

LIFE BEYOND REFERENDUM

_ by Thuria Tayza

The referendum is coming. Regardless of political opposition's denunciation of it as a sham, a sham referendum for a pro-military constitution drafted by a convention of much compliant delegates hand-picked by the military; and despite United Nations' request to the junta to formulate a more inclusive and more transparent process, the de facto military rulers of Burma are going ahead with their planned referendum where existing and newly crafted laws threaten any body who dares to speak anything against it will face long prison sentences, which in Burma usually comes with an automatic bonus of tortures and ill-treatments. The military junta has rejected United Nations' proposal to send UN monitors for the referendum. Notwithstanding the plan to hold constitutional referendum in May, majority of people in Burma haven't seen the draft constitution; actually they don't even know yet when exactly the referendum will be. Electoral registers are not yet complete, virtually non existent in many remote places of Burma where at least half of the country is either covered by jungles or on difficult terrains of steep hills and tall mountains. In spite of all these it is quite certain, at least for the junta, that the result of the referendum will be a "Yes", that is even if people actually vote "No" in an overwhelming majority. The referendum is just a formality for the junta to enable them to announce that Burma has been given a new constitution, whether people like it or loathe it. That's why junta has already declared that general elections will be held in 2010 under the new constitution which is yet to be approved by referendum!

Even though people loathe it and international community denounce it, the new constitution is going to be a very useful tool for the junta. After brutally killing dozens of Buddhist monks in a peaceful demonstration for better living conditions and improved human rights in Burma last year, the military junta came under immense pressure from United Nations and wide ranging sanctions from all self-respecting democratic governments around the world. Even junta's main sponsor, communist Chinese government, felt embarrassed by Burmese Generals' blatant breach of human rights. And there is a personal need for Senior General Than Shwe, the supreme leader of junta, who is alleged to be suffering from severe hypertension, diabetes and some intestinal tumours, to get a safe way out before he dies to leave a secure future for his family and a powerful legacy for his loyal followers in the military. A new civilian government, controlled by the military from behind the scene, under the new constitution will give Gen. Than Shwe a chance to claim that he has given a disciplined democracy to Burma. He has already time and again emphasized that Burma's democracy will be in Burmese style, not American style. And junta's big brothers China and Russia, and neighbouring countries like India and Thailand who want to get natural gas at a cheap price from Burmese generals will endorse junta's claims of achieving disciplined democracy in Burma. So, although every self-respecting politician in the democratic hemisphere knows that Burmese people have been given a very bad deal for a fake democracy by their military government, the establishing of a so called disciplined democracy will buy Burmese generals some credibility in other hemisphere influenced by China, Russia and India.

As it is, the political opposition inside Burma and in exile know the fate awaiting them beyond the referendum. But, as terribly weak they are, as dreadfully disunited they are, and as woefully disorganized they are, the political opposition have no ways and means, i.e. no

political institution or influence, to stop the referendum, or even to disrupt it. Since all brave and bold activists have been put behind bars during the Saffron Revolution last year, only a few elderly politicians are remaining outside jail, and they are these days just acting as care takers of the apparently exhausted main opposition party, looking forward with their weary eyes to a day in the dim future when the party will be revived by some miracle.

Some exile activists are suggesting boycotting the referendum. Perhaps, they may be able to persuade people in Burma not to vote in the referendum. The low turn out at the referendum may discredit it; but as the latest referendum law does not mention the minimum level of turn out for its validity, low turn out will not stop junta from declaring victory. On the other hand, it's a certainty that junta will force its soldiers, soldiers' families and civil servants to cast a "Yes" vote. And, junta lackey militant Kyant-phut and Swan-arr-shin organizations will mobilize their members to intimidate people to go to voting stations and vote "Yes". Eventually, junta will just count what ever "Yes" votes they can garner and declare that more than 99.99% has voted Yes!

So, alternatively, some suggest making a "No" campaign, to urge people to go and vote No. There's no question about people's loathing of corrupt military rulers, and in all possibilities people will take "No" vote as their natural revenge on the brutal military junta. So "No" vote is the natural outcome for the referendum, provided it be genuinely free and fair with real secret voting system. "No" vote will teach a tough lesson to the military and seriously damage their ambition for a perpetual dominance in Burma's politics. That's why the all powerful military will not allow "No" campaign to win. Even now, to dishearten "No" campaigners, military is spreading rumours that if "No" campaign wins, another national convention will be convened again which will take another fifteen years like the previous one, effectively giving the military another fifteen years at least to go on ruling as transitional de facto government.

No one knows exactly how the military will respond to a victory of "No" vote. But, nonetheless, people will just have to vote "No" to a constitution which gives 25% of seats in both houses of parliament to military officers hand-picked by their commander-in-chief, which allows military to operate as a totally independent institution with no control what so ever by civilian government on it, which allows military to take over power virtually at any time they like, which allows only three presidential candidates with one of them to be hand-picked by the military. Only fools and soldiers will vote "Yes" to such a constitution; "No" vote is the only choice for people, and "No" campaign is a must for all political activists.

But, as no one knows if the military will really hold a free and fair referendum, as no one knows how military will respond to a "No" victory, and as nothing is certain in Burma where a bunch of unreasonable military generals have absolute control over everything, "No" campaign alone will not be enough solution for Burma's problems. And, politicians and activists who want to carry on the torch of their political aspirations into long distant future, however bleak it might be, need to start preparing now for all eventualities beyond 2008 May referendum.

Here, it'd not be very impolite to point out an important reason of the chronic failure of Burma's pro-democracy movement, that is the very re-active nature of many a movement leaders who lack pro-active plans but like to issue one ineffectual statement after another only in a sluggish response to those cunning political moves by street-wise military generals extending and strengthening their powers. Usually, whenever Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is under house-arrest, her deputies just wait for her return, acting only as quiescent care-takers in

the mean time. But the problem is she has been under house-arrest most of the time during the last two decades. So, it's not surprising that she seems to become quite frustrated with the current situation of apparent lack of life in her party. And she, during her last meeting earlier this year with her party elders, pointed out to them the need to carry on the fight with or without her inspiration, and to be able to make decisions with or without her guidance, especially at this critical moment for the future of the country.

So, while making "No" campaign, activists should also start thinking about the next steps to take when military junta declare, in a believe-it-or-not manner, that their constitution has been approved by referendum.

When the new constitution come into effect, by hook or by crook, there will open up three main options to continue the fight against military oppressors _

1. To take the new constitution as the symbol of total defeat and failure of current non-violent struggle, and launch an all out armed revolution.
 2. To continue the non-violent struggle but in a more active manner, taking direct actions frequently, mobilizing Saffron Revolution style people power uprisings as frequently as possible, trying to destabilize any future puppet civilian government under military control.
 3. To play along with the new constitution and take part in elections and attempt to fight any future puppet civilian government from inside, or from inside the parliament
- Actually, all these three components can be used in a harmoniously synchronized combination. But to accomplish such a massive political effort and organization, pro-democracy parties will need new generations of more daring and more active leaders.

In reality, number two and number three options are more practically feasible than the first, as armed revolution nowadays seem to become totally obsolete. Since "nine eleven" no government around the world would provide assistance to an armed revolution in Burma, however much sympathetic they are to Burma's struggle for democracy. And all those successful coloured democratic uprisings (velvet one in Georgia, orange one in Ukraine, etc) in recent history are based on non-armed movements. Even the terrorist Hamas has finally come to power in Gaza Strip through political elections. Likewise, today's major armed ethnic resistance groups in Burma, if they understand changing trends in the world, will in near future need to form political wings like Sin Fein of IRA, to take part in elections and to make two-pronged efforts (non-armed political offensives as well as armed self defence against any attempted genocide) ultimately towards self-determination and autonomy in their homelands.

If the pro-democracy movement, especially the movement's main political party the National League for Democracy NLD, is to survive and thrive beyond 2008, and beyond 2010, the party must try to build political muscle. Of course, military junta and its security apparatuses and its future successor puppet civilian government will all try their best to contain and crush NLD party. But if there's a will, there will be a way. There had been many instances in the past where activists successfully organized strong movements despite intense scrutiny and tight control by security forces; e.g. , under difficult situations students organized and mobilized protests in 1987, 1988, 1996, and student leaders initiated white shirt movement and open heart campaigns of 2006 and anti-inflation demonstrations of 2007 despite the junta stamping down on them. And with the new constitution and new elections in 2010, it will become inevitable for military junta to allow some room for political activities inside the country. So NLD must try to regroup and rebuild itself, and must try to establish a well

organized political institution inside the country, mostly above ground but also some under ground elements as required; and there must be a long line up, a virtually endless supply, of new generation leaders who will take over and carry on the fight whenever their senior colleagues are arrested or eliminated by the military.

Most important above all else will be to bring together people power; to re-align the movement as one for the people, and by the people, instead of a movement by a small group of politicians for transfer of power to their party.

Recently, there has been poverty relief efforts and rice distribution by Amyotheryei U Win Naing and group. And, there was Ko Htin Kyaw and group who voiced people's concerns for the worsening poverty, lack of credible social welfare and lack of electricity supply, etc. And, there was an effort by Phyu Phyu Thin and group to provide assistance to HIV patients. And there were attempts by Su Su Nway and group to protect the rights of people used as forced labourers by the military. And there even is a group led by actor Kyaw Thu providing free funeral arrangements for poor families. And there are many a faceless civilian journalists and bloggers from inside Burma who try to record the sufferings of people and spread the word to the outside world. And there are numerous groups which are providing healthcare, education, food, shelter and other helps to refugees, migrants and displaced people along Thai-Burma border.

But sadly, we haven't seen anything significant done, or said, by current caretaker leaders of the movement, and the elected people's representatives inside and outside the country, for the relief of poverty and sufferings of the people.

Since 1990, all policy platforms of current caretaker leaders of the movement and the elected people's representatives inside and outside the country have steadfastly been based on 1990 election results; all statements issued, all request and proposals made to the junta, all petitions and open letters written to United Nations, all policy initiatives laid down, and all political strategies designed have consistently been centred around 1990 election results and the need to get power transferred according to 1990 election results.

But the truth is, after nearly two whole decades, under very terrible real-life situations on the ground, the long suffering and now virtually starving people are no longer interested in election results of twenty years ago. And, the younger newer generation activists of today were either born after 1990 elections or were in a very tender young childhood at the time of the election. So, although they care very much about nowadays' terrible poverty suffered by their fellow country men under a corrupt military junta, they do not care that much about an election result some two decades ago which the military junta refused to recognize.

And remember that the massive Saffron Revolution of 2007 was not at all about politics or political parties or political elections. The people in 2007 were already absolutely poor and on the brink of starvation which was dramatically worsened by junta's five-fold increase in fuel prices. Angry people led by their student leaders came out onto streets and marched and made protests which were supported by Buddhist monks, which led to brutal beatings by soldiers on the monks, which in turn angered the mass of Buddhist monks and devotees in majority Buddhist country Burma, eventually leading to the explosion of the Saffron Revolution. So it is very clear that Saffron Revolution exploded solely and spontaneously out of people's poverties and miseries, nothing to do with politicians or political parties.

Since before 1990, and until now, people of Burma have been trying to get rid of an unwanted military rule. But there is a delicate and gradual change in underlying reason to get rid of the military rule. In 1990s people were angry with the military junta because they felt that, by refusing to recognize 1990 election results, the military had cheated people of their legitimate choice of government. But in 2007 and now, people are angry with the military junta because military generals' corruptions, brutalities and incompetence has caused so much and so terrible sufferings to the people.

So, if the pro-democracy movement is to survive and thrive beyond 2008 and 2010, there are two imminent and immediate requirements to fulfil.

The first is to reinvigorate the movement by getting more energetic new generation leaders who can get along and go along with people better, and are bold enough to initiate, organize and lead people power movements as required to take direct political action against military aggressors.

Nowadays' younger generation of grass-root junior activists are looking for new generation leaders, like the 8888 generation students, who understand the people and are understood in return by the people, who sympathize with the people and are sympathized by the people, who speak out for the people and are spoken very highly of by the people, who stood up for the people and are rallied around by the people.

And the second requirement is to realign the movement with the people by speaking up about people's sufferings, representing people's interests, trying to help people in every possible way, fighting for the people, fighting to get power for the people but not fighting to get power for a party.

Usually, in democratic systems politicians whose policies best reflect people's most pressing concerns have the best chance to get elected. Bill Clinton on economy platform during economic recessions of the beginnings of 1990s. Second Bush winning second term with a tough warrior stance on national security platform during an era of terrorist phobia.

As people in Burma are suffering quite a lot, there are a lot of things which Burmese politicians can speak out for their people. First of all there is very high inflation and low income, coupled with high un-employment and low morale. Many people are starving, and millions of children are malnourished. Child mortality rate is very high. With very meagre and poor quality health-care, maternal mortality rate is also high; and general population's life expectancy is also very low. Nasty infectious diseases like HIV, TB, etc are very prevalent. Education system is very chaotic. Starving and un-educated children are sold into sex-slavery or used as under-age under-paid labourers. Jobless women also fall into prostitution in neighbouring countries. Military frequently uses people as unpaid forced labourers. Military also uses child soldiers. Military can confiscate people's houses, land and any thing they want at any time and any where they like without giving any compensation. Judges, juries and the whole judicial system runs on bribery. The entire government bureaucratic system from top to bottom is rife with corruptions. And there is no media freedom, and all phones and emails and internet access are tightly controlled and monitored by security forces. If we go on and on there will be an endless list of people's sufferings. There is quite a lot for politicians to speak out on behalf of the people; they only need to have a will to do so. If politicians really love their country, as they usually tend to claim, they must think more about helping the people

rather than about getting power for themselves. In a democratic system politicians really need to serve the people.

And, by the way, a few words about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi; there is a very strong possibility that the people's long drawn-out struggle for human rights in Burma may outlive their leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. There is a very essential need to keep the freedom struggle and revolutionary spirit alive as long as necessary, until Burma become fully democratic with genuine and complete human rights, which may take up to twenty years or fifty years or even a century if all these democratic reforms and human rights improvements are to develop so very gradually against generations upon generations of hard-line dogmatic aggressive military generals who want to maintain their dominance in Burma's politics. The need is real, and may be even urgent, to make sure that the struggle will not die down or fizzle out when, in an eventuality, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is no longer there to inspire it and lead it.

And concerning exile politicians; although they cannot serve the people directly, must try to make a difference in Burma's politics by repeatedly telling the international community time and again about the non-inclusive nature of the constitution drafting convention, the undemocratic nature of the new constitution, the lack of transparency in the referendum, so the illegitimacy of coming elections in 2010, and also the puppet nature of the future civilian government which the military is trying to install under their control.

And for the United Nations and the international community; if they really want to help Burma, they must first try to understand the true nature of Burma's current problems, and need to see clearly that Burma's problem is not a power struggle between a political party and a military junta, but is about the suffering, poverty and misery of the people under a corrupt and incompetent military junta. So if international community want to give a genuine help to people of Burma, they must try to help relieve sufferings of the people, and also get more freedom for the people if possible. Before UN envoy Mr Gambari's latest visit to Burma, when he sent five written requests to the junta, one of the requests was about co-operations between UN and Burmese junta to make a joint effort for poverty relief for the poor people of Burma. But it was rudely rejected by the military junta. But Mr Gambari should not be disappointed by the junta's total indifference towards people's sufferings, but keep up his good work and try again, and again, to provide direct help to the people.

And the future civilian government after 2010 elections (even though it most probably will be a puppet one); it should try its best to reduce hostilities among all political factions in Burma, and try to build trust, try to be flexible, and try to work well with all politicians and parties in the parliament; should even try to form a broad-based big-tent government if possible.

One last word, for the generals, about sanctions_ generals need to understand that sanctions are the fruits of their own wrong doings. As long as military dominance is persisting in Burma, so also will the sanctions be on the businesses of military generals, their families and cronies. Sanctions nowadays are a default response mechanism of international community to any authoritarian regime. So if they really want lifting of sanctions, Burmese generals need to show that they deserve it by making solid credible, even if gradual, reforms in the right direction.

(The author is a post graduate Law student in London; and general secretary of the UK-based exile branch of Burma's National League for Democracy)