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Peacebuilding in the Dawn of Democracy in Myanmar: Prospects and Problems¹

Your Excellency Mr. President, Distinguished faculty, guests and students of the Graduating Class of the Rotary Peace Center of Chulalongkorn University – it is a great honor for me, and a wonderful privilege as well, to be invited as a keynote speaker in your graduation program today. It is indeed a humbling experience to stand before the dignitaries, distinguished, and people of intelligentsia of this one of the most prestigious universities in South East Asia¹.

I bring warm and hearty greetings to you from the Board of Trustees, Faculty and students of the Myanmar Institute of Theology and also the Executive Committee members of the Peace Studies Center of our Institute.

As I stand here on this university campus, it brings back memories to me. My very first contact with Chulalongkorn University was about 33 years ago. It was my first trip abroad in September of 1979 when I went to Cyprus to attend the International Seminar on Children's Books. On the airplane, it was KLM, I met a Thai delegate who was also going to the same seminar and we became friends since then. She was Mrs. Bampen Krishnakan, an Assistant Professor of the Department of History, if my memory is correct, of this great university. I salute her with due respect and honor as she's a kind and loving friend to me

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and to my family. Moreover, whenever I come to Bangkok, alone by myself or with family or friends, we do enjoy shopping at MBK, and maybe somehow indirectly support this university financially, I would like to think; and we are happy about it.

I am a trained theologian, a social ethicist, and a senior pastor of a Baptist Church in Yangon, but I am going to give the keynote address this afternoon not as a theologian and pastor, but as a social ethicist and a peace builder. Despite the limitations of the scope of this address, lack of proficiency in the use of the English language, my second language, and also the time constraint, I hope that you may endure and enjoy listening to me in this hour of the temptation for snoozing, perhaps it may be a siesta time after lunch and high tea.

1. A Strategic Location of Myanmar

Myanmar, formally known as Burma, is geographically situated in the region of Southeast Asia, surrounded by China in the northeast and India in the northwest, Laos in the east and Bangladesh in the west, and has a long border with Thailand in the east and southeast. We have a long, beautiful, and resource-rich coastal region along the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea in the west and southwest, which is the gateway to the Indian Ocean. Myanmar has high mountains in the north and west with various natural resource, plain and dry zone in the middle, full of Bamar cultural heritage, Shan plateau in the east with all its natural and cultural beauties, a fertile delta region in the south known as the rice bowl of Myanmar, and mountains along the Tenintharye Peninsula, where we have a long border with Thailand, especially good for planting rubber trees and palm trees that produce palm oil. The sea in the south and southwest is full of natural resources and has gained a lot of international interest.

On the other hand, one of the uniqueness of Myanmar is that the country is comprised of 135 ethnic groups with their own languages and or dialects, speaking 35 main languages, however, Burmese is the common language and Bamar is the majority group with 68% of the whole population. The rest are Shan, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, Chin, Wa, and others mostly living on the highlands and some on the plains having their own cultures and traditions which are so diverse and very interesting. Buddhism is the predominant religion, which claims 89,4% of its adherents, and the rest are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism. The richness of pluralism and diversity is, in fact, the richness of Myanmar.

2. A Brief History of Myanmar: From Colonial Time Till the Present

After several centuries of Buddhist monarchy (1044-1886), Myanmar, then known as Burma, was under British colonial rule for more than one and a half century (1886-until the beginning of the Second World War), liberated by the Japanese from the British and ruled by the Japanese during WW II, and again liberated by the British from Japanese rule and became a British colony again until independence was achieved on January 4, 1948 through great commitment and efforts under the leadership of General Aung San against the British rulers. The country had enjoyed parliamentary democracy for about ten years (1948-1958), and then, because of certain political turmoil, the military was invited to rule the country for about two years as an interim government (1958-1960). The following two years, the parliamentary democracy system was restored. On March 2, 1962 there was a military coup d'etat led by General Ne Win and until 2010, Myanmar had been under the successive military regimes who exercised various political systems, however, they ruled with an iron fist as human rights and human dignity were deprived, and freedom nullified. The notorious and brutal crackdown on the opposition groups and individuals, arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial sentences, anti-intellectualism, and brain drainage are some of the consequences that followed. A decline of the quality education, a sense of fear in daily living, the loss of civil society, lack of expertise and skilled workers, serious corruption issues, and an increase of poverty caused the country to be categorized as one of the least developed nations by the United Nations.

Moreover, during these years, civil wars and ethnic conflicts flared up, and sustainable peace could not be meted out, although many cease fire agreements were made, just to be broken every now and then, blaming and accusing each other for the failed results. It should be most appropriate here to quote the words of Mana Tun, a research fellow of the Peace Studies Center in MIT, mentioned in his research paper:

In such long history of war-making culture or of war-making political atmosphere, the people of Myanmar have been informed consciously and unconsciously about war-making things and ideologies like hatred, killings, revenge or retaliation, and violence in various forms.

However, in 2010 a long awaited democracy, although it was a military-guided democracy, was meted out in accordance with the controversial constitution, yet the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy, refused to take part in the elections as they believed that the constitution was seriously flawed. As a result, the party was demolished and their movements were strictly restricted

although the party's most prominent leader was released from house arrest. The government was formed and the ex-military general, who was ranked in third in the former military regime, U Thein Sein, became the president, and many other military generals were appointed in a leadership role to take the responsibility as ministers in various ministries of the new government. The process of democratization gradually takes further and fragile steps, sometime with bumps and bounces, since then.

3. Peace Building in the Dawn of Democracy in Myanmar

3.1. Prospects

In spite of miseries, sufferings, pain, and sorrows of all these years, most of Myanmar people are not altogether pessimistic. Many of them hoped for a better future, some of them tried to do something as they envisioned democracy, and a few were deeply committed to achieving democracy and made all out efforts through nonviolent means toward that goal. All these inspirations and aspirations had come to begin to actualize in the latter part of 2010. The first thing that made people very excited, hopeful, and optimistic was the extension of the invitation to the opposition leader, Daw Aung San Su Kyi, a Noble Laureate, by the president, U Thein Sein, and her acceptance of the invitation. She went to Nay Pyi Daw, a newly built, capital city of Myanmar and met with the president in his presidential palace for about twenty minutes for the very first time after all these years. The contents of their meeting were not made public, but as they came out of the meeting, both the president and his invited guest, standing in front of the portrait of the late General Aung San, an architect of the country's independence and the father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, said that they were pleased to meet each other and the meeting was positive. Nevertheless, this is the proved result of nonviolent, active resistance, that brought these two people together to the table, a round table, and it had an immense impact on the people as they saw the dialogue worked as foes became friends.

The second impression that is still vivid in our mind is about the stopping of the mega dam project in Kachin state. This mega dam project was a joint project between Myanmar and China, the main partner and supporter of Myanmar during the military reign. The dam was constructed on the site at the very beginning of the River Irrawaddy. The great Irrawaddy River was formed as the two rivulets, Maekha and Malikha, converged. The River Irrawaddy that flows through the middle of Myanmar from northern Tibetan highlands towards the Bay of Bengal in the south is the most loved river in Myanmar and a bloodline of the liveli-

hood of people who live alongside and beyond. Of course, it was without the consent of the people, particularly living in that area. As soon as the dam project began, there were voices against it because of severe deforestation, an indescribable devastation of the natural environment, and an irreversible destruction of rare and invaluable species of flora and fauna, plus exotic and near-extinct animals. We give thanks to the conservationists, environmentalists, nature lovers and peace builders as they precariously took risks and made their voices against this mega dam project heard. When the parliament sessions began, this matter was allowed to be discussed openly and we owe the legislatures, especially from Kachin state where the project was located. They were among the vigorous contenders who were against this project and stood firm together in the parliament. Serious and open criticisms were made verbally and through media against those who were stubbornly saying that this project should continue at any cost because the downside of this project was carefully “calculated” and preventative measures were taken for possible hazards that might occur by the construction of this mega dam. Eventually the minister of the Ministry of Industry, U Soe Thein, said the words of *dharma*, a kind of the rhetoric, which we had never heard before for decades under authoritarian regimes. He said that the rulers of the country were impermanent, the power they had was also impermanent, but permanent were the people and the River Irrawaddy, and therefore the government had an obligation to listen to the voice of the people and their genuine desires. Then, the three-day seminar was held with the participation of scholars, intelligentsia, environmentalist, and people with ecological concerns who seriously discussed the issue of Irrawaddy. After a few days, during the parliamentary session, a letter from U Thein Sein, the President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, was sent to the parliament and it was announced that the mega dam project was stopped, at least during the reign of the present government, i.e. until 2015. This announcement was hailed nationally and internationally as the victory of the people of Myanmar over inappropriate national policies and signed agreements of the former regime. And it was followed by the gradually release of prominent political prisoners, amendments of the constitution to make way for the opposition, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and the ability to be able to participate in the upcoming bi-election. Many foreign dignitaries and head of the states made historical visits to Myanmar, including Hilary Clinton, Secretary of State of the United States, and David Cameron, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Cease-fire agreements were signed with all armed ethnic minorities, but one, i.e. Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). Substantial help and aids for the livelihood of those armed groups who signed cease-fire agreements and people in those regions were warmly extended. Further developments have been discussed and there is hope that the more concrete and positive resolutions would be implemented gradually in the not-too-far future. The national level of peace talks

and discussions on national reconciliation envisioned. The issues of Internally Displaced Peoples were seriously discussed and the help of expertise and financial aids were negotiated and promised by the government and INGOs. The Human Rights Commission was formed by the President himself. Sanctions were mostly lifted, and as a result, monetary institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Asia Development Bank also made crucial visits to discuss monetary matters in order to help the country develop properly. There was a free and fair bi-election in which the opposition party, NLD, won a landslide victory again and the result was acknowledged. Press freedom was highlighted, and the interest of investments of multi-corporations was obvious when the necessary laws, rules, and regulations are under way. Besides, Law Amending the Political Parties Registration Law, Law Relating to Peaceful Gathering and Peaceful Procession, Labor Organization Law, Labor Dispute Settlement Bill, Ward or Village Tract Administration Bill, Bills on Microfinance, and the Bills of Foreign Investment were approved respectively. These are some of the highlights of the prospects of the democratization of Myanmar when the so-called Myanmar Spring became barely a year old.

No doubt that there are still numerous things to get fixed after 58 years of misrule caused devastation and deterioration of the country, society, and people in all aspects of life. We, the Myanmar citizens, must have patience and definitely have to work hard in an on-going peace building and nation building process.

3.2. Problems

Everybody wishes that there would be a magic wand to right the wrongs instantly and simultaneously so that all can enjoy the happy-ending of a story. Yet, we all know that such a thing is so much a fairy tale. In reality, we all know that it takes time to get things fixed, to right the wrongs, to correct the mistakes, and to undo the wrongdoings. All these mishaps occurred because of wayward ideologies, unwise decisions, and egocentrism. In order to restore the good, courage and wisdom are essentials to work for lasting peace and justice. Commitment, patience, and zeal are requirements in order to see human rights and human dignity upheld. People of Myanmar have been subjects to different powers in the past, unfortunately until recent time. Now the time has come, in fact the *Kairos*, where people of Myanmar should now no longer act or react like subjects, but citizens.

In Myanmar, because of past incidents, ethnic minorities in general identify Buddhism, Bamar, and the Military the one and the same. The majority of Bamars are Buddhists, and the majority of military personnel are Bamars and Buddhists. When ethnic minorities usually suffer atrocities caused by the military, their hatred against the military, in combination with the assumption that the military is

Bamars and Buddhists, became more and more intense. There are ethnic groups with Buddhists majority, yet they are against the military and are always suspicious of Burmanization. It is a fact that there has always been tension between the ethnic minorities and the military government seen as Bamar and Buddhist. In the recent history, however, there was the so called “Saffron Revolution” in 2007 when Buddhist monks organized peaceful demonstration against the regime on behalf of the people, and that was the turning point. Since then a certain suspicion or assumption that the military, Bamar, and Buddhist are one and the same has been toned down. And now, during the process of recent reforms towards democracy, as the President U Thein Sein and some of his government personnel, who also may have honored the advice(s) of their respective advisory committees to the President, made consistent and genuine efforts to make peace with armed ethnic groups. As I mentioned before, it is successful to be able to sign cease-fire agreements with all, but one, KIO. Nevertheless, one is too many for us to rebuild the nation and to work for national reconciliation and to make it a reality. It is a must that the armed conflict inside the country that has persisted for about 60 years has to come to an end. Yet we know that it is not an easy task, since making war is more familiar to the people of Myanmar than building peace. Many of you might have known the recent unrest in Rakhine state in the western part of Myanmar. All such incidents indicate that there is still substantial tension between and among the ethnic groups, and it is so fragile and really needs to be handled with care. To achieve national reconciliation and lasting peace is not impossible in Myanmar, but the government and the peoples of Myanmar do need a concerted effort by all means to make all peoples in Myanmar feel safe, feel themselves as part of a whole, have equal rights, and equal opportunities would all truly help immensely to build genuine and lasting peace in Myanmar.

Secondly, the problem is the issue of gender. Myanmar is a predominantly male dominated society, culturally and traditionally. Women are perceived wittingly or unwittingly as subordinate. When the country was ruled by the military for nearly six decades, the military culture, as elsewhere in the world, endorsed the domination of the male. Chauvinism, Masochism, and patriarchy are so common and prevalent in different communities and societies in Myanmar. Thus, such a structural mischief encourages the sentiment of dislike against women to take leading positions in the political and social life in Myanmar. Gender discrimination is merely seen as nothing unusual, nothing strange. It is a given, it is the way it is. The majority of women in the country are prone to maintain the status quo as they have been taught that subordination of women is something natural all through their life through stories, proverbs, and anecdotes, etc. Feminist ideology or teaching of feminism, feminist ethics, eco-feminism etc, are still non-existent in the schools’ and universities’ curriculum, let alone to make the public aware of it. Not just equity but equality in regards to gender needs to be addressed.

As Miroslav Volf stated, “not exclusion but embrace [...]”, this kind of perception should be fostered among our societies so that gender discrimination would come to an end.

Last, but not least, is a need to develop the sense of civil society. When the military took over power in 1962, the sense of civil society in Myanmar was murdered. People’s self-reliance had gradually faded out, and they began to rely for every need in life on the government, and blamed the rulers for every shortcoming. There is no doubt that the government is accountable for the deterioration of livelihood, human rights violation, intimidation, the decline of quality education, increase of poverty, and the loss of freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom to choose and press freedom. People are used to stay quiet, maintain the status quo, and came to believe the notion of “survival of the fittest” and exercised it in life’s circumstances. Critical thinking was remote, positive criticism restricted, culture of negotiation nullified, the loss of trust between the people and the military government was serious.

And now the time has changed. The development of the sense of civil society has been encouraged. Labor organizations and local NGOs are being encouraged. The farmers who lost their land to private entrepreneurs can file a complaint openly. Transparency and the sense of open society are now flourishing through media and other campaigns and rallies in a scale we had never seen before. The people were urged to voice their desires, as well as, their resentments, and the civilian government has begun to listen to their voices and is trying to fulfill them according to the existing laws, rules, and regulations. The present government has acknowledged the flaws in management, the existence of horrible corruption at every corner of life, persistent poverty, increasing numbers of unemployment, notoriously poor health care system, and failed educational system both in primary and secondary education. It is amazing that these problems have existed for decades but denied and ignored. Now, not only are the problems acknowledged, but the president U Thein Sein and his government promised to challenge these issues and vowed to tackle them by all means. Hence it is now that the people must respond and come to cooperate with the personnel concerned so that we would begin to see the changes starting to take place in the not-too-distant future.

However, most of our country’s people need to be aware of such a change, and the people themselves need to change accordingly. People were pessimistic for years and still doubt the changes that are taking place at present. It is understandable because of the past incidents when the change was not genuine but a fraud. At this moment in our history, people must tend to be positive, at least to be optimistic cautiously. As the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi rightly warned about reckless optimism, but instead healthy skepticism is encouraged. In my opinion, people may need to be cautiously optimistic but suspicions on the change should not be fostered because we may get stuck where we are and

will lose our energy and enthusiasm to move forward. It may not be wrong to be careful of hardliners, because perhaps they may want to push back the ongoing process of democratization.

Conclusion

Therefore, we urge the international communities, our friends far and near, to come and help us, support us and our present government as we struggle along together for democracy. We ask you to help move away the unnecessary and unfit sanctions that would certainly hinder the process of democratization and poverty reduction. Come and see Myanmar, help us with investments in different aspects of life, hence creating jobs and other opportunities. Come not with greed, not without ethics, but as friends and partners. Come with accountability and responsibility so that both parties would benefit and our people may learn new things in terms of expertise, various kinds of technology, new skills, and gain adequate knowledge and advanced education to make our country prosper. We need such kind of friends, help, and more from our ASEAN neighbors and beyond. It is obvious that we are no longer in the dark, in chaos, as before. People are no longer in the state of hopelessness as in the past. Myanmar is no longer a country behind the iron curtains and forgotten unfortunately time to time by the international community. Myanmar has come into the spotlight on the world's stage. Now we are hopeful people and filled with hope for the future. But caution! Hope could also be an escape in a way it would sustain the status quo. Hope will never be encouraging, beneficial, and potential for realization of our dreams unless it embodies the reality and works with it. We have seen the glimpses of light at the end of the tunnel, and therefore, people from all walks of life, adherents of all religions, peoples of all ethnic groups, every citizen of Myanmar must come together with the spirit of unity in diversity and shall work fervently, unreservedly towards the goal that we long for, a fully democratic Myanmar where peace and justice prevail.

Participation and involvement of the people should be an integral part of us as we continue to march with hope and heart, energy and enthusiasm, dignity and decorum, conviction and commitment in building peace and making a new nation, a Republic of the Union of Myanmar, for the citizens to dwell in peace and prosperity.

Thank you.