

Interview With Harn Yawngwe

reconciliation through Dialogue is the Name of The Game in Burma Politics

Chinland Guardian

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While the whole world is condemning the Junta after its brutal crackdown against peaceful demonstrators in Burma, Chinland Guardian has a chance to interview Harn Yawngwe one of the most capable strategists and influential leaders among Burma's pro-democracy movement. Harn Yawngwe is director of National Reconciliation Program and Brussels based Euro-Burma Office. He is senior advisor to Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) the council that represent 7 non-Burman ethnic states. Harn Yawngwe is the son of Sao Shwe Thaik the last prince of Yawngwe and the first president of the Republic of Union of Burma

Chinland Guardian: It is a pity to watch the people movement crushed by the SPDC. Is there any option left for positive change in Burma soon?

Harn Yawngwe: It depends on how you define positive change. If you mean an immediate regime change either by a people's uprising, a military coup d'état, intervention by UN or US forces; or the SPDC willingly handing over power to DASSK, the answer is definitely no. None of these will happen soon if ever. But if you define positive change as an opportunity to change the power equation in Burma and bring about a political solution, the answer is a qualified yes. I say qualified because it will depend on how skillful we are and how willing we are to take risks. Most people expect that because of international pressure, the SPDC will hand over power. They are not, however, willing to risk engaging with the SPDC in case it is a trick or in case the SPDC wins. If we engage the SPDC in a dialogue and can get the international pressure to continue, we could maybe see a real dialogue take place between DASSK and the SPDC. The international community has never been this united in wanting to see change in Burma. We have to provide the way to make that change happen.

Chinland Guardian: During the monk led demonstration, one of the main demands included National Reconciliation. Why is that? What kind of National Reconciliation is needed in Burma?

Harn Yawngwe: The monks asked for National Reconciliation because they recognized that political problems are at the root of the economic problems. They know that toppling the regime is not the answer. They want a peaceful transition. They recognized that the Union of Burma is a very divided nation the military versus civilians; the rich versus the poor; Buddhists versus Muslims and Christians; Burmans versus ethnic nationalities; ethnic nationalities versus minorities; ceasefire groups versus non-ceasefire groups; those who want democracy first versus those who want economic development first; those who want an immediate regime change versus those who want a transition; those who want sanctions versus who want engagement; etc. Religious people are supposed to be peacemakers, so the monks asked National Reconciliation as a first step to heal the deep wounds. Over the last 60 years, we have been divided and sub-divided until today we can say that society in Burma has been fragmented or atomized. Only the military has been left as an institution of state. If we want democracy, we have to re-build a cohesive society. That means reconciling differences through dialogue, understanding and accepting that diversity in the nation is an asset rather than a weakness. We need unity but not uniformity. A Chin can

never be the same as a Shan and a Shan can never be the same as a Burman. But we can all be united by working for the same goals.

Chinland Guardian: The recent statement made by Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) encouraged Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (DASSK) to accept the offer made by Gen. Than Shwe, to meet with her in spite of the precondition made by the General. What is your opinion on that statement?

Harn Yawngwe: The ENC did not encourage DASSK to accept the offer. The ENC asked her to seriously consider it. There is a difference. The ENC cannot make the decision for her. She has to make the decision herself. The ENC asked her to seriously consider it because first of all, she has always asked for a dialogue to solve the problems that we face in Burma. Secondly, it is ENC policy to find political solutions for political problems and it is the ENC? strategy to find such solutions through a tripartite dialogue. Thirdly, all the monks and demonstrators asked for national reconciliation and a dialogue. Should DASSK not try to fulfill the demands of the people who risked their lives? Fourth ?the international community is asking the SPDC to have a dialogue with DASSK in order to have national reconciliation. If she refuses to have a dialogue, the SPDC will have an excuse to say that they were willing but she refused. In such a case, there would be no role left for either Gambari, the UN or the UN Security Council. Fifth ?the SPDC has always refused to have a dialogue because it believes that force is the only way to solve any problem. Should we not be encouraging them to find other solutions? Sixth ?last but not least, the future of the whole of the Union of Burma depends on whether we can bring about change now. That change depends on whether or not there is a dialogue. DASSK must think about the future of the nation and all its peoples. She cannot think as a private person or even as the leader of the NLD. She must also think on behalf of the ethnic people including the ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups. I am sure she is very aware of this and has not yet responded to the SPDC. Her party and others, however, have without thinking seriously responded in a negative way. The key to change is to get a real dialogue started. We should then use the international attention to force the SPDC into a substantive dialogue. As for the pre-conditions, I see them as a face saving device for the SPDC. Than Shwe cannot be seen as having given in to international pressure. He needs to be able to justify why he is talking to DASSK. If she agrees, he can say she is giving in to him so he is talking to her. We must not forget that in Burmese culture, he is older and she is a woman. So, in his mind it is more natural for her to give in. If we look at the preconditions carefully, there is nothing she cannot really agree to:

Confrontation/ Utter devastation ?The SPDC claims that ?tter devastation?is what she threatened the SPDC with. This is not true. She said there is a need to dialogue and solve the problem. Otherwise the country will face utter devastation. So she can easily say, her policy is always to have a dialogue and find a political solution, that she does not want confrontation and that she does not want utter devastation for anyone, not for the SPDC, and least of all for the country.

Sanctions ?The NLD has stated clearly that it is not NLD policy to call for sanctions. The countries that imposed sanctions did so because of the way the SPDC was behaving. She can say that in the interest of the people, she believes that a dialogue is needed, and so for the time being she would like to facilitate a dialogue by calling for a moratorium (to withhold) on sanctions. The countries that have sanctions will not automatically lift them just because she says so. The most they will do is say, they

support a dialogue and are willing to lift sanctions once they see progress. This is a great way to make the dialogue substantive.

1990 elections ?DASSK has always said she is not seeking power. She has always called for a dialogue. She can say that if a dialogue will provide an answer to how the 1990 election results can be taken into account, she is willing to start the dialogue without the precondition that the 1990 election results must be respected immediately. But she can further say that she herself was never elected, so she cannot make a decision on behalf of those who were elected. To make it binding, she will need to consult with all those who were elected and their parties. This is a very reasonable request. The international community will support it. This will make it very hard for the SPDC to refuse and it may open up more political space and maybe even bring about the release of MPs.

SPDC Road Map ?DASSK can say that she in principle she agrees to a transition period. All transitions need a Road Map and a timetable, and that she is willing to accept the steps outlined in the SPDC Road Map. She can further say that the dialogue will determine the timetable and the contents of the Road Map.

If she can handle these and other preconditions in a skilful way, the SPDC will have to respond. If they do not, they will be blamed for the failure of the talks. If she rejects the preconditions, she will be blamed for the failure of the talks that everyone wants.

Chinland Guardian: Why one of the stake holders, Non-Burman Ethnic Nationalities, not mentioned in the talk?

Harn Yawng hwe: Actually, point No.3 of the ENC statement affirmed that a ?ripartite dialogue?is needed to solve Burma? problems. Point No.2 did not mention it because it is talking about the offer made by Than Shwe to DASSK. He did not make the offer to the ethnic nationalities. In any case, the ENC views a dialogue or talks as a process. It is not something that takes place once or twice. The ENC is also certain that the problem in Burma cannot be resolved either by the SPDC or DASSK without bringing in the ethnic nationalities. They will at one point have to bring in the ethnic nationalities into the process. This is because no ethnic nationality will accept a decision made for them. They must decide for their own future.

Chinland Guardian: How is the prospect of ?ripartite Dialogue?

Harn Yawng hwe: Again it depends on how you define it. If you think it means SPDC + NLD + ENC = Tripartite, the answer is that the prospect for such a dialogue is slim. Why?

The SPDC does not believe in a dialogue. It believes it can solve problems by the use of force and it is the only one that should decide Burma? future.

The SPDC is agreeing to talk with DASSK because of international pressure based on the recent domestic demonstrations and its aftermath.

The SPDC will do as little as possible. If it is further pressured, it might agree to include the ceasefire groups, not the non-ceasefire or exile groups.

On the other hand, if you define a ?ripartite Dialogue?as where the concerns of the ethnic people are addressed, the prospects are good. Why?

The international community including China is calling for inclusive dialogue and national reconciliation;
DASSK agrees to the UNGA resolution calling for a tripartite dialogue;
The ENC is seen by the international community as a credible organization and its recommendations are taken seriously;
As far as the ENC is concerned, it does not matter if it is invited or not. The key is to ensure that true ethnic representation is included in the talks. These can be ceasefire, non-ceasefire or even political parties. The key is to ensure all ethnic parties have the same policies regarding the constitution.

Chinland Guardian: The SPDC is rallying the people to support their National Convention in Ethnic States like Kachin and Chin State. What step should the opposition groups take now?

Harn Yawnghwe: The SPDC is determined to go ahead with its NC and Road Map ?dialogue or no dialogue. Hopefully, the dialogue will be substantive and can contribute to the modification of the Road Map. At least a time frame for a transition can be agreed to. However, the ethnic states should not depend on the outcome of the dialogue. As far as I know, ENC strategy is as follows (Hope for the best, prepare for the worst):

1. Prepare for a long term campaign by:
 - a) Empowering the people;
 - b) Protecting the civilian population;
 - c) Improving civil administration;
 - d) Building up the capacity of political parties and engaging in SPDC politics;
2. Prepare for the medium term by:
 - a) Preparing to resume hostilities if the SPDC tries to disarm groups prematurely before the dialogue can reach an agreement;
 - b) Preparing to engage politically if no agreement can be reached;
 - c) Preparing to engage politically if some agreement can be reached;
3. Immediately:
 - a) Engaging with the SPDC in a dialogue;
 - b) Engaging with the international community in a dialogue;
 - c) Engaging with the people in a dialogue;
 - d) Engaging with democracy activists in a dialogue.

Chinland Guardian: Recent uprising in Burma gained overwhelming international attention. But, needless to say, action is needed. What kind of international action would be most productive for positive change in Burma?

Harn Yawnghwe: Many Burmese believe more sanctions are needed to bring down the regime. I personally believe that this is the wrong strategy. Why?

The international community will not act to bring down the regime. They, especially the neighbours, are scared of anarchy and instability;
The West has no economic interest in Burma to risk bringing it down. The cost benefit relationship is not in favour of intervention;
The UN system is overstretched. It cannot handle another major crisis even if there is the will to intervene (There is none as describe in No.2);
Other options short of intervention will not bring the regime down. Sanctions are mostly cosmetic and do not affect the generals;

Bringing the regime down will not solve problems. If the SPDC goes, we might have to deal with 13 dictators (the regional commanders) instead of one. They have everything to lose and are not likely to favour dialogue either; If there are 13 dictators, not counting the ceasefire armies, our giant neighbours might be compelled to intervene to protect their national interest if there is anarchy and instability. It is not impossible to see Chin State and Sagaing Division maybe even Magwe annexed by India; Arakan State annexed by Bangladesh; Kachin State, Mandalay Division, Shan State, Karenni State, Pegu, Rangoon and Irrawaddy Division annexed by China; Karen and Mon State and Tenasserim Division annexed by Thailand.

The international community is the most united now UN, US, EU, China, ASEAN all agree that there needs to be a dialogue and national reconciliation. At the moment Gambari is the main interlocutor. He gets on well with the generals and with DASSK. He is well aware that the dialogue process has to be inclusive meaning the ethnic nationalities. This is also China's position.

Gambari is backed by the UN Security Council. China wants to see this work. It does not want the issue to go to the Security Council for its own reasons. At the moment the UN Security Council only deals with hard security issues war, regional stability, etc. it does not deal with soft security issues democracy and human rights. If Burma becomes a UN Security matter, the scope of the UNSC will be expanded to include soft security issues. This is dangerous for Russia and China. Both will veto it regardless of what is at stake in Burma.

Asking for UNSC sanctions will not help because China and Russia will veto it. Even if the UNSC could agree, the question is this What will the UN do if the SPDC refuses to comply? So it is not useful to push for a UNSC resolution if the UN cannot act. In the Darfur case, the UN had to get the Sudan Government to agree before the UN could send a peacekeeping force. SPDC is unlikely to agree.

The best option is to continue with Gambari. He will need the UN Security Council and multi-party talks to back him up. The Gambari mission in turn will push for substantive dialogue in Burma.

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