

What's changed in Burma in the past 19 years?

The Nation

28 September, 07

Today is the 19th anniversary of the coup that ousted the socialist regime of U Ne Win and put the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) into power following the junta's crackdown on the "Four Eights" (8888) uprising.

But this year, junta members have no cause for celebration as they are facing nationwide protests calling on them to hand over power to a civilian government. Htet Aung Kyaw takes a look back at how much the country has changed after two decades of struggle.

Following the State Law and Order Restoration Council's coup on September 18, 1998, junta leader General Saw Maung promised to hold fresh elections and then hand over power to the winning party as soon as possible. More than 100 political parties, including detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) participated in the election held on May 27, 1990, the first election in 26 years.

When the NLD won 392 of 485 seats in parliament, the SLORC broke its promise and issued order No 1/90, which meant that elected MPs would not have the chance to take power directly but that a National Convention would be held to draft a new constitution. "How can we hand over power to them without a constitution?" Saw Maung asked at the time.

The SLORC then went on to arrest dozens of MPs who did not follow the No 1/90 order, while some MPs escaped to found a government in exile. In 1992, the SLORC dismissed General Saw Maung and replaced him with General Than Shwe, then said the promise had been made by Saw Maung, not Than Shwe.

In January 1993, Than Shwe called a National Convention to draft a new constitution. Initially, 93 MPs from the NLD and dozens of ethnic MPs joined the convention, but in December 1995, NLD members boycotted the convention, saying they were prevented from engaging in a free discussion. In March 1996, the National Convention was halted and in September 1997 the SLORC was renamed the State Peace and Development Council.

In May 2004, the National Convention resumed but the NLD and the ethnic MPs did not join for the same reason as in 1995. But nearly 100 representatives from ethnic groups that had declared a cease-fire and 1,000 government-selected people attended. Finally, the 14-year long National Convention came to an end on September 3, but no one knows how much further it will be to a new constitution.

Although nothing seems to have changed in the mainstream political scenario in the past two decades, the sideline politics - especially in areas bordering China and Thailand - have changed. Dozens of ethnic rebel groups that had been operating for decades signed cease-fire agreements with the government in the 1990s. Most of them attended the National Convention. A few groups, however, including the Shan, Karen, and Karenni, are still ready to fight back.

Apart from its political and armed conflicts, Burma's education, health, and social systems have collapsed, even though the government says on their television channels that they are building hundreds of schools and hospitals. "Yes, they built new schools and new hospitals in our area, but there are neither books nor medicine," explained a leader of the Kachin group along the border with China.

For the business sector, Burma officially announced plans to open its market to foreign-direct investment in the 1990s. But until now, the government controls most businesses directly or

indirectly. The inflation rate is high at over 2000 per cent, as US\$1 (Bt34.26) is now worth 1400 kyats, as compared to 70 kyats to the dollar in 1988. The official exchange rate is still \$1 for 6 kyats.

According to a UN official in Rangoon, nearly 90 per cent of the country's population of 50 million live below or near the poverty line of \$1 a day. But the government claims that Burma's GDP is growing 10 per cent every year as shown in the hundreds of new bridges and dams that are being built. Many economists point to junta mismanagement rather than US-led sanctions as being to blame for the country's economic woes.

The junta's recent decision to increase fuel prices by 100 to 600 per cent might be the worst move it has made in its 19-year term. Since August 19, the 88-Generation Students group has led demonstrations that have now spread nationwide against the fuel-price hike. Moreover, the country's highly respected union of Buddhist monks has joined hands with the group and called on the SPDC to hand over power to a democratically elected government, as they promised to do 19 years ago.

Htet Aung Kyaw

Oslo

Htet Aung Kyaw is a senior journalist of the Oslo-Based Democratic Voice of Burma radio and TV station.

http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/09/18/opinion/opinion_30049321.php