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 Burmese*"All participants [...] must be in no doubt that the only outcome of the transitional processes underway must be inclusion, political dialogue and genuine reforms."*

The Need for Peace and Inclusion

A Commentary by Laphai Seng Raw

27 January 2016 - Article

The peoples of Myanmar have long desired a platform for inclusive peace and dialogue where the vital issues of politics, economics, welfare and human rights for all can be discussed together, fully and in a spirit of national reconciliation and cooperation. Thus any initiative towards peace and dialogue is always welcome.



Market in Yangon / Photo credit: brentonson @ Flickr

This commentary is based upon a presentation Laphai Seng Raw gave at the Yangon launch of the book "Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders", a global project by International Idea.

Presently, a crucial turning point has been reached in our country's history, and hopes for peace and reform have been greatly encouraged by the victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in last November's general election. The challenge for achieving nationwide peace will soon fall to the incoming government, and expectations are high. But for a peace process to succeed, it is essential that we review the past and draw lessons from tragic mistakes that have undermined peace and national progress for so many decades. It is a sad history of failure, resulting in incalculable loss and cost to all peoples.

Among many challenges, a perennial weakness across the different eras of government has been a lack of inclusion and representation for all peoples and parties. During the hasty countdown to independence, a non-inclusive conference took place at Panglong in February 1947 and, subsequently, not all parties contested elections to a constituent assembly that drew up the future constitution. The newly-formed "Union of Burma" thus became independent without resolving vital political and ethnic issues. Within a year, unrest and conflict had broken out across the country, and this has never been resolved.

A similar lack of inclusion took place during a quarter century of the "Burmese Way to Socialism". Following a failed "peace parley" during 1963-64, a new constitution was imposed in 1974. However, once again, a new political system – this time a monolithic one-party state – did not provide a satisfactory answer to the underlying questions of political representation and democratic rights for all peoples.

This divisive tendency to include some groups, while excluding others, then continued during the preceding era of the military State Law and Order Restoration Council (subsequently State Peace and Development Council). On this occasion, despite the 1990 general election and spread of ethnic ceasefires in some areas, the National Convention to draw up a new constitution did not include all peoples and parties. National progress was again jeopardised for another two decades, and the patterns of political exclusion continued during the 2010 general election when the polls produced a result that was hardly representative of all peoples, parties and aspirations.

The cumulative result of these divisions and exclusions over so many years is a legacy of national instability and state failure that has continued since independence in 1948. The lesson is thus absolutely clear that political dialogue must include all peoples and regions of the country if real peace and justice are to be achieved in any process of national reform.

Since President Thein Sein assumed office in 2011, the national environment has again changed, and there is undoubtedly more openness and recognition on all sides of the need to resolve conflict through political solutions that reach to the roots of the problems. These are important steps in right direction. However, while ceasefires and hopes for reform have come to some areas of the country, conflict has returned to – and even intensified in – other regions, especially in Myanmar's northeast.

Conflict, internal displacement, human rights abuses and loss of life are on-going in our country, even today. But it is sad to reflect that the conflict-torn areas where such conflicts are persisting are not being represented at peace process meetings under the current government. This means that any discussions taking place without their representation cannot be regarded as inclusive or binding. Indeed there is a real risk that a partial peace accord, which is promoted as a "nationwide" solution, could unhelpfully prolong conflict instead. As citizens know after so many years of national suffering, all voices must be heard and all parties must have the opportunity to contribute to achieve sustainable peace and reform.

In the meantime, it is important that peace discussions continue in different forums with the objective of building durable relationships and maintaining the national focus on conflict resolution and political reform. However the present steps must be understood as *preliminary* discussions, leading up to – and only leading up to – inclusive political dialogue and reform implementation that will hopefully take place during the life of the next parliament.

In this respect, the current landscape of national change through parliamentary and peace talk processes presents opportunities to share ideas with others with whom we have common goals while seeking common ground with those whose opinions may differ. But whatever the individual viewpoints, the need is to develop ideas and outline procedures to take the country forward together. All participants, however, in the different discussions taking place must be in no doubt that the only outcome of the transitional processes underway must be inclusion, political dialogue and genuine reforms.

In recent months, concerns have been rising that a division once again threatens progress between different groups in national politics, some of which may put their own self-advantage before the achievement of an over-arching accord that brings all peoples together. We must therefore bridge our differences to establish a new political system that will unify our country while at the same time providing space for our diversity in both cultures and histories. If national trust can be achieved, then finding solutions should not be as difficult as is often believed. The failures in the past can be traced back to the long-standing lack of opportunity for all peoples and parties to meet together. In the new political era, these exclusions and divisions must finally be overcome.

As popular reflection of the national mood, the victory of the NLD in the general election speaks an unmistakable language that can be built upon: the peoples of Myanmar – across all ethnic nationality lines – have voted for change. This was a clear vote for peace and reform, and the new government now has a strong mandate to initiate an inclusive process towards achieving reconciliation and reform in the whole country.

All nationalities in our country long for peace. We do not want to send our young people to the front to lose their lives fighting fellow citizens. We do not want to invest in armaments. Rather, we want our resources to be used for good schools throughout the nation, from the smallest and most remote villages to the largest urban centres. We want to pay for modern health services, not for arms and ammunition. But to do this, we must silence the guns, and we must end the civil wars. Over half a century of battles have brought no victories to anyone – only defeat, losses and suffering for the entire country.

It is thus highly encouraging to all peoples that the chairperson of the NLD, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has stated that the new administration will make the achievement of peace its top priority. Citizens know that our dreams of economic security, health and education can only become a reality based upon a foundation of peace. Such a peace, in turn, depends on an inclusive dialogue that leads to a just political system, a federal system, that guarantees equal opportunities and respect for the rights of all ethnic nationalities. But in the agreement of such a political system, it is also essential that concrete steps accompany political dialogue to ensure the achievement of nationwide peace. In particular, military operations must be halted; human rights respected; land-grabbing and other forms of economic exploitation brought to a halt; and all parties must join the processes for national peace and political reform with mutual respect and good intention towards each other.

Such urgent challenges place a great onus on all leaders in our country who now have the opportunity to pass on a heritage of peace and reform to future generations. This means that those taking part in parliamentary and peace talk processes should be keenly aware of the country's past failings and present needs if they are not to perpetuate the mistakes of their predecessors. In particular, it is vital that they do not pass on an unhelpful legacy to the next government and endanger future efforts to achieve peace by creating new divisions in the political landscape just when the goal should be unity and peace for all peoples.

In taking peace and reform forward, many needs can be highlighted. Foremost among the most fundamental challenges are an inclusive political dialogue for peace, national reconciliation, a redrawing of the relationship between military and civilian institutions, and social and economic development that reaches to all peoples. On the conflict front, for example, consultations have been continuing for three years under the name of "nationwide peace" process. Unfortunately, for many citizens this is a misnomer. Rather, the situation many communities are facing today is more of a "peace process" that is stuck on the snags of piecemeal ceasefires with less than half of the ethnic opposition groups in the country. At the same time, the lack of inclusiveness is not always due to those leading the discussions, and there has also been an unhelpful lack of unity among those standing in opposition to military-based rule.

In recent months, however, strengthened by the victory of the NLD in the general election, there has been a growing unison in the calls by the different nationality groups, in unanimity with the NLD, for the prioritisation of peace. Six key elements in conflict resolution stand out in order to take national peace forward:

- monitored ceasefires and demilitarisation
- voluntary and ordered return and resettlement of IDPs
- inclusive political dialogue and constitutional reform
- reconciliation and restructuring civilian-military relations, not retribution
- equality of all our peoples
- shared resources for the economic and social development of our country.

One of the most immediate questions these needs raise is just how citizens who gave the NLD such a clear mandate for national change are going to be able to convince the military authorities that holding on to power to control the political and economic course of the country will, in the long run, pose a greater threat to national stability than sharing power among peoples who are simply seeking their democratic rights to equality within the framework of a federal system. For this to happen, military officers must be convinced that it is better for them, their children and children's children to be citizens on an equal footing with all the citizens of a rich and thriving modern state than to be privileged in a crippled state, exploited by their neighbours and exploiting their own peoples.

To address such issues, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has stated that she will form a government of national reconciliation. We must therefore look forward positively in the coming months, not wasting our precious time, so much of which has already been lost, on recriminations and revenge. The rule of law, which Daw Suu has often emphasised, is intended to protect all citizens. Our hope, therefore, is that this balancing act between civilian and military interests in our country can be accomplished without prejudicing the success of the NLD's peace and reform programme. It is likely to be a sensitive task.

Looking to the longer-term future, political transition to a democratic and federal society must also bring a tangible improvement in the economic situation of our country, where many families still live at deep poverty levels. Myanmar is resource rich and has always been a land of great potential. But in our extractive industries, untold sums have been diverted over the years to the bank accounts of high-ranking people and their business friends. Furthermore, the revenues from the little that is actually taxed do not represent the real value of the resources actually extracted from the people's lands.

Tragically, while Myanmar's impasse continues, these resources are disappearing forever, sold and smuggled abroad. The country, at large, does not benefit, and the ethnic states, where many of these resources are located, have even less than nothing; rather, the local peoples suffer not only loss of land and livelihoods but also environmental degradation and threats to health. For example, on the Resource Governance Index of the international Natural Resource Governance Institute, which covered 58 resource-rich countries, our country is number 58, at the very bottom of the list, with a score of four out of a possible 100 points. A terrible legacy is being left for our young people.

On a more positive note, it is important to acknowledge that the outgoing government plans to participate in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, a global standard that promotes open and accountable management of natural resources. This, however, is only a first step on the road to a regulated extraction of our natural resources with a fair share to the benefit of local peoples.

The situation is now urgent, but among the people there is a determination that the political and economic wrongs of the past should be corrected. The landslide vote for change in the general election shows us that the farmers of the Irrawaddy Delta, their brothers and sisters in the Chin Hills and their kindred on the slopes of Hkakabo Razi are all united in their goals. With the new NLD majority in the local and national parliaments, it must be possible to pass legislation that puts a stop to large land grabs and prevents grants of unregulated concessions in the extractive industries to a few privileged elites. Farmers should no longer fear losing their land and being forced to leave their homes to eek out a miserable living in the oil fields or as illegal jade pickers on piles of rubble, threatened by deadly landslides.

In this light, it is important to critically look at investment agreements that Myanmar is negotiating which do not include strict and broad performance requirements for foreign investors while giving them extensive rights to challenge new laws and regulations that will support a genuine peace. It is important, too, that legislation should not only prevent exploitation but also encourage small-scale local economic initiatives, such as those supported by the Metta Development Foundation and other local NGOs, which contribute to social cohesion. With appropriate social and political foundations, there is every reason to believe that national progress can quickly be made.

Finally, it is important to highlight the remarks by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on the opening day of last week's union peace conference. Here Daw Suu stressed the importance of national peace to have shortcomings in the current peace agreement and emphasised that it is important "not to have divisions between those who signed and those who did not," recommending that dialogue should be flexible.

I cannot agree more. We face many future challenges that can only be met and overcome if we accept shortcomings and possible concessions but stand united in our common vision for just and peaceful change. We must carry on – even in the face of setbacks or minimal progress – if we truly wish to free our citizens from the yoke of war, poverty and injustice and establish a democratic federal state, regaining the rights of our peoples and respected place for our country in the modern world.

Laphai Seng Raw is a 2013 Ramon Magsaysay Award winner and co-founder of the Metta Development Foundation and Alrawati.

This commentary is part of a project funded by Sweden.

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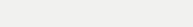


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