

Impoverishment as the Road to Freedom

Dr Khin Zaw Win

“For 26 years Myanmar experienced impoverishment in the name of socialism; it now appears there is to be impoverishment in the name of democracy.”

- Dr. Khin Zaw Win,

I was released after 11 years of imprisonment for sedition and human rights work on 6 July this year. During my years in prison the external agency that had the greatest positive impact on prison conditions and the lives of the inmates was the International Committee of the Red Cross. With a not-too-large budget and staff, it has managed to visit nearly all the prisons and a large number of convict labour camps in Myanmar and its efforts have resulted in marked improvements in many aspects of prison life.

Perhaps it was helped by arriving at a time when the domestic establishment was ready for reform but then this only shows the importance of timing. The way the ICRC is set up and its modus operandi are perhaps unique. And there's still so much to be done - shortages, deprivation, neglect and corruption are everyday things. Nevertheless this organization instituted critical inputs at a critical time, and it has become a presence that is effective and welcomed, even an integral part in the workings of the nation.



It is therefore sad to recall that its re-entry to Myanmar in expanded form in 1999 had been in the face of vehement opposition from an unexpected quarter.

The irony is inescapable: the economic decline during the previous one-party state in Myanmar and its attendant hardships had been one main impetus behind the upheaval of 1988. Now economic hardship is being prescribed to bring about democracy. For 26 years Myanmar experienced impoverishment in the name of socialism; it now appears there is to be impoverishment in the name of democracy.

If that weren't enough irony, the present sanctions - intended to bring about political talks, national reconciliation, democracy (and a dozen other high-minded objectives) - denote the tolling of the bell in a way. Talk about acts that are irredeemable. Initially sanctions and other measures were instituted to push for political change. At the focal point and cutting edge for such change, opportunities did arise, but they were either thrown away or misused. And for this the country is

being subjected to more punitive measures from the world's economic powers. The mood - and perhaps the likely consequences - hark back to the Treaty of

Versailles and the U.S. involvement in Iran and Vietnam, all of which have few parallels as engines of instability. I would like to repeat what was said about the Vietnam debacle: the wrong strategy at the wrong place at the wrong time. If instability is viewed and prescribed as a precursor of democratic change, we are on pretty desperate ground indeed.

Myanmar is being subjected to economic warfare no less. In the assumptions and hopes of some, this would lead to political instability. And then what? In an atmosphere pervaded by coup and countercoup (actual and threatened), regional rebellion and outright hostilities, orderly democratic transitions, elections, constitutions and kindred things shall all come to naught. Even if those extreme situations were averted, a divided and ineffectual military set against a weak,

In the absence of a system that orders state power, this has been accompanied by varying degrees of uncertainty and crisis. The Armed Forces are having to learn the hard way that only such a legitimate and broadly-acceptable system can offer assurance for its long-term integrity as an institution. A mutual dependency of interdependence with liberal democracy appears to be emerging.

What Myanmar needs is not just democracy, but stable and liberal democracy. This isn't merely a pious statement nor an academic one, nor a formula that people from well-meaning international organizations recite. It is an expression of painful necessity.

The country's past experiences with democratization have not been altogether happy. After four decades of

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faction-ridden and equally ineffective democratic government are still invitations to disaster.

These are not nightmares that only happen to other people in other countries. They happened right in this country not so long ago. The spectre of the years immediately following independence still haunts living memories. Have the lessons not been learnt?

Had a democratic government been installed early on, shortly after 1988, a coming to terms with the military would have been necessitated. Not only that, the government would have had to deal with factions or blocs within the Armed Forces to avert dissension or worse. In so doing, the loyalty and goodwill of the bulk of the Forces would have been critical. It should be clear by now that this then was the delicate path that any government would have had to tread.

Alas, to the nation's detriment, this was dismissed out of hand. The military, on its part, is going through multiple transitions of its own.

alienation there is now to be another, hopefully more sensible, attempt. It's going to include decentralization too. Call it multistage or phased democratization if you will, but it's certainly not a case of reverting to dictatorship. If the real lessons of the setbacks and disappointments are taken and internalized, we can look forward to Myanmar's future democracy being on a much sounder footing. The Myanmar people should be enabled to make sober, unemotional and responsible choices regarding their own political future. At this particular juncture there is really just a straight choice between two paths:

- * Taking the most viable path there is and attempting to make it as liberal as possible.
- * Conversely, taking the most-touted liberal path and attempting to make it viable.

The international community could have a hand in either. Of one thing we should be clear though: attempting to keep the country poor and undeveloped is not the way to any kind of political solution, democratic or otherwise.

What can be seen in Myanmar is a society, a people, making the most of what they've got, exploiting every new opening, stretching their own safety nets, stepping into the unknown. Most of this is being done without any formal assistance or guidance, whether from the state or from overseas. It is a quiet but extensive and far-reaching exercise in self-help. If this Country makes it through, it is little thanks to those in high places, at home and abroad. For any number of reasons, and in the long run, this really is the best way.

This is a time of trial for the nation. There have been others: sieges and conquests, wars against imperial powers, fascist occupation, civil war.

The nation has seen and endured all this, and has come through. It shall do so again. The overriding question now for a citizen is whether one stands with the besieger or with the besieged motherland; that for a concerned person from abroad is whether the present siege, flawed as to intention and to method, should be allowed to continue. These are stark and clear-cut questions and there is no avoiding them.

Dr. Khin Zaw Win was recently released "Prisoner of conscience" (Time in prison 11 years, 1994-2005). We are sorry we do not have permission from him. We hope the author will understand the situation.

_____ Editor- Rebound88.