

Burma Policy Consultation

CHINA'S ROLE IN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN BURMA

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Keynote Speech by Harn Yawngwe, Director, Euro-Burma Office, Brussels

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak here today. It is a great honour.

I am very glad to see both Mr Scott Reid from the Conservative Party and Mr James Dewar from the New Democratic Party. Burma has always attracted support across the political spectrum and I am glad to see the tradition being continued. Both of them are also Members of Parliament and it highlights the fact that the Parliament of Canada has always been at the forefront of the fight for democracy in Burma.

Congratulations to the Canadian Friends of Burma for a truly fruitful discussion. I know from experience that it is not easy to organize such conferences especially with people from around the world participating. I am also happy to see many old friends and would like you all to honour Murray Thompson who is here with us. He was the founder of the Canadian Friends of Burma.

This conference on China's role in Burma is the first of its kind and long overdue. We in the Burmese democracy movement have unfortunately focused too much on the west. We need to work more closely with our neighbours.

As a Canadian, I am proud of Canada's contribution. This conference in a way highlights the way Canada has contributed to democratization in Burma. Canadians are too modest. They believe their country is too small to make an impact on the world scene and generally prefer to follow the crowd. They are wrong. Canada has led the way in many areas with regard to Burma and others have followed.

In 1991, Canada was the first country to financially support the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). In other words, we recognized the results of the 1990 general elections in Burma in concrete terms. The support was provided through 'Rights & Democracy' which was established by the Parliament of Canada. Norway, Denmark, the USA, and others soon followed Canada's lead.

Again in 1999, Canada was the first country to financially support the National Reconciliation Programme (NRP) through Canadian Lutheran World Relief. The NRP allowed the ethnic nationalities to begin rebuilding their unity. This is important because in 1994 the United Nations General Assembly passed a unanimous resolution calling for a 'tripartite dialogue' – the military, democracy advocates, and the ethnic nationalities – in order to resolve Burma's problems and build a sustainable democracy. The military is united under the State Peace and Development Council. The democracy movement has a natural leader in Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The ethnic nationalities were divided – there are seven states, each multi-ethnic; there were ceasefire armies, non-ceasefire armies, political parties. Each had a different goal and many wanted independence. Today through the NRP, we now have the Ethnic

Nationalities Council which represents the seven states. The ENC's policy is not independence but democratic federal union of equal states. The NRP also allowed the ceasefire armies and the non-ceasefire armies to carry out a dialogue and agree on areas of common interest. Starting with Canada, the NRP has been funded by Denmark, the European Union, Ireland, Germany and Sweden.

In 2001, Canada also started funding projects in support of civil society in Burma through Inter-Pares and other. Today everyone wants to fund civil society in Burma. Canada may be small but it can have a great impact especially when it leads the way.

But unfortunately, while Canada has led the way in the past, it has fallen behind. This is because the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) does not have a budget allocation for Burma. Funding for the projects I mentioned had to be found in creative ways and the amounts are limited. CIDA's bilateral aid program for Burma was cancelled in 1988 after the brutal military take-over at the request of the Burmese democracy movement. Of course, we do not want aid for the Burmese military. We want support for the development of democracy and the empowerment of civil society in Burma. Therefore, Canada needs to set up a new mechanism that will allow CIDA to fund Burma projects but ensure that it does not go to the Burmese military. I am sure both Mr Reid and Mr Dewar will be able to do something about it.

Let me now move on. I will not repeat the bad news about Burma. Mr Reid and Mr Dewar have done so adequately. Let me touch on some topics of concern to us.

The National Convention – It is supposedly being wrapped up on 3 September. After that there will be a new constitution, a referendum and elections. Many fear that if they succeed, the SPDC will gain legitimacy. As far as I am concerned, they cannot gain legitimacy even after they get a new constitution. Every body is aware of the flawed and undemocratic process and without the genuine acceptance and support of the people, the SPDC can never become legitimate. They may have a new constitution but they will still have all the unsolved problems – political, and economic. Burma will also remain a pariah state racked by instability and uncertainty. The recent unrest in Burma will continue as long as the right policies are not adopted.

The UN Security Council – Many Burmese were also dismayed by the double-veto in January by China and Russia at the UN Security Council. But there is a silver lining. We should look at what China actually said. China for the first time publicly admitted that Burma was facing serious problems and it advised the generals to not only solve the problem but to also listen to their people. Since then, China has been working behind the scenes to bring about change in Burma. So now we actually have an international consensus on Burma. Everyone agrees that the status quo is not sustainable. In the past, the west wanted change but Burma's neighbours were happy to work with the status quo as long as they benefited economically. Now everybody realizes that unless there is change in Burma, the region could become unstable. The new attitude of Burma's neighbours and the renewed attention being paid to Burma by the UN Secretary-General and his Burma Advisor means that the international community is more engaged on Burma than ever before. This is good news.

The Burmese democracy movement – The consultation yesterday was very encouraging. I believe we have matured in our understanding of democracy and more

realistic in our expectations. This is a good sign for the future of democracy in Burma. In the past, we were very concerned about party politics but now we are more focused on people's participation at the grassroots. This consultation is a good example of civil society in action. None of us came here as leaders of political parties but as individuals who have the same concern and who want to be able to contribute to our society, our nation. I am sure there will be more such consultations in the future.

Unity – Some have expressed concern about the unity of the movement. People think that to have unity, there must be only one organization and only one voice. That is not how a democracy works. Opposing positions have to be voiced and debated openly. When a consensus is reached, you can have real unity. Following a single leader blindly is not democracy. For example, some people are concerned about the Karen National Union (KNU) because it has lost a strong leader – General Bo Mya. They say that in the past decisions were reached quickly and everyone spoke with one voice, while today no one can give a quick decision and everybody has different opinions. Having different opinions or being slow is not a problem if we are trying to build a democracy. The key is whether or not the differences can be debated and whether or not some joint decision can be reached, and whether everyone will abide by the decision once it is reached.

As I stated previously, democracy is taking root in Burma and if we work to empower the people we do not have to worry about the military's National Convention. The generals cannot succeed without the support of the people.

Internationally too, we can look forward to a more sustained effort to bring about change in Burma. China will work for change too but we should not expect it to condemn the military regime like the US does.

In fact, China may become friendlier to the generals in order to be able to influence them to change. We should be aware of such differences and not immediately condemn China for becoming friendlier with the SPDC.

In the same way, our Canadian friends need to understand that the Burmese have to live between two giants – China and India.

Canada can take a strong stand on democracy and condemn human rights abuses where ever it is found. But sometimes, the Burmese democracy movement may not want to speak about it too loudly. It does not mean we are not committed to democracy and human rights. It just means that we have to be a bit more careful. It is like Canada having to live with the gaint neighbour to the south – Thank you.