombe (27 September 2007). "Burma: Inside the Saffron Revolution." URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burma-inside-the-saffron-revolution-403645.html> and McGeown, Kate (26 September 2007). "Burma: The revolution that didn't happen." URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7635419.stm> and Somera, Nina (17 March 2009). "Burmese Plan Elections, Aung San Suu Kyi Banned from Elections." URL: http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=882:burmese-plan-elections-aung-san-suu-kyi-banned-from-running-&catid=20:intermovements&Itemid=231

Photos from Burma Campaign UK and Wikimedia Commons

How would you relate the military regime's oppression of women and its oppression of communities?

I remember that there was a time when urban families were very conservative and careful with their daughters since the latter might be forced into marriages with military officers. This happens especially in rural areas where there are ethnic populations. Women are targeted for sexual abuse by the regime or even influential people because there is just this sense of lawlessness, that there is no way to get some kind of justice for such situations. This has been a way of subjugating and humiliating the local population and those who complained using the legal system were beaten up or killed.

Yet to see women and men who are coping and who are still pushing for change has been an inspiration. They take immense risks for themselves, given the horrendous conditions of prison and other serious consequences. They still resist. Some of them have found creative ways to empower themselves.



Sometimes I liken this process to that of domestic violence. People are in denial, saying that it is a domestic issue, that it is none of your business. And then they ask that we talk to the abuser in a certain way, that we don't provoke the abuser, that we don't demand too much, go along for the time being, find another way.

In most cases of domestic violence, we see a lack of support and acknowledgement

from the community and its refusal to empower survivors and to be open and direct in addressing the abuser. We see this kind of process in Burma, except that it is not a household of 10 people but a household of some 60 million people.

What makes it so marked is the way they treat Aung San Suu Kyi, confining and persecuting her, trying to humiliate her in public. In cases of domestic abuse, we sometimes blame survivors, telling them that they should not have spoken that way or maybe if you behaved yourself properly, you would have made it easier for yourself. And we see that kind of rhetoric towards Burma from various elements in the international community

always encouraged the Rohingya men to allow their women into the public sphere.

Rohingya women have been targeted for sexual violence by the regime as well. And when a community is feeling so much at threat, it justifies the very conservative elements to lock up the women for their own protection. Women are extremely important because they are needed to produce their own kind. That's why the prevailing mentality has influenced the military regime by making ethnic women pregnant or forcing daughters of influential community leaders to marry military officers. This allows the regime to dilute the bloodlines of communities and "Burmanise" them.

In fact, in some ethnic communities, it is a cultural decision by some leaders to discourage contraception.

Male leaders of communities recognise this problem that has become inherent that sexual violence is bad. That it is not just about women being exposed to sexual violence from the soldiers but women should not be subjected to sexual violence full stop.

We read in so many reports that women have been systematically raped. Over the years, what have been the changes in the use of women's bodies as weapons of war?

What is inspiring is the male leaders of communities recognise this problem. There is still a long way to go in terms of supporting women's rehabilitation. Nonetheless, it has become inherent that sexual violence is bad. That it is not just about women being exposed to sexual violence from the soldiers but women should not be subjected to sexual violence full stop.

How difficult is it to be a woman in Burma, even if we don't assure that one will be sexually abused?

We strongly disagree with religious persecution and discrimination just like the case of the Rohingyas. In some cases, it is like genocide given the authorities' restrictions on marriage, religious festivals and mere movement. It refuses a community's right to identify itself. So we have always been clear on the fundamental rights against racism and discrimination. But within that, it has always been a source of concern that the women are so cloistered, protected and shielded from the outside world. We have

Women's organisations and women themselves feel less ashamed that sexual violence is less of a taboo, that for them, even issues on sexuality should not be covered up. So we see these issues much more acknowledged and women much more courageous to speak up in public against sexual violence especially if they are survivors.

This has also been the reason why women have been so keen in the campaign against impunity, for criminal accountability. That's

Burmese society is traditionally much more open-minded and flexible on gender issues. It was militarisation that has conservatised the society, putting women into a “to-be-protected and helpless” role and making them targets of violence and subjugation.

why we see women from Bruma trying to pressure the Security Council over UN SCR 1325 and 1820. You see young women at the borders shouting, invoking these resolutions, from the grassroots being aware of these resolutions, so there is very sophisticated high-level advocacy happening. Because they have been denied their rights, they have asserted themselves as citizens of the world. Many of these women do not even have their documents.

Burmese society is traditionally much more open-minded and flexible on gender issues. There is this kind of contract even between husbands and wives to maintain family and community harmony. They also have divorce laws which allow women to take the property that she brought into her marriage and half of the couple's accumulated wealth.

Then we saw many women in high positions in the government and other professions. In the 1960s, Burma had a woman leading the medical school of Mandalay University at a time when very few women around the world were being allowed to be doctors. Aung San Suu Kyi's mother was the ambassador to India. At that time, some Western countries did not have women ambassadors. There were middle class women who had a great deal of power.

UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820

Lately the United Nations has recognised the roles of women and girls in times of conflict and reconstruction. On 31 October 2000, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 which calls for women's greater participation in peace-building. It urges states to “ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.”

Meanwhile, Resolution 1820 was passed on 19 June 2008 demanding the end of using sexual violence especially against women and girls as tactics of war. It asserted that, “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide, stresses the need for the exclusion of sexual violence crimes from amnesty provisions in the context of conflict resolution processes.”

Before 2008, the coalition Stop Rape Now collated some disturbing figures on the extent of gender-based violence committed during conflicts. In 1990, 20,000-50,000 women were raped during the Kosovo war. In 1994, up to 500,000 women were also raped during the Rwandan genocide. Rape was also frequent among displaced communities. In Sierra Leone, up to 64,000 women were raped and in Congo, 14,600.

There were even reports that UN peacekeeping forces are themselves perpetrating such violence against women and girls.

Sources: Stop Rape Now (nd). “Security Council Resolution 1820.” URL: <http://www.stoprapenow.org/pdf/Security%20Council%20Resolution%201820.pdf>; UN Security Council (2008). “Resolution 1820.” URL: [http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/391/44/PDF/N0839144.pdf?OpenElement&Women's+International+League+of+Peace+and+Freedom+\(nd\).+United+Nations+Security+Council+Resolution+1325+on+Women,+Peace+and+Security.”](http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/391/44/PDF/N0839144.pdf?OpenElement&Women's+International+League+of+Peace+and+Freedom+(nd).+United+Nations+Security+Council+Resolution+1325+on+Women,+Peace+and+Security.”) URL: <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html>

It was militarisation that has conservatised the society, putting women into a “to-be-protected and helpless” role and making them targets of violence and subjugation. It also limited women's socio-economic options because to be influential, one must be part of the military and have field experience.



Nipped by Nargis. Two years ago, the country was lashed by Cyclone Nargis, which left almost 140,000 dead and dispossessed almost two million. Various countries responded to the aftermath of this catastrophe, bringing with them much needed aid. But instead of allowing these to be delivered to the towns surrounding the Irrawaddy delta, the military regime generally blocked such assistance and delayed the processing of visas of foreign aid workers. In instances where it accepted the aid, it relabelled it as having been provided by them.

Sources: Marwaan, Macan-Marwa (12 May 2008), "Burma: Junta Aid Blocks Could Multiply Cyclone Toll." URL: <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42322>; Mizzima (1 May 2009), "Junta's role makes life more difficult for Nargis survivors." URL: <http://www.mizzima.com/special/one-year-after-nargis/2058-juntas-role-makes-life-more-difficult-for-nargis-survivors.html> and Seattle Times (13 May 2008), "Myanmar junta hands out aid boxes with generals' names." URL: http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2004389949_apmyanmarcyclone.html

Photo from Burma Campaign UK

How would you describe the country's constitution and its implications for women?

The 2008 Nargis constitution, that was forced as Burma was in the middle of a cyclone, stipulates that the head of the country must have a military background. It reserves 25 per cent must be reserved for the military. Most of the civilian parties are led by ex-military men. The military, not the parliament, decides who will be the minister for home affairs, defence and border affairs. And then the president who is a military person has the power to hire and fire the state government

When you look at all of that, when will there be space for women? When you look at the constitution as one point in a continuum where the military are consistently denying and restricting the space for women, you see that the 2010 elections and the constitution itself constitute a huge ball and chain for women.

What is your projection of the elections, given the many criticisms including those provisions that deliberately prevent Aung San Suu Kyi from running?

The fact that Aung San is excluded is symbolic of the fact that most people from Burma are excluded from the elections. Monks and nuns are not allowed and that's half a million already. At least half a million are internally displaced people (IDP). Probably there is even more now, given the escalating hostilities. Prisoners are not allowed to participate in elections. There are up to 4 million migrants from Burma, mostly undocumented. Easily up to five million potential voters will be disenfranchised. So the constitution excludes a significant proportion of key stakeholders in national politics.

Furthermore, the constitution requires more than 75 per cent of votes to move for amendment. And since the military comprises 25 per cent, no amendments will be possible without military support. Thus, the whole array of inherently unjust, discriminatory and undemocratic provisions in the constitution cannot be changed.

That is why a lot of ethnic groups are refusing to join the elections. There is a huge debate over whether there should be

a total boycott or a protest vote or not to officially join the elections and allow proxy parties. But the regime is absolutely determined to have showcase elections to show that they have “won” even though it

is by fraud. They have never gotten over 1990 the election result.

Disappointingly, many foreign governments are buying the argument that something is better than nothing, that maybe people should go along with the election and try to find some space. And for most people in Burma, the issue is the constitution and the movement is saying that we want a constitutional review.

How effective is the media and how strong is the image of Aung San Suu Kyi? We have a broad spectrum here where at one end is government propaganda and the other end Aung San Suu Kyi.

People treat the state media with a great deal of cynicism and suspicion. When Nargis hit, people were turning to international media including short-wave radio such as the Democratic Voice of Burma, Radio Free Asia, Voice of America and BBC all of which were restricted.

On the other hand, the regime has locked up Aung San Suu Kyi since 1989. When they softened the restrictions, she was still not allowed to travel. It was only in 2002 and 2003 that she was allowed to travel around Burma. By that time the regime felt secure because she had been out of the public eye for 13 years. In fact, they put out the propaganda that she was a spent force, that people were no longer coming to her rallies. So when we were able to obtain photos and videos of her travels, it was clear that that was not the case at all.

For many people, Aung San Suu Kyi is not just a person but what she stands for. She is has achieved very graceful but firm resistance to this brutal military regime. She is able to laugh and be courteous to everyone around her. She still speaks about people’s daily struggles. She always proposes solutions. So she resonates even to young people.

Her trials have been a way for the regime to humiliate her. For many people, she has been



Aung San Suu Kyi

Born on 19 June 1945 to Burma's independence hero, Aung San and diplomat Khin Kyi, Aung San Suu Kyi was educated in Burma, India, and the United Kingdom. She had been living with her family in the UK before she returned to Burma to help her ailing mother in 1988, which happened to be a turning point in the country's history.

As General Ne Win, the head of the then military regime stepped down, pro-democracy movements emerged, leading to the formation of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and calling for a free election. Aung San Suu Kyi was chosen as NLD's

secretary general and was widely supported by the populace.

Despite the landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, which gained 82 per cent of the votes, the new military junta placed her under house arrest and persecuted the other members of the NLD.

In 1990, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which her sons accepted on her behalf.

But just days before the end of her 14-year house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi was whisked away for trial for allowing the entry of an uninvited US national, who swam towards her house. On 11 August 2009, Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced to 18 months under house arrest. In an attempt to sound considerate, the Burmese junta said that this was half of what should have been the actual penalty, three years in prison with hard labour.

The Nargis Constitution effectively disqualifies Aung San Suu Kyi or anyone who is or was married to a foreign national. Aung San Suu Kyi was married to British scholar Michael Aris who died of cancer in 1999. Aris, despite the appeals of then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Pope John Paul II, repeatedly attempted to obtain a visa to Burma but was always denied.

Sources: Burma Campaign UK (nd). "A Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi." URL: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/burma/about-burma/about-burma/a-biography-of-aung-san-suu-kyi>; Isis International (12 August 2009). "Aung San Suu Kyi Verdict: Not Surprisingly but Certainly Painful." URL: http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1295&Itemid=100 and Somera, Nina (17 March 2008). "Burmese Plan Elections, Aung San Suu Kyi Banned from Running." URL: http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=882:burmese-plan-elections-aung-san-suu-kyi-banned-from-running-&catid=20:intervements&Itemid=231

Against All Odds.

Some members of the 1988 generation students continue to protest, exposing themselves to the risk of arrest, torture and even death. According to Human Rights Watch, Burma currently holds some 1,800 political prisoners. A 2004 report of the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) and the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners – Burma also provides details on the conditions of women political prisoners who endure sexual harassment, rape and reproductive health risks, on top of physical beatings.

Source: Burmese Women's Union (BWU) and the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners – Burma (2004). "Women Political Prisoners in Burma." URL: <http://www.aappb.org/Women%20Political%20Prisoners%20in%20Burma.pdf>; and Human Rights Watch (nd). "2100 by 2010: Free Burma's Political Prisoners." URL: <http://www.hrw.org/free-burmas-prisoners/intro>

Photo from Burma Campaign UK

a source of encouragement because they got to see her on television and photos. People were energised when she had this graceful composure even in such a situation. She is not a symbol of hope. She embodies that hope.

I had a friend who was traveling in Burma in the late 1980s and befriended a tricycle driver, who wanted him to come to the family home. It was a very spartan house. The only material possession in that house was a photo album of Aung San Suu Kyi.

But there is a generation of young women leaders who have spoken at the UN and with world leaders for the movement. One has access to the White House that even Than Shwe could never dream of. That makes us hopeful. There are so many courageous women from Burma. Some of them remain faceless for their own security, some are in detention. Many young women from exile and refugee communities are coming out and doing amazing work, despite not having access to educational opportunity.

We need to support these women and their political leadership at this time at all levels of society, one that it is sustained even

beyond the crisis. So that when Burma is free, the country can take off politically and economically because there are good women leaders. The male leaders have to change themselves. They need to be more open not just to women's equity but equality. They have to acknowledge the power of women's voices in this movement. We need to make sure that this becomes a permanent path in Burmese political culture.

What are usually the forms of resistance and pockets of empowerment for most Burmese?

There are 16 community based organisations working in conflict zones. They provide health and education to their communities, traveling to participate in strategic planning meetings and share resources. I asked, "how long have your communities been subjected to wars?" They said, "60 years." "How big is your army compared to the regime?" "Miniscule." "How much weapons and money do you have?" "Nothing." "How come you are still alive, you still exist in your communities? Have the community-based self-help organisations grown or reduced?" "Our numbers have grown. We are better organised."



There is a generation of young women leaders who have spoken at the UN and with world leaders for the movement. We need to support these women and their political leadership at this time at all levels of society. So that when Burma is free, the country can take off politically and economically because there are good women leaders.

And that day, it was the international day of action, videos of internally displaced people in that conflict area were being shared around the world as activist held rallies in front of Burmese embassies around the world. Then I asked them, “When you speak like this, who listens to you, the world or the regime?” And they said, “the world listens to us.” And I said, “That is your power.”

After the Saffron revolution, one of the creative ways they did this was to hang the pictures of the generals on the necks of street dogs.

They don't know who is listening out there but they have immense faith in the international community. They hope that somehow they will be heard and something will be done. They take immense risks to show their faces on video and put their voices out there.

After the Saffron revolution, people were still protesting. One of the creative ways they did this was to hang the pictures of the generals on the necks of street dogs. In Burmese culture, to call someone a dog is very insulting. So the army and the police started running after these street dogs and they looked even more silly. So it gave people some comfort and amusement.

The junta has been quite resilient. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the movement?

Its strengths are its diversity, resilience and resourcefulness, its capacity to change and adapt technologically. Its weakness is also its diversity. It is ironic that in a movement for democracy, the arguments of differences are

less tolerated by the international community. Another weakness is the lack of opportunity to communicate extensively.

But there has been a lot of work and achievement done in terms of confidence-building among groups. Many more alliances are being formed and these are not just on the political and resistance level. There are thematic alliances on youth, women, environment, transitional justice, economic development, education and health. So we can see that there is a multi-level, cross sectoral alliance that is happening – which has been an exciting development in the last 20 years. So the movement is so rich in terms of identity, not just along ethnic lines. People are starting to recognise their identity as a multilayered phenomenon.

But in terms of how decisions are made, because people are so spread apart, the process of consultation is so lengthy and complicated. So streamlining how decisions are made is something that will be happening soon in the movement.

How do you find the UN's role in Burma?

The movement is very quick in utilising the space allowed by the UN. The activists are much more articulate and strategic than the regime's own diplomatic corps. Unfortunately, the conservative governments such as China, Russia, India and even the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are protecting the regime.

But somehow that dynamic is shifting. Many of these countries are starting to feel the pinch of the negative effects in terms of economic and regional stability as resulting from the regime's misrule. Thus we say that the regime is a bad enemy but it is an even worse friend. The closer you get with the regime, the more hurt you will be by the regime's misbehaviour. We saw that in August 2009, when despite China's warnings, the regime embarked on a war right on China's doorsteps, sending 40,000

ASEAN

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed to minimise the threats posed by the Cold War and quell the tensions among its members. Prior to the establishment of the ASEAN in 1967, the region saw military confrontations between Indonesia and Malaysia, the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, riots between ethnic groups such as between Muslims and Chinese, and the Philippines' attempt to reclaim a territory in Northern Borneo, among others.

ASEAN's original members are Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. This expanded in the next decades as ASEAN accepted Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. It also accommodated its powerful northern neighbors, China, Japan and South Korea. Hence, the grouping ASEAN+3.

ASEAN adopted two key principles towards the goals of building confidence among its members; ensuring regional security and even consolidating a regional identity. Consensus and non-interference were also crucial. These key principles have led to both the successes and failures of the body. On the outset, the goal of achieving consensus spells a result that is quite dependent on the speed and progress of consultations. Meanwhile, the doctrine of non-interference likewise puts the efficacy of the consultations into question.

These two key principles likewise set ASEAN in great contrast with its European counterpart. While consensus-building is the aim of EU processes, the Union has been vocal in its stance on human rights especially in cases involving Central and Eastern European states. Though the EU is just a decade older than ASEAN, its structures are far more mature, owing to its members' relatively uncomplicated cultural differences and stable economic position. Moreover, the EU has the option to penalise and expel non-complying members, a feature that is quite impossible to build within the ASEAN due to its otherwise fragile constitution.

Sources: Chu, Shulong (2004). "US Security Strategy in Asia and Regional Security Regime: A Chinese View." URL: http://www.iips.org/04sec/04asiasec_chu.pdf; Gramigna, H.E. Pierre (Ambassador of Luxembourg to Japan) (1997). "European and ASEAN Integration Processes: Similar Models?" URL: <http://www.unu.edu/unupress/lecture18.html>; and Vatikiotis, Michael (1996). *Political Change in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge

refugees into China. And more war is expected when the regime attacks the Kuchin and the rest of the Shan states.

At the UN level, Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has been so conciliatory on Burma for so long that the regime feels that the worst the international community can do against them is bombard them with statements. Yet the regime is afraid of being held accountable for their crimes. They are afraid of economic sanctions, their assets being frozen, their access to weapons being restricted and this is where we have to hit them where it hurts.

That's why we have called the UN Security Council to set up a Commission of Inquiry,

inquiring into Burma's war crimes and crimes against humanity. If the Security Council has the guts to do this, it basically changes the rules of the game. The regime will start to understand that they can do it the nice way, engage in a dialogue with the international community and stakeholders in the country, release all political prisoners and conform to the benchmarks. Or the Commission, if it finds evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, the Security Council may decide whether or not to refer the case to the International Criminal Court.

One thing that most people don't realise is that the regime is not as monolithic and powerful, that it is not impervious to pressures. Many military leaders are concerned with campaigns on accountability, the role of border-based groups in capacitating the groups inside and for being a channel of information and documentation of the situation inside Burma. If the regime is not afraid, it will not be so repressive.

So there are still options for the regime to rehabilitate itself. Aung San Suu Kyi herself is not calling for the overthrow of the regime. She is actually calling for a negotiated settlement that involves all stakeholders. A couple of years ago, the NLD even offered to recognise the regime as an administrator, if only the regime would allow the parliament to convene based on the last election result. So Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD see transition as something to be managed and politically negotiated.

How about ASEAN?

Early in the day when Burma was invited into ASEAN, there was an assumption that Burma would reform organically through peer pressure from the other member states, follow the norms of ASEAN, which were not great to start with. But that didn't happen.

Although it is transforming into a rules-based organisation, ASEAN is still very much based on consensus, which is based on the lowest common denominator. So ASEAN's

bar was actually lowered when Burma entered. That's why we see how the charter, the terms of reference of the ASEAN intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights have been diluted – and all these to suit Burma's comfort level.

But ASEAN has also failed to be consistent in having a firm approach on Burma and that is because of Cambodia, Burma and Vietnam. They ganged up and refused to allow ASEAN to move forward. In the last summit, Indonesia had stuck its neck up and became a lone voice, speaking on something that is akin to international standards. On the other hand, Indonesia, when it sat on the UN Security Council failed to exercise its leverage to pressure the regime.

So there has been an inconsistency as well in the approach of individual ASEAN countries.

ASEAN has allowed itself to be bullied by the regime and its allies and it will continue to suffer the consequences in terms of credibility and regional stability.

Do you see ASEAN expelling Burma?

If Burma feels uncomfortable, it might withdraw from ASEAN. In fact, ten years ago, the regime chose which ASEAN activities it would like to participate in. The regime has not been totally committed to the process and it is now thinking of joining the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This is going to be an interesting dynamic, that the regime picks who it would like to work with.

What can the world do for Burma?

It can be united for Burma.

One of the cultural problems of the progressive community is that people don't want to impose. They always want to support and persuade. There is so much love for statements rather than of actions. The sense of mission is diluted by so much consultation and debate that in the end nothing or very

little gets done beyond the statement. And yet we should be much more willing to have a belief of what we are doing and match this belief with actions.

The international community has not been united on Burma and it is time for some unity and consistency so that the regime will know that it has nowhere else to run, that it cannot play one country off against another.

People talk of disunity in the movement but the problem really is in the disunity of the international community. We should not be tolerating the impunity of this regime especially on women and children. It has been going on way too long. It has been a slow burning situation that is gradually starting to get out of control.

If there had been more bombs and acts of terrorism, the international community would have gone into a crisis mode and try to fix something. But because the Burmese people and movement have been relatively well-behaved and civilised in the way they try to organise change and gain international support, the international community has been largely apathetic. Frankly, the way ASEAN and the international community have responded to Burma basically tells the movement that bad behaviour gets better response than trying to pursue political and peaceful means. That is a very dangerous message.

So we need a Commission of Inquiry, a global arms embargo. We need to challenge the regime on the validity of the 2008 constitution. There has to be a cessation of hostilities. We must go after the regime's financial reserves from oil and gas revenues which they stash in Singapore. Make it feel the pinch.

I don't think the question is generating enough political will in the international community. It is not an issue of capacity of the Burmese. The regime has not been compelled to make a commitment to genuine reforms. ■