



## **The Emerging Role of Civil Society in Burma and Challenges and Opportunities of the 2010 Elections**

### ***Report of the workshop discussion at the Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF)***

**3 October 2010**

#### **First session: Hearing voices from civil society inside and the emerging role of civil society in Burma**

Civil society is not dead or paralyzed in Burma/Myanmar, in fact it is growing and developing and learning to work more efficiently and effectively despite the challenges it faces.

During the socialist era, there was no space for civil society in the country and the country was extremely isolated. All of the participants agreed that Nargis was a turning point for civil society in Burma/Myanmar. There was an urgent need for local civil society groups to respond to the crisis since the government did not allow international NGOs (INGOs) to enter. The population of Burma/Myanmar mobilized on a large scale to meet the needs of those suffering in the Irrawaddy Delta. Civil society groups were able to develop and multiply after Nargis and the working space for civil society grew.

Civil society groups are taking advantage of this space by enhancing partnerships and coordination. The Myanmar NGO Network is a good example of NGO partnership, and has not only enhanced coordination between local NGOs, but also between national civil society and INGOs and between NGOs and the government.

Many restrictions still exist, but civil society groups are trying to develop the socio-political space, and have also learnt by experience how to operate in the difficult environment. Most organizations continue to work unhindered even without official registration. In some cases, civil society organizations are stronger and better financed than the local authorities, so they have a strong political-economic influence in their local communities.

The aim of civil society is to support and empower people to make decisions for themselves and to assist communities in responding to their own needs. Their aim is to empower youth, women, and disenfranchised communities.

To do this, civil society also needs access to capacity-building initiatives. They need more knowledge and skills. These skills can only be obtained through more partnerships, particularly with the international community. Civil society needs the international community to advocate on their behalf with the national authorities to allow them more space as well as with other members of the international community to give more support to local civil society.

The need for long term financial support and experience sharing with civil society in Burma/Myanmar was also underlined.

### **Second session: Challenges and opportunities of the elections.**

All participants acknowledged that the military regime in Burma/Myanmar perceives the upcoming elections on 7 November as a way to legitimize military rule, to ensure military control and to eradicate the opposition. It is certain that the military will try to control the process and win. However, if there is hope for a sustainable transition to democracy in Burma, change must be initiated by the people of Burma/Myanmar themselves.

Although the election process is not free and fair and although the 2008 constitution is flawed, the elections represent the first opportunity in over 20 years to be able to mobilize communities on their democratic rights. Some organizations are using the opportunity to inform communities and individuals about their rights and encouraging them that it is their right to make their own decisions on this issue. It is a chance to develop people's political awareness, particularly young people who have never had the opportunity to vote before. Civil society is working (despite the challenges) to inform the population so that the elections can be as free and fair as possible.

The basic strategy is to start mobilizing the population and to lay the groundwork for new elections in 2015. The parties and legislators will have to start from scratch to learn how to function as effective political parties. Capacity building will be the focus of the next five years.

Some civil society groups believe that the opportunities of these elections are therefore to:

- Enhance political awareness and knowledge among the population
- Create opportunities for dialogue and discussion on political matters at grassroots level
- Develop skills
- If the opposition can gain 25% of the seats, provide checks and balances to military rule

The elections are only legislative elections; they are not elections for a new government. Therefore, regime change is not possible in these elections. After the elections, the elected legislators in the upper and lower houses will then elect one President and two vice-Presidents. The President will choose a new government. If the opposition forces can win 25% of the seats, the elections could provide the opportunity to have checks and balances on the military rule. This is because, according to the SPDC

constitution, 25% of the elected representatives can call for parliament to be convened. If the opposition can do this, it means that there will be less likelihood for the new parliament to be just a 'rubber stamp' for the military when it meets once a year.

Some participants believe that boycotting the elections only gives more power to the military – if no one stands or no one votes, then the military backed parties will win without opposition, and they will be able to say they are the only true representatives of the people. Most groups felt it was not acceptable to leave the population with no choice but to vote for the military backed parties.

It was also suggested that the military may not be able to control the election process as much as they would like. The elections laws are very similar to the 1990 elections, and therefore if parties and candidates make it to Election Day, it is possible that the voting will be free and fair. It must be noted that opposition groups have already been discriminated against by the Election Commission, and the military will definitely use whatever methods it can to eliminate the opposition. However, everyone hates the military, and given a choice, they will not vote for the military backed candidate. Therefore, the opposition may be able to gain some seats.

The elections may also lead to internal disputes inside the military regime. A number of generals and leading military men have been forced to resign as part of the military's plan to fill the 75% of 'civilian' seats. In General Ne Win's 'socialist' era, it made no difference if one was an active service army officer or retired, because everybody was poor. But today army officers are very privileged and have become rich. The ones who become civilians will lose all their privileges and become poor. This is a recipe for disaster unless the ex-officers are rewarded as 'elected representatives'. This could be particularly bad for those who do not win seats at the elections – suddenly their power and wealth is removed. Even if the military men become ministers, if the elected government is not more powerful than the military, they will lose out. Therefore, the ex-military officers may begin to see that their personal interests are different from those of the military as a whole.

Also, there are two main government backed parties - the USDP and the NUP. While neither is considered opposition to the government, they may possibly oppose each other in the parliament. The cronies of the USDP currently have far more access to money-making opportunities than members of the NUP. Some members of the NUP may therefore see it in their economic interest to reach out to the opposition to foster a more liberal socio-economic climate. Even though the motivation would be personal interest, rather than the will of the people, this internal tension could help pave the way for a new dynamic in the elected parliaments that could eventually lead to more democratic reforms, and certainly lead to more checks and balance over military rule.

Some participants from the opposition in exile believe that the 2008 constitution and the election process are too unfair and undemocratic to participate in. Participating in the elections will only work in the military's favour. They are hoping that if no one participates and no one votes, then the international community will reject the elections and somehow put increased pressure on the military generals to enter into genuine 'tri-partite' dialogue with the opposition and ethnic leaders. They doubt very much that the NUP will be a check and balance to the regime, as they are backed by the military.

While most participants believed that the opposition in exile is morally right, most were also concerned about leaving the elections to the fate of the response of the international community. Based on the international response for the past 20 years, the community is likely to be divided and there will not be a strong response that could persuade the military to negotiate. Even if the international community does reject the elections, it still means that the current status quo will be maintained in the country, where the SPDC has 100% of the power.

All of the actors from inside the country believed that, despite the odds against the opposition forces, it was best to use the opportunity of the elections to fight the military and grab as much of their power as possible. The military won't give up power on their own; the people of Burma have to initiate an environment where the power of the military can be contested. 2010 may be the beginning of the end of military rule.