

Negotiation and Reconciliation: An Interview with Burmese Dissident Aung Naing Oo

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From 1988 to 1999, Burmese scholar and writer Aung Naing Oo was a member of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), a dissident pro-democracy group based in Thailand. As part of ABSDF, he worked with armed ethnic armies fighting for greater autonomy from the military regime in Burma and acted as a diplomat and international lobbyist for the pro-democracy movement.

Ano, as he is known, has a B.A. from Rangoon University, a diploma in diplomacy training from New South Wales University and an MPA from Harvard's Kennedy School. He is also an alumnus of the eleventh annual Democracy & Diversity program in Cracow. Currently a research associate with the National Reconciliation Program (NRP), Ano writes articles and speaks publicly on issues in contemporary Burmese politics. Recently he spoke at the Graduate Faculty on the current situation in Burma, and granted TCDS the following interview.

TCDS: After years of military rule, Burma appears to be on the threshold of major political change: in your words, "the time of reckoning is near." What has happened that this change now seems possible? What do the junta leaders stand to gain from opening up the political stage? And what are the grounds, if any, for such optimism, given the seeming stagnation of the talks between SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council, the military junta currently in power; now known as State Peace & Development Council (SPDC)] and the NLD [National League for Democracy]?

ANO: The Burmese regime has no political will to embark on the road to democratic transition. The generals see no benefit for them to change. This is the case with almost all authoritarian regimes. Recall that prolonged hostilities in some diamond- and resource-rich African countries, such as Congo and Sierra Leone, have been attributed to unwillingness on the part of the military and political leaders who see peace as a threat to their existence, their power, and also the huge profits they make from the sales of natural resources.

It is abundantly clear now that the generals in Burma wish to hold onto power and that they are prepared to do anything to achieve this end. However, the situation in the country has changed drastically over the past few years, especially on the level of economics. The current sustenance level of the Burmese appears to be bearable, but this may not go on for long. There is no international assistance to speak of, and what little the regime has received is riddled with corruption. Foreign investment in Burma is down almost 90 percent this year. Therefore, if there is one thing that would force the regime to change its heart, it could be the economic problem.

Coupled with worsening economic woes the regime's stubbornness is likely to induce more international pressure. The recent visit to Burma of the UN Special Envoy was a failure, and another UN official, a special reporter on human rights, came out with a very strong report. I can go on and on.

Under these circumstances, the regime will have to reevaluate its strategy. With the door opening to negotiation with the opposition, there is a chance for the regime to find a honorable way out, which will allow Rangoon to retain not only considerable power during and after the transition, but also the wealth the generals and their associates have accumulated over the years. If the generals continue to shut the door to reconciliation, it is likely they may find themselves in a repeat of the 1988 popular uprising that saw the ousters of three

presidents and abolition of one party socialist system. It also means that the military rule is likely to end abruptly. This is not a scenario that the generals would like to go through.

TCDS: Can you speak a little bit about Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD? What are the party's major positions or issues, and from where is it drawing its support?

ANO: Aung San Suu Kyi is the first politician in forty years who has the support of the majority of the people in Burma. Like her father, General Aung San (he was assassinated in 1947, a six months before Burma's independence from Britain; he is our national hero; Aung San Suu Kyi was only two years old at the time), she is charismatic, outspoken, and intelligent. She has unmatched qualities. She is well-liked or even loved by the people of Burma. She is more than a politician; she is the symbol of freedom and democracy. She has won more than 40 international awards including the Nobel Peace Prize, and wields enormous moral authority.

However, she faces a very difficult task. The NLD won the election in 1990 and enjoys the support of the people (including some soldiers who voted for the NLD in the 1990 elections), but the current regime has refused to honor the results. So on one hand, she has to deal with the Burmese regime, which has consistently refused to cooperate with the opposition. On the other hand, she has to direct a party that still takes pride in having won the election and which believes itself to be the legitimate ruler of the country. (It is the NLD and its members who have suffered most under the repressive rule of the regime.) The NLD is not to blame, but it has become trapped in this mind-set, meaning that it will take a long time for Aung San Suu Kyi to bring her party out of its hard-line policies towards the regime.

I think there is in Burma what I call "Old General Syndrome." The regime is entrenched. The generals refuse to consider giving up any part of their strategy. They don't want to end up like Milosevic or Pinochet by the time they are in their 60s or 70s, after having given up their power. They have fought all their lives and will continue to fight. They will die fighting. It is not surprising, then, to find a similar mind-set among the opposition groups - both armed and unarmed. I think Aung San Suu Kyi has this problem with some of the party leadership of the older generations. Although the people of Burma, including myself, respect the political veterans and former army officers who make up the NLD leadership, the way the party operates - under tremendous repression and restrictions - does not favor or allow for creativity or for a new generation to have a voice. That is why, as I said, Aung San Suu Kyi's task is very difficult. She has to contend with her own party's leadership as well as that of the current military regime.

In other words, if change is to come to Burma, it has to come from all of those involved in the current political crisis, not just from the regime. However, we can safely assume that the NLD is ready to change, whereas the regime is not.

TCDS: You yourself are an activist and a political exile. What kinds of activities have you, personally, been involved with in the struggle for democracy in Burma?

ANO: I was in the student movement, as well as a member of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), for which I was the foreign affairs secretary for about nine years. I lobbied the international community and spoke to the press while I was with ABSDF. I also did a lot of translations of documents on human rights abuses in prisons and published articles in English.

I am now a research associate with the National Reconciliation Program (NRP). Out of the NRP, I do political commentaries on the radios broadcast to Burma from overseas such as

Voice of America, BBC, RFA (Radio Free Asia, based in D.C.) and DVB (Democratic Voice of Burma, based in Oslo). I also write political commentaries.

TCDS: How did British rule change Burma, and do you see the lingering effects of colonialism in the political situation of today?

ANO: This is a difficult question. My beliefs on and understanding of the effects of colonialism in Burma has changed to an extent. (For the regime, it's still a favorite issue because it's easy to blame British colonialism for the failures of the successive governments.) I now look at it mostly from a conflict-resolution point of view - for instance, whether colonialism has created the ethnic divisiveness and animosity we still see today.

I think favoritism is one of the key factors that still haunts Burma. During the colonial rule, ethnic minorities were favored or preferred by the British because they were considered loyal, obedient and hardworking. They were given important positions while the Burman were considered troublemakers. This created Burman hatred towards the ethnic minorities. So when the British left Burma, we saw the outbreak of civil war. Although ethnic hatred of the Burman had existed long before the British, due to the autocratic rules of the Burmese kings and their annexation of ethnic territories that now make up Burma, we tend to place greater emphasis on the favoritism that Britain showed towards ethnic minorities. But whoever is to blame, this is a question we must confront in bringing about reconciliation.

TCDS: How has Burma changed since the military took power?

ANO: Economically, Burma is worse off. Economically, Burma was on a par with South Korea when the coup occurred, in the early 1960s. Burma had the best university and airport in the region. Back then, Burma was known as "the rice bowl of Asia." But now Burma is on a par with the poorest nations on earth. In 1987 the UN gave Burma Least Developed Country status - one of the reasons why the people of Burma rebelled against the military-run socialist government in 1988. Everything from education to health has hit bottom. The spread of HIV/AIDS has hit the 2% mark, which is the international benchmark of concern to closely watch the spread of the disease and start massive campaigns to battle the virus. In terms of freedom of the press, Burma is just above Iraq and China. The Burmese regime could not send the country's soccer team to compete in the Asian qualifying games and was fined by the Asian Soccer (Football) Association. It was cheaper for the regime to pay the fine rather than participate in the games because it was highly unlikely that it would win even a single game. The Burmese are proud of their soccer achievements during the 50s and 60s. Again, I can go on and on.

But my focus is on the social and cultural effects of the military rule. We have lost all our traditional customs of hospitality. The people now rely on black magic, astrology and other supernatural and paranormal practices to get themselves out of hardship. There are more crimes now than ever. The people are angrier than ever. This is worrisome because in this sort of situation, people tend to take matters into their own hands. So if something dramatic happens, the people take their anger out on the religious and economic minorities, which plays into the hands of the Burmese army.

In short, while we may be able to bring about some sort of economic recovery, given ten years of transition or so, it may take generations to undo the social implications of 40 years of military rule.

TCDS: You have written that "the road to [the] Pang Long [agreement] is the road home for Burma." What aspects of the Agreement lead you to make that statement, and how can those aspects be brought about again today?

ANO: I am talking about spirit of cooperation and coexistence. Realizing the need for cooperation, leaders - both Burman and minority ethnic - worked together in 1947 to produce a document that would serve the nation as a whole or would create a nation of many ethnic groups living together peacefully. The choice for Burma now is whether to go back to Pang Long or something similar, or to continue the repression of ethnic minorities. It is ethnic repression, and thus the outbreak of civil war, that has brought Burma to its current state. This strategy is no longer viable for Burma. The war must end and the military rule must end. We must give reconciliation a chance to work. If we wish to achieve this goal, we will have to go back to Pang Long.

How do we do that? The current negotiations, though stalled, are the efforts of the opposition movement to bring recognition of ethnic minorities and reconciliation between the different groups to Burma along with democracy. That's why we have worked for and supported the negotiations in Rangoon. If the negotiations are successful, we can sit down and negotiate with all the actors involved, at the negotiating table or in a convention, what the future Burma will look like.

TCDS: You see federalism as a crucial factor for democratization in Burma. Given that the "bitterness and animosity [between ethnic groups] is deep-rooted and ubiquitous," and given Burma's already bloody history, how, if federalism becomes a reality, can it avoid the fate of a country like Yugoslavia, descending into ethnic civil war once a strong centralized government is no longer in power?

ANO: There is a lot of distrust in Burma - but if we are to bring about reconciliation at all, we must begin with constitutional reconciliation. Burma's problems are historical as well as constitutional. (We don't have a constitution right now.) Ethnic distrust and hatred will always remain - but if we achieve constitutional reconciliation under a federalist system, we can expel most of what has troubled us in the past and possibly achieve a genuine national reconciliation. In reality, though, federalism seems to me like a distant goal; we'll have to work towards it very slowly.

I am not worried about Burma going down the same road as Yugoslavia. First, even if ethnic minorities want to break away from Burma, the majority Burman will not allow it to happen. This does not mean that it could not happen. It will take a long time before the Burman majority and the army no longer regard the secession of ethnic minorities from Burma as a threat to the country. This can only happen once Burma has achieved prosperity and a high standard of education. This may take 20 years or more, even if we don't hit any snags. Second, even if a secession does happen, it might not be bloody. And third, if the minority ethnic groups can come to see union with the Burman majority as beneficial, they may not consider leaving Burma, just as Scotland continues to be part of Great Britain. There will always remain nationalism within ethnic groups, but if the benefits outweigh the losses, I don't see why ethnic minorities will have to say goodbye to Burma.

TCDS: Besides federalization, what are the priorities or necessary conditions for Burma's reconstruction? What are the dangers it faces?

ANO: Even if we achieve federalism in a short time, it will still be very fragile. Its success depends on Burma's economic and political stability, which again depends on the leaders of the day. So we must not only give priority to the durability of the federal constitution, we must also give priority to what would make the constitution durable in the first place. We have to emphasize the economy, education, health, and above all, the development of institutional democracy. We must make sure that those on the political fringe - meaning ethnic groups - are brought into the game so they can play effective roles not only for their own communities but

also for the country as a whole. What usually happens after a charter is written is that those it promises to help are excluded from the democratic process. We must make sure that this does not happen.

There are many dangers. The army will always be poised to make a comeback. We will have to make a lean and mean professional army - and keep it out of politics. Economic hardship will remain among the various populations, and with political freedom they will demand more: these groups will have to be oriented through the political and economic changes. There will be more actors in the political arena. More people will be free to demand a piece from the shrinking pie. There will be more crimes, there will be more violence, so on and so forth. These things are all potential sources of conflict.

We will bear these dangers in mind when we embark on the road to democracy and reconciliation. But I am counting on the future leadership of Burma. We have been through so much. I believe that in the end we will all give peace a chance and think more than twice before going back to old ways if the union does not work out. We'll choose to talk at the table rather fight in a battle. Either we will have made the dialogue work or we will have helped the culture of dialogue to take root - so that from now on, we can always resort to peaceful means when it comes to resolving conflicts.

Interview by Erica Weitzman, TCDS Bulletin editor and student in Liberal Studies at the Graduate Faculty