

BURMA - Perspective of the Ethnic Nationalities  
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Some in the audience may be wondering why I have been asked to speak about the perspective of the Ethnic Nationalities or ethnic minorities.

After all, the recent popular uprisings in Burma have focused attention on the fact that we have a brutal military dictatorship and that the people want democracy. They may ask, 'Why are we complicating matters by bringing in the ethnic minorities?'

In one sense, they are right. The uprising was not purely an affair of the majority 'Burman' people. Demonstrations took place in the Burman homeland and in all the seven ethnic states. The monks that were brutally suppressed were not all Burmans. Many were Arakan, Karen, Mon, Shan and even Kachin. So it is clear that the democracy movement includes all the people of various ethnic backgrounds.

But on the other hand, it is very important that we talk about the ethnic nationalities. Why? Because although each ethnic group may be a minority, when you take the seven ethnic states together, their population make up 40% of population of Burma (20 out of 50 million people), and their homelands together make up 60 % of the territory of Burma (almost the size of Germany). The problem of the ethnic nationalities, therefore, is not a minority problem. It is a major constitutional problem.

Secondly, the Burmese military first came to power in 1962 using the excuse that it seized power to prevent the disintegration of the nation. At that time, the ethnic states were trying to legally amend the constitution to transform Burma into a federation. Therefore, if the military is to give up power, we need to resolve this question.

Third, while the ethnic people also want democracy as we have already seen, they have been engaged in an armed struggle with the central government since 1949. We need to understand what the ethnic nationalities want if we want peace in Burma. However, it is important to note that the ethnic conflict in Burma is not horizontal like in the Balkans. It is a vertical conflict against the central government.

Given this complicated situation, the United Nations General Assembly in 1994 adopted a resolution that called for a 'Tripartite Dialogue' to solve the problem and build a sustainable democracy. This means a dialogue among the military, democracy advocates, and the ethnic nationalities.

This was the first time that the world body had recognized that the ethnic nationalities' struggle for their rights is as legitimate as the struggle for democracy. It means that while the ethnic nationalities are part of the democracy movement, they also have a unique and different role to play in rebuilding Burma.

This is not understood by many people. In the name of unity, they want the ethnic nationalities to have exactly the same position as the rest of the democracy movement. This is not unity but uniformity. The Burma Army's motto is 'One blood, one voice,

one command'. You cannot build unity with such a slogan especially when 40% of your population is different. Europe knows what it means to have unity in diversity.

So, from the ethnic nationalities point of view, the UNGA resolution is their window of opportunity. Fifty-eight years of armed conflict has not brought about the desired results. It is, therefore, crucial in their view that dialogue with the military is achieved.

But the ethnic nationalities are well aware that a dialogue in itself will not bring about change. Many ethnic armies entered into ceasefires with the military starting from 1989 in order to find a political solution. But the military has not kept its promises.

To bring about the desired change, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic forces will have to skilfully use the economic and social concerns of the people. They will also need the full and coordinated support of the international community.

In addition to sanctions, we need to find a way to get Burma's neighbours to commit themselves to help bring about change in Burma.

Burma's neighbours have awoken up to the fact that the military's mismanagement is causing instability in the region. I believe we now have an opportunity to convince our neighbours that if they want stability and economic development, things have to change in Burma. If we cannot convince China, Russia and India to help bring about change in using the language of democracy or human rights, we might be able to convince them to support change now because of economic factors.

There is no better time than now. The world is focused on Burma. The UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor Professor Ibrahim Gambari is fully engaged. The UN Security Council has also endorsed his role. My recommendations are as follows:

1. The international community should fully support the efforts of Gambari. There should be no parallel processes to the UN effort.
2. Gambar's efforts should be fully supported by the UN Security Council.
3. However, the Security Council cannot be used as the sole instrument to move the dialogue process. It will lose its effectiveness if it cannot reach a consensus and it will backfire if China or Russia were to use their veto again.
4. We need a more permanent international effort to support Gambari. A multi-party talk along the lines of the Six Party Talks for North Korea but including the UN is needed. We need to get the neighbouring countries committed to supporting Gambari and bringing about change in Burma or they may be tempted to break rank in order to pursue individual national interests at the expense of a rival.
5. A 'Friends of Burma' or 'Core Group' to advise Gambari is not good enough. It excludes the SPDC. Being extremely paranoid, they will see it as a conspiracy against them. They need to be included and also held accountable in an international forum. The process around Gambari needs to be institutionalized.

6. In this context, an EU special envoy could represent the EU in Multi-Party Talks. It would be better still if the EU envoy had a troika team to assist him.
7. It is crucial that the UN, SPDC, India, China and the US are in the Multi-Party Talks. EU, ASEAN and Japan will be needed to provide the balance. Russia might also be needed to ensure that it does not become a spoiler.

In terms of the EU, opportunities to advance the agenda will present themselves at the ASEAN Summit, the EU-India Dialogue, and the EU-China Dialogue this month.

Thank you.

Question asked at the one-day Conference:

Q. If there is a 'Tripartite Dialogue', who will represent the ethnic nationalities?

A. The concept of a 'Tripartite dialogue' does not necessarily mean that three parties or three persons have to be at the table. For example, the SPDC is now talking to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi now as it did in 2000-2003. She is the key player. No one is asking for a third party to be introduced now. We have to see dialogue as a process. We are just trying to get a process started. The two parties have not even begun to discuss substantive matters. The 'Tripartite Dialogue' concept means that when substantive discussions start, we cannot solve the problem just by talking about democracy versus military rule. The military came to power because of its disagreement over a constitutional matter. The talks will have to deal with constitutional matters. When this happens, the process needs to be expanded to include all stakeholders, especially the ethnic nationalities. In other words, the ethnic armed groups have to be given an alternate way to settle their grievances – a political solution instead of armed struggle.