“Popular education, cross-border civil society and possibilities for democracy in Burma”

By

Sai Thet Naing Oo

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University of Technology, Sydney

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CERTIFICATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Sai The Naing Oo

March 2012
“Education is about enhancing students’ knowledge and ability to face challenges in their lives. School education is important, but there is also a kind of education that takes place outside of the educational institution. We need to take on both kinds of education, and since the schooling education system in our country does not adequately prepare young people to face challenges later in their lives, they must find ways to improve their knowledge and ability with education occurs beyond the school.”

Aung San Suu Kyi

A translation of an interview in Burmese by Myat Lay Ngon of the Yan Gon Time Media Club (14/9/2011)
Abstract

I grew up in Burma and went to the Rangoon Arts and Science University. I participated in the student-led democracy uprising in 1988 and was forced to flee the country to avoid imprisonment or worse. The military regime may have suppressed that and subsequent uprisings, but the spirit for restoring democracy in Burma has remained strong. After the democracy uprising in 1988 was crushed by the military regime, some members of the opposition groups chose armed struggle to continue their struggle for regime change while many have formed organisations outside the country and focus on mounting international community pressure on the military regime to bring about change in Burma. The movement for democracy has taken place not only inside Burma but also among Burmese exile and refugee communities. The most important site outside Burma for the democracy struggle has been Thailand and in particular in the Thai-Burma border region. The purpose of my thesis is to contribute to the ongoing struggle to combat the military dictatorship and work towards a democratic future. While focusing on the particular task of democracy-building for Burma my interest also extends to the wider question of how informal adult education can build democracy in the face of dictatorships. This study argues that the Burmese opposition movement has, by and large, overlooked the value of grassroots social change, community development and education.

Successive Burmese military regimes have crushed any possibility of sustained people power. Public space for social action inside Burma is almost nonexistent. The declining Burmese economy since the 1970s, authoritarian rule and ongoing civil war are major push-factors behind unprecedented numbers of Burmese leaving their country. More than one hundred and fifty thousand refugees and over two million migrant workers from Burma are currently in Thailand and the numbers are increasing. In the 1990s, most armed ethnic groups that had been waging war
against the ruling regime since the 1950s, entered into cease-fire arrangements. Although these agreements were widely subjected to criticism among opposition groups, they have subsequently provided an opportunity for civil society groups to emerge along the border regions with Thailand. “Civil society” in this thesis refers to traditional, social, welfare, humanitarian, local self-help and advocacy organisations. These cross-border civil society groups initially emerged in response to a humanitarian crisis among Burmese refugees and migrant workers. After a decade, they have transformed into a hub of capacity building for the democracy movement. In here I analyse the nature of teaching and learning democracy in the everyday life of Burmese labourers in Thailand. Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are mostly illegal and face various forms of marginalisation, exploitation and unfair treatment by their employers, local government authorities and human traffickers. Unlike political leaders and activists in the movement, they are pre-occupied with everyday survival and cannot take part in political programs. My findings reveal that teaching and learning democracy amongst migrant workers tends to occur informally, often in unexpected locations and under unlikely circumstances. Informality is an important element in workers learning because it allows them to express deep-held feelings, make use of their practical wisdoms and make critical inquiries about the nature of their exploitation. This study also found that workers develop capacity for active citizenship as a result of participation in small and unlikely social spaces.

The challenge to bring about democratic change in Burma is far greater than replacing an oppressive authoritarian regime with a democratically elected government, since the legacy of more than six decades of oppressive rule has led to the building up of internalised fears amongst people and passive attitude toward collective actions for changes. Many of these anti-democratic characteristics are deeply embedded in social and cultural practices. The oppressive military rule is not the only barrier to democracy in Burma because, in addition, there are non-political factors such as the top-down spoon-feeding education system and hierarchical
socio-cultural practices that breed patron-client relationships amongst people which are equally destructive to the development of democracy. The military dictators have built on such cultural traits and led the people to be so passive about their own power to make democratic changes. Enabling common people in and outside Burma to become active citizens remains perhaps the great challenge to, and represents the most sustained possibilities for, the Burmese democracy movement.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Through this long journey of six years, the support of my supervisors, friends, colleagues and family were the guiding lights that kept me going in the right direction. Their invaluable support was essential to not only keep me going but also from breaking my spirit at times when I was so close to giving up this ordeal. Although the contributions from many people made it possible to complete this tremendous task, I would like to mention some specific names.

I am grateful for the support of my supervisor Dr Rick Flowers who patiently guided and helped me by challenging my assumptions, cautioning me to be as objective as I could be, editing and commencing on my drafts. English, as my fourth language, was challenging for me to produce academic writing. I was so lucky to have my supervisor Dr Rick Flowers and my co-supervisor, Professor John Macdonald as my friends and colleagues. Rick gave me friendship during the isolation years of dissertation writing and John always provided me guidance and moral support. This dissertation would not have been possible without the warm friendship and emotional sustenance of Dr Rick Flowers and Professor John Macdonald.

I owe a great debt to my parents who were teachers themselves and did their best to ensure their children receive education all the way to the university. I grew up in a remote town in Burma where only a small number of young people of the town reached high school. My parents sent me and all my siblings to schools in major cities of Burma in order to help their children access good education. I am so lucky to have parents who saw education as prime importance for the future of their children. My father, who passed away in 2008, inspired me by his ethical actions and helped me understand values in education at young age. I will always remember advice and wisdom I received from him and they will be my guiding lights forever.

Fieldwork for this study is an outcome of the effort of many minds and hearts. I have so many people to thank for their support, advice and work, particularly, Sai Mawn of Ethnic National Council, Dr Thein Lwin and Saya Sai of Migrant Learning Centre (Chiang Mai), Ko Aung Myo Min of Human Rights Education Institute of Burma, Ko Aung Myo of Protection of HIV/AIDS Among Migrant Workers in Thailand, Steve Thompson of Environmental Desk of Images Asia, Nang Hseng Nong of Shan Women Action Network, U Theing Oo of Burma Lawyer Council.

Finally to my children, Sai Mong, Khaee and Roshan who have made this intellectual exercise in tune with the rhythms of everyday life. I am sorry I could not spend time with them as much as I wanted to. They made my life busy and messy in this journey but they always lifted my spirits and cheered me up.
Source: Lambert Conformal Conic Projection (Map of Burma with cities)

Http://www.vidiani.com/maps
Burmese Refugees camps locations (Map: TBBC)
ABBREVIATIONS

AAPP- Association for Assistance for Political Prisoners
ABSDF All Burma Students Democratic Force
ABSU All Burma Student Union
AFPFL Anti-Fascist and People Front League
Aids Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
Altsean Alternative Association for South-east Asian Nations
BBC British Broadcasting Corporation
BRC Border Rescue Committee
BSPP The Burmese Socialist Program Party
BWU Burmese Women Union
CBOs Community Based Organisations
CDCE Community Development and Community Empowerment
CIDA Canadian International Development Agency
CPB Communist Party of Burma
DAB- Democratic Alliance of Burma
DTP the Diplomacy Training Program
DVB Democratic Voice of Burma
ECS Economic Corporation Strategy
EBO Belgium based the Euro-Burma Office
ENC Ethnic Nationalities Council
EDD Doctor of Education
E-Desk- Environmental Desk
ERI Earth Rights International
ESC Economic Cooperation Strategy
EU European Union
FBC Free Burma Coalition
FCC-T Foreign Correspondent Club -Thailand
GONGO Government Organised Non-Government Organisation
GHRED Grassroots Human Right Education and Development
HIV Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HREIB- Human Rights Education Institute of Burma
IDP Internally Displaced People
ICG International Crisis Group
INGOs International Non-Government Organisations
IRC International Rescue Committee
JACDB Joint Action Committed for Democracy in Burma
KED Karen Education Department
KF Karuna Foundation
KIO Kachin Independent Organisation
KNU Karen National Union
KNOW Karen National Women’s Organisation
KWAT Kachin Women’s Association-Thailand
KWHRO Kuki Women’s Human Rights Organisation
KWO Karen Women’s Organisation
LWO Lahu Women’s Organisation
MAP Migrant Worker Assistance Program
MDSA Myanmar Dental Surgeons Association
MFO Myanmar Film Organisation
MHAA Myanmar Health Association
MLC Migrant Learning Centre
MMA Myanmar Medical Association
MNA Myanmar Nurses’ Association
MOU Memorandum of Understanding
MPs Members of Parliament
MRC Myanmar Red Cross Society
MTAA Myanmar Tradition Artists Association
MTO Myanmar Theatrical Organisation
MVA Myanmar Vocalists Association
MWDA Myanmar Women’s Development Association
MWEA Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association
MWJO Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association
MWSF Myanmar Women Sport Federation
NCGUB National Coalition of Government of Union of Burma
NCUB Nation Council for Union of Burma
NDD Network for Democracy Development
NDF Nationalities Democratic Front
NED National Endowment for Democracy
NHEC National Health and Education Committee
NGOs Non-Government Organisations
NED Karen Education Department
NHEC National Health and Education Council
NLD National League for Democracy
NLD-LA National League for Democracy-Liberated Area
OSI Open Society Institute
PDC Political Defiance Committee
PHAMIT Protection of HIV/AIDS among Migrant Workers in Thailand
PWO Palaung Women’s Organisation
PWU Pa-O Women’s Union
RASU Rangoon Arts and Science University
RFA Radio Free Asia
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<tr>
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<td>Rangoon Institute of Technology</td>
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<td>RMIT</td>
<td>Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>RWU</td>
<td>Rakhaing Women’s Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBEZ</td>
<td>Special Border Economic Zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>SHAN</td>
<td>Shan Herald News Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>Shan State Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWAN</td>
<td>Shan Women Action Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>TWU</td>
<td>Tavoy Women’s Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>TACDB</td>
<td>Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBBC</td>
<td>Thai Burma Border Consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOT</td>
<td>Training for Trainers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNLD-LA</td>
<td>United Nationalities League for Democracy (Liberated Area)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nation High Commissioner of Refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>U.S. Assistance for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USDP</td>
<td>Union Solidarity and Development Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>USDA</td>
<td>Union Solidarity and Development Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOA</td>
<td>Voice of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>WLB</td>
<td>Women League of Burma</td>
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<tr>
<td>WRWAB</td>
<td>Women’s Rights and Welfare Association of Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WVO</td>
<td>War Veteran’s Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>YCOWA</td>
<td>Young Chi Oo Worker Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>3Ds jobs</td>
<td>Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous jobs</td>
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