

The High Costs of Non-Solutions in Burma/Myanmar

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Time has done nothing to heal war-torn, impoverished Burma/Myanmar. Trapped in a prolonged domestic political impasse with insufficient international assistance, the people of Burma/Myanmar live

in a state of endemic deprivation. The domestic and international responses to the devastating Cyclone Nargis succinctly demonstrate the current situation – Burma/Myanmar is in desperate need of assistance and encouragement.

Humanitarian Assistance is Beyond All Argument

The Irrawaddy delta and adjacent parts of Burma/Myanmar were hit by category 4 Cyclone Nargis on May 2–3, 2008. It was considered the worst natural calamity in a century and the country was caught unawares and unprepared. The cyclone cut a swath of destruction in the lower Delta before hitting Yangon, the country's biggest city.

The calamity is estimated to have resulted in well over 140,000 deaths, in addition to the widespread and massive destruction of property and infrastructure. Many more people have seen their homes, crops, livestock, and livelihoods wiped out. This comes after decades of impoverishment in a country classified as “least developed.”

Despite the magnitude of the disaster, the speed and size of the government's response was found wanting. This stands in contrast to the large amounts of assistance offered by countries and organizations far and near. A week after the storm hit, a mere trickle of aid was getting to the worst-affected areas.

Both the country of Myanmar and the ruling regime have been marked by two decades of isolation, which has come about from a poorly-managed political transition. The people have had to bear with a distorted economy, low incomes, shortages of essentials like fuel, the effects of sanctions, and poor social services. The government has become the target of international censure and punitive measures in addition to the isolation. One observer has remarked that “relations with the West are the worst since independence”. One result is that there is a deep-seated suspicion of Western governments coupled with an obsession with security. This translates into an unfavorable climate for international aid in a country that needs it badly. Despite all this, committed and patient organizations and individuals continue to devote their energy and resources, and their role came to the fore in a natural disaster like this.

As if Cyclone Nargis wasn't bad enough, it has been followed by an economic recession, especially in the agricultural sector, which has faced a series of successive disasters. Responding to these crises represents a continuum of humanitarian assistance. In doing so, a number of objectives are accomplished – providing much-needed humanitarian assistance, opening up the country, boosting civil society, and, to a lesser extent, reaching out to the reformers. The rebuilding, expansion and strengthening of civil society have been a big help. One wonders how relief could have reached the communities devastated by Cyclone Nargis if it hadn't been for local volunteer organizations, followed closely by INGOs.

Amartya Sen makes a differentiation between famine and endemic deprivation. When you go through district gazetteers of Burma from the colonial period, there is sometimes a short paragraph on “famine relief”. A kind of memento mori if you will. This would have been more prevalent in the central dry zone where rainfall is scanty and its adequacy spelled the difference between a good crop and a bad one. Dark stories were told of famine conditions in the late 1940s, flowing dislocations in agriculture brought about by war. But generally Burma/Myanmar was spared the spectacular famines on the levels of Bengal and China because of its low population and the natural abundance of the land.

However, endemic deprivation was and is rife. Deprivation not only with regard to adequate nutrition but also in health, education, and, most importantly, freedom. Not unnaturally in the 20th century this provided part of the impetus behind the nationalist struggle and the communist movement which accompanied it. Socialism in its many forms and shades seemed to present a ready solution to both young intellectuals and poor peasants alike. Indeed socialism became the sole state ideology in the 26 year period from 1962 to 1988. But instead of the Promised Land, it turned out to be a bitter experience for the people of Burma/Myanmar. Socialism never recovered from the opprobrium engendered by economic decline and its abrupt termination at the upheaval of 1988.

Disappointed by socialism, people turned their hopes to democracy. The expectation of a better life coupled with the promise of *democracy*, however, has not yet been fulfilled. People in their tens of thousands had marched in the streets demanding change but the results have been bitter. When a democratic system appeared on the horizon after 1988, people had looked to leadership, both old and new, for deliverance. But what resulted was the most excruciating disappointment in recent Burmese/Myanmar political history. The generals took note and embarked upon another round of unbridled military dictatorship. This time around, with a larger population and much less resources and aid per capita, social services collapsed. And with the regime on a building spree, the money supply spigot was turned on full, and inflation ensued. With basic services, as in China, a misguided “cost-sharing” system and privatization in health care have pushed a decent level of care beyond the means of most people. Similarly primary education become unaffordable to the poor and tertiary education exists only in name.

The ordinary Myanmar citizen is caught between a rock and a hard place, between the Scylla of an unbending, unresponsive military dictatorship and the Charybdis of democratic leadership failure.

Establishing Positions

What I have to say here is out of my deep concern for the people of Burma/Myanmar. Because of this concern I have had to give up eleven years of my liberty as a political prisoner. But this has bestowed

upon me a very clear and independent position, and a vantage point from which to view and assess the failings of both domestic and international approaches to the plight of the Burmese people.

There is an explicit recognition of the shortcomings of the roadmap and its products - the constitution and the elections in 2010. There will be no effort to rationalize these; if the present constitution is flawed, constitutionalism is weaker still. Whatever the constitution, a *functioning* state has to put it into effect. For a military that prides itself as the state, a serious challenge resides in operationalizing this present constitution. The military is counting on having various entities of the future state march lockstep with it, but this is assuming quite a lot. The regime regards the constitution and the coming elections as a concession that it is uncomfortable with. The elections happen to be a weak point, despite all the measures being taken to load the dice in its favor. It is hedging its bets in a big way, one consequence of the shock it received in the 1990 elections when the NLD won a landslide victory. The new constitution already makes for a strong executive branch that will further reinforce the military's continued dominance while attempting to insulate the executive from the legislature. The envisaged executive branch will be a carry-over and replica of the present authoritarian regime.

This being the case, a primary objective will have to be to challenge the military's primacy. This would include **altering** the balance between the military-dominated executive and the legislature, one-quarter of which would be military. The effort would be to bring about a situation where concession of a measure of *governing* happens in practice and not just in words. There will be a need for capability and courage where civilian legislators are concerned. It would not just be about legislating, but also for standing up for the people's rights. For the first time in decades, there is going to be a legitimate forum and position from which to do this. It also entails constructing the liberal and democratic portion of the semi-authoritarian state. It would be the part that is unencumbered by not being from the military mold. One result could well be in the issue of freeing political prisoners. Not only regarding the release of present prisoners, but the very fact of political activity becoming *legitimate* would mean, hopefully, the end of people arrested and incarcerated for such activities.

Perhaps more importantly, the coming elections can be viewed as the means of reaching out to the hard-pressed public and reminding it of the possibilities of democracy. At the same time, younger candidates can cut their teeth on politics and prepare themselves for an open democratic system sometime in the future. What are needed now are coalition-builders and people and organizations willing to work in concert. A new broad-based party still remains a possibility, especially around an anti-authoritarian, pro-development platform, but it's an uphill task quite different from that of the heady, effortless days in the 'window' of late 1988 and 1989. The current primary contestant, the Union Solidarity and Development

Association, is not going to be a pushover as the National Unity Party was in 1990. The country is going to need democrats who are committed enough to walk this path.

If anything, the challenges may only multiply. Even with the advent of semi-elected provincial governments, how does one lift the regions and populations out of the mire? It has to be remembered that there will be a lot of expectations riding on those sub-national governments as well as on the union government. How, for instance could one expect the coming government and economy of Kayin state to be a viable entity? The state is, an area of ongoing low-intensity conflict, with landmines, abuses, and communities scarred by generations of war, and it is an extreme example of unmet needs.

In addition, the ethnic nationalities issue has been regarded as secondary and ancillary to “national” and elite-level politics. This is reflected, for example, in the way the ceasefires have been treated. Such attitudes persist at great risk to the country. The ethnic question is quite different, qualitatively and quantitatively, from that which the country faced in 1947 and 1962. In 1947, before independence, the issue had been rushed through, and in 1962 it had been smothered. Today it is in danger of being put on the back burner. All this would have to be turned into an over-arching endeavor of nation-building, which will be cross-cutting. And the cohesive force or the glue in nation-building is certainly not nationalism. Neither is it any ideology nor religion, and much less a personality. A noteworthy fact is that Myanmar has *never* had a pan-national leader. It comes from the shared experience of suffering and that of rebuilding from the ashes of civil conflict, authoritarianism and failed economic policies.

Situations of basic human insecurity exist to varying degrees in all the other states and divisions as well. The urban areas of the biggest city are no exception. Will there be a “democracy dividend” where the ceasefires beginning in 1989 did not produce a peace dividend? When democracy (or semi-democracy) is re-installed after 47 years of total absence, there are generations that have grown up without knowing the first thing about democracy. If human conditions continue to slide, there will be little to commend the new political system that has been so long in coming to the despairing population. We are already looking at a situation where the pursuit of basic human needs obviates any interest in politics, much less a system where popular participation is a *sine qua non*.

In a way it’s like the response to cyclone Nargis writ large. Assistance provides succour at a time of dire need as well as the encouragement to go on. It is not just the argument about development and democracy, the sequencing, and the nurturing of an educated middle class. Everything is going to be compressed and much more focused in the year ahead. Basic needs will have to be adequately met if the Myanmar people are to decide, despite all the limitations, the unfairness and the loaded dice, on their political future in 2010. People are tired of the force-fed propaganda on the one hand, and the unfulfilled

promises, slogans, and self-evident leadership deficit on the other. The economic slate could be very effective in the coming election campaign, but what assurance can one give that things will get better?

Solutions to persistent humanitarian crises cannot wait while the present political players go about searching for a settlement as they understand it. There are those who argue time without end that democracy is necessary, and could have averted these economic and social crises. Point taken, but democracy could have been initiated twenty years ago under much easier conditions if the democratic leadership had displayed enough common sense instead of engaging in grand moral posturing.

Threats Past and Present

It is not surprising that this prolonged domestic impasse and international disordering of priorities has resulted in appalling collateral damage. The aid organizations on the ground have set out the grim consequences of neglect by many sides. But at the same time, Burma/Myanmar and her unfortunate people have become virtual economic hostages and more to their giant northern neighbor, China. Behind the headlines, the weak and uncaring state, an economy struggling to keep its head above the water, and the unending political struggle without a goal have provided a continuous opening for a creeping takeover by a power with far larger interests in mind. This could be the ultimate tragedy of the two lost decades in Burma/Myanmar – that the country is subjected to ecological rape and has to pawn its economic independence to stave off Western interventions to “install democracy.” It could well be that by the time that democracy is installed the country would have become a de facto vassal state.

For decades during the Cold War, but especially after 1968 (coinciding with the Cultural Revolution and the struggle with the Gang of Four), Burma/Myanmar fought what amounted to a proxy war on the side of the West. For the people of Burma/Myanmar, the Cold War was a hot, brutal, and costly civil war – and they are still saddled with the consequences, which include ethnic bitterness and economic backwardness. Another unfortunate by-product was that the military was strengthened. Now, eerily, there is another conflict going on in the country – two domestic sides pitted against each other and backed by former Cold War adversaries. This is what happens when one is poor and politically unsophisticated and happens to be sitting on strategic turf.

This conflict is not exactly a shooting war – although this could break out again since the ingredients are still there. The proxy struggle this time, despite all the protestations of nationalism and sovereignty and democracy, is between two spheres of interest (to use an older term) in a global faceoff. The Communist Party of Burma had received huge amounts of support from China and waged all-out war in vast areas of Shan and Kachin states in Burma/Myanmar. Its defeat was only partly due to Western assistance; at the heart of its downfall were ethnic and cultural factors. Over time, communism could not

make any headway in a deeply religious land. And I don't mean just Buddhism – many of the ethnic areas are heavily Christian. However, with the winding down of hostilities and the advent of a not-quite-peace, the people were again denied the fruits of peace.

At the forefront of the threats this time around are those of economic and demographic domination intertwined. There was a half-hearted stab at development after the ceasefires began but this was soon overwhelmed by the scale and extent of an unprecedented rapacity going under the name of economic “concessions.” The perpetrators were of every stripe – indigenous and foreign – and in places the crust of the earth was actually peeled off to get at the loot within. As has been stated earlier, the Burmese people are losing ground to the twin threats of economic and demographic instability (often literally). The ethnic communities that live closer to the border lose more, just as they suffered disproportionately during the civil war.

Any Burmese government – be it authoritarian or liberal – would dearly love to be independent nationally and economically. Burmese businessmen and consumers would dearly love to have access to goods and markets all over the world. I don't think there would be many traders who would instead prefer border trade, with its lop-sided terms, shoddily-made goods, and lack of assurance – not to mention the high risk of being cheated. And which self-respecting Burmese would wish to see fellow citizens having to work as virtual slave labor in neighboring countries? There is a far larger demand to learn English than Mandarin in Burma/Myanmar. It is indeed a sorry state of affairs that when Burma/Myanmar opened up from authoritarian isolation more than a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, a series of missteps by political leaders in tandem with misguided Western policies engendered another prolonged era of travail for the country.

Conclusion

If I may conclude with an analogy, in surgery the second or third operation for the same ailment is always more difficult, if only because of the scar tissue from previous operations. Well, earlier surgeons working on Burma/Myanmar have botched the job badly. Not only is there more scar tissue, but the original ailment persists – with added complications.

How much justification would there be anymore in looking to past leadership to pull Burma/Myanmar out of the mire? Some individuals in that category are going to fade from the scene soon. It is a new game now – a new, complex, and urgent game. Both the two present major players know only one game and they play it ad infinitum. With a multiplicity of lesser players (in other words, a true pluralism), they become off-balanced. The 2010 election and beyond does open up more political space which can be utilized for reconciliation in both the democratic and ethnic divides. As such, 2010 could

become an opportunity for prevention of further conflict in a land that has known little else for close on seventy years.