

MULTI-PARTY TALKS

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“Multi-Party Talks” on Burma was first proposed by the Ethnic Nationalities Council in 2006¹. At that time, the international community was still very divided on how to deal with the question of Burma. The idea was to try to bring together the two extremes – neighbouring countries and the West. It was a best case scenario based on the North Korean Six-Party Talks – North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia & the USA – and the “Quartet of International Mediators for the Middle East” - UN, EU, Russia & the USA . Of course, this assumed that the international community had the will to resolve the problem of Burma. In reality, Burma is not on the priority list of any nation’s agenda to attract the kind of attention and resources necessary to set up a new international mechanism to enable a “Multi-Party Talk” on Burma to take place.

Shocked by the brutal repression of monks in the “Saffron Revolution” of September 2007, the international community has since become more cohesive. But the gap still remains between those who want to impose more sanctions and those who feel engaging the regime will produce more results. Neither has made much progress.

In December 2007, the “Group of Friends” of the UN Secretary-General was formed. It consists of Australia, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Britain, the US and Vietnam, as well as the country holding the presidency of the European Union – currently Sweden. It differs from the concept of the “Multi-Party Talks”:

1. It does not include Burma
2. It is an ad-hoc body unofficial body advising the UN Secretary-General
3. It has no clearly defined goals or a vision of what can be accomplished
4. The composition is slightly higher and different – voluntary membership rather than strategic stakeholders (Australia, France, Indonesia, Norway, Singapore, Thailand, Britain and Vietnam versus South Asia, ASEAN and the EU as blocks).

Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 further galvanized the international community to try to work together in more concrete terms in a limited field – cyclone relief. The Tripartite Core Group – Burma, the UN and ASEAN – was formed to coordinate the work. The EU, Norway, USA and other nations provided funding. This has worked well enough to encourage the international community to attempt to expand both the geographical scope and work of the TCG. This has, however, not been welcomed by the SPDC.

To date there is still no mechanism to coordinate the international community. But it is unlikely that a “Multi-Party Talk” can be initiated. This is because:

- a) The SPDC is not interested in engaging the international community to solve Burma’s problems
- b) The SPDC is determined to implement its Road Map and hold elections in 2010. It does not want any foreign involvement in the process
- c) The SPDC would like to continue exploiting the differences that exist in the international community and it would rather have direct bilateral talks with nations like the USA

- d) Burma is still not high enough on the priority list of the international community and no nation is going to allocate the necessary resources

It is unlikely that the international situation will change much with regards to Burma in the short-term and medium-term. It is also very unlikely that the SPDC will change its attitude before the 2010 elections. Therefore, rather than pursue the “Multi-Party Talks”, it may be more beneficial in the short-term to try and provide input to the “Group of Friends”, which will be meeting on 26 September.

However, given the perception that the UN Secretary-General is weak, and the fact that the Obama administration is reviewing its Burma policy, nothing drastic can be expected. The most positive outcome might be an agreement to better coordinate increased humanitarian aid to Burma. While this may not be much, it should be welcomed because there are reports that the Burmese economy may fare badly this year and that the agriculture sector may face a crisis.

Does this mean that there is nothing that the international community can do? Yes and no. Timing is a key factor. In terms of humanitarian aid there is a lot more that the international community can do:

1. Cyclone recovery in the delta
2. Famine in Chin State
3. On-going refugee crisis on the Thai border
4. Internally Displace Populations in Shan, Karen and Karenni States
5. Potential refugee and IDP crisis in Kachin, Shan and Mon States on the Chinese and Thai borders
6. Potential famine in northern Rakine State/ Rohingya and the Dry Zone
7. Potential economic crisis based on rice crop failure

In terms of politics, the scope is more limited. While many are hopeful that the new engagement with the US will lead to a new policy, this possibility is remote. For the USA, the minimum concession is the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The SPDC cannot agree. For the SPDC, the minimum requirement is the lifting of sanctions. For the USA, without the release of DASSK this cannot be done. The stalemate will, therefore, continue as long as Senior-General Than Shwe and the SPDC remain in power.

International efforts to bring about change in Burma have not succeeded in the last 20 years. We can keep trying internationally but it may take another 20-40 years. We cannot depend on it.

One possibility for change is the 2010 elections. Can we try something different? Do not misunderstand me. I am not supporting the 2010 elections. I am also not saying that the elections will bring positive change. As far as Senior-General Than Shwe is concerned, there will be no change whether or not the elections take place. The Army must remain in absolute control either directly or indirectly. As a result, international sanctions will remain in place. The status quo will continue. What I am saying is that when there is change, when there is movement, there might be a possibility to introduce something that will improve the situation. Without movement, there is nothing anyone can do.

The SPDC prefers the status quo. It does not really care whether sanctions are lifted or not. It wants the international community and especially the domestic opposition to remain paralyzed. We need to be prepared to influence the outcome when change takes place:

1. Generational change within the ruling SPDC. Is there any way to change the mindset of the senior officers? For example, Cyclone Nargis forced many low-level and mid-level army officers and civil servants over a wide range of ministries to interact with the population and civil society to deal with immediate life and death issues without referring back to the top. Can the new Generals coming to power be made to see that it is possible to deal with existing problems in a different way?
2. Change from direct to indirect military rule – the elections. While the SPDC plans to control this process every step of the way, they cannot be 100% certain. Even if the democratic opposition did nothing, the outcome is uncertain for the military. This is true of elections even in democratic countries. People are unpredictable. The more factors there are to consider in an election, the more uncertain the outcome becomes. If the elections returned democratic leaders or more liberal military officers, are we prepared to welcome them and empower them to sustain the change?
3. Internal dynamics within the military between officers who will remain in the army and those who will have to retire to be elected. Can we somehow empower the elected members so that the elected government provides some degree of oversight?

When there is change, our actions will either help to shape events in a positive or negative direction. We need to evaluate whether they will contribute to democracy or dictatorship in the short-term and the long-term. It is not possible in the heat of the moment to make such evaluations. So it is important to start mapping out the options now.

Thank you

¹ **Multi-Party Talks On the UNION OF BURMA/MYANMAR**

Vision: To enable the Union of Burma/Myanmar to become a proud contributor to the vibrant life of the region and an economic gateway connecting South Asia - South East Asia - East Asia.

Goals of the Multi-Party Talks:

- To Affirm the Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of the Union of Burma/Myanmar;
- To Assist the Process of National Reconciliation in the Union of Burma/Myanmar;
- To Assist Economic Integration within the Region in the Union of Burma/Myanmar;
- To Assist Transition to Democracy in the Union of Burma/Myanmar;

(Working Groups for each of the target areas can be formed with experts from the Union of Burma and the international community, not necessarily only from the participants in the Multi-Party Talks)

Possible Participants in the Multi-Party Talks:

1. Union of Burma/Myanmar;
2. China;
3. South Asia (India & Bangladesh) - 2 seats;
4. Thailand, Laos & ASEAN Chair - 3 seats;
5. Japan;
6. United Nations (S-G Representative and UNDP Residence Coordinator) – 2 Seats;
7. European Union (Presidency & Commission) - 2 seats;
8. Russian Federation;
9. United States of America;

Possible Concrete Benefits from the Multi-Party Talks:

- Coordination of Increased Humanitarian Aid;
- Coordination of Technical Assistance by ADB, World Bank, IMF, Japan, China, India and others;
- Coordination of Economic Strategies in the Region;
- Coordination of Strategies to Combat HIV-AIDS, Infectious Diseases, Drugs, Human Trafficking, Environmental Degradation, Transnational Crime, etc;
- Coordination of Political Expectations and Time Frames;