

The Martin Luther King Prize Acceptance Lecture

The Salemkyrkan, Stockholm, Sweden

15 January 2007

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Dear Friends:

When I was told that I had been awarded for the Martin Luther King Prize for 2007, I felt extremely honored. When I first heard from the chairperson of the Martin Luther King Prize, I was speechless because I could not believe what I was hearing. I certainly never expected such a prize for my involvement in this struggle. I am involved in this movement for just two reasons; first, it is to achieve for my country a free and open democratic system, which I think is often taken for granted here in Sweden.

Second, I am involved in this process for what I view as the very survival of my birth community of the Chin people in Burma and by extension the survival of my own ethnicity and identity as well as the other oppressed ethnic nationalities of Burma. So, it seems to me that what I am doing in this struggle is quite personal: reflecting my beliefs and struggling to achieve in the political context of Burma where those beliefs and my ethnic identity are valued and respected for my generation and the future generations of the peoples of Burma. You can understand that I did not expect any prize for working on something that reflects so much of my personal values. And I would like to take this opportunity and express my gratitude that it is one of the great privileges of belonging now to Swedish society that I have the freedom and a means to work and struggle to achieve what is important to me and the Chin people. To be associated with a prize bearing the name of one of the persons I most admire is an honor beyond anything I could ever have imagined

I must admit that I was quite delighted when I heard the name of Martin Luther King, who was one of my heroes since my university days in Rangoon. It also brought back many sweet memories of student life when we were young and dared to think and challenge almost everything under the Sun. Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were the two theologians who inspired me personally, “daring in order to know” —as they both taught us. Just before the fateful events of student-led uprising in 1988, I wrote a term paper at Theological Seminary comparing the non-violent strategy applied by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Ethic of “Just War” applied by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both of them dared to challenge unjust laws, and both did not survive their struggle. In those days, my heart was a bit closer to Bonhoeffer; may be it was because of the fact that the regime of Nazi Germany was more similar to the military dictatorship in Burma. However, both of them are my inspiration; and both of them received their inspiration from the teachings of Jesus Christ, who proclaimed that

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to
preach the good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners,
And recovery of sight for the blind, and released the oppressed.

Since I joined the movement, I have written many letters and statements calling for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners in Burma but not to avail. Since the popular uprising in 1988, the entire people of Burma “are the prisoners in our own house”, as Aung San Suu Kyi said. Burma under this military regime is just like a blind man who lost his sight intentionally, for it was covered by absolute darkness with extremely negative attitude. And there are millions of oppressed to be released. This is what our struggle is all about.

In this struggle, we are fighting for freedom, justice, peace and fundamental human rights. We want “freedom from fear” because we live our lives under this military regime in constant fear. We want “freedom of expression” because freedom of expression is a huge crime under military dictatorship. We have over one thousand political prisoners in Burma, who committed no crime but daring to express their free will. We want “freedom from *want*” because the peoples of Burma are destitute living under extreme conditions of impoverishment, hunger and disease without remedy in the land that used to be known as the “rice bowl of Asia”.

We want “peace” because the regime in Burma has been at war with its own people for more than five long decades. Yes, we want peace but the peace that we want is not just in terms of the absence of conflict but in terms of the presence of justice.

We want “justice” because there is no such thing as the rule of law under a military dictatorship. Martial Law, according to General Saw Maung, is no law at all but the use of force. In today’s Burma, law and order exist not for protecting its people but for sustaining dictators in power. We want basic “human rights” because human rights abuses have become part of the political system in the so-called “law and order restoration”, as the military junta used to call itself the “State Law and Order Restoration Council”.

Finally, we want to live with human dignity because when all kinds of rights are abused people lose their dignity, integrity and identity. And what we want is to live just like a human being who is the image of God. So, our struggle is a struggle to be an *authentic human being* again.

Our struggle is not just for changing the government in Rangoon, or in *Naypidaw*, but for restructuring the country into a Democratic Federal Union as it was agreed by General Aung San and ethnic national leaders in 1947 at the Panglong Conference, when the Union of Burma was founded at the first place. The root cause of political crisis in Burma is not just ideological confrontation between military dictatorship and democracy; it also involves constitutional problems rooted in the denial of the rights of self-determination for ethnic nationalities who joined the Union as equal partners according to the Panglong Agreement. The only solution for political crisis in Burma, in our view, is to establish a genuine Federal Union of Burma, which will guarantee the fundamental rights for all citizens of the Union, political equality for all ethnic nationalities, and the right of self-determination for all member states of the Union within federal arrangement.

In this struggle, we also challenge the notion of “nation-building” in which the concept of “nation” is blended with “one ethnicity, one language, and one religion”. As such, nation-building belongs to what social scientists call “subjective values”, that is, culture, language, religion, ethnicity, homeland, shared memories and history, etc., which differentiate one group of people from another—values that cannot be shared objectively between different peoples. From its process, the very notion of “nation-building” excludes other ethnic groups, cultures, religions and everything related to multiculturalism and diversity. Thus, by accepting only one homogeneous set of cultural and religious values as its political values, the process of nation-building can produce only a nation-state made by a homogeneous people or nation that claims pre-state unity based on culture, history or religion. As a result, a nation-state made by a nation through the nation-building process cannot accommodate other cultures, religions and ethnic groups. What it can do at best is it can tolerate non-integrated minorities as guests, but not as equal citizens. The status of fully recognized citizen can be attained only by integration.

In such circumstances, minority groups have only “either-or” choice: either integrating within the majority culture after paying a big price of destroying their original cultural roots, or resisting integration but after paying a big price of being denied the opportunity to enhance their cultural identity through political means. In both cases, minority groups must pay a big price because the only choice for them is between assimilation and resistance. Assimilation in such situation is nothing but ethnic and cultural extinction, and resistance can be anything in between life and death. Thus, it is obvious that the nation-building process is impossible to implement in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious plural society like the Union of Burma. The only way to implement the nation-building process in a plural society is to use coercive force for assimilation. However, using force for ethnic assimilation will definitely be resulted in confrontation and conflict, because the very notion of nation-building is hostile to multiculturalism and diversity. Unfortunately, this conflict is exactly what is happening in Burma during the past fifty years.

Since independence, the successive governments of the Union of Burma have applied “nation-building” process with the notion of nation as “one ethnicity, one language, and one religion”. First, U Nu introduced “religion” as a means of national integration in ‘nation-building’ process for newly independent Burma. For U Nu, the only means to build a new nation was to revive the pre-colonial cultural unity of *Buda-bata Maynmar Lu-myō*, which means, “To be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist”. Although Buddhism had been a powerful integrative force in traditional Myanmar society, a modern multi-national state of the Union of Burma with its multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic plural society was a very different country from that of the pre-colonial Myanmar Kingdom. The pre-colonial Myanmar Kingdom, of course, was nothing to do with the Chin, Kachin, Shan and other ethnic groups who joined the Union of Burma only as a means to speed-up their own freedom. However, leaders like U Nu believed that Buddhism could make a significant contribution to some aspects of national integration

and assimilation. In this way, U Nu's government officially adopted Buddhism as a means of national integration. In 1953, the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs was created to promote the process of assimilation, and eventually the government promulgated Buddhism as the state religion of the Union of Burma in 1961. Since then, the successive governments of the Union of Burma officially made many attempts to achieve homogeneity by imposing religious and cultural assimilation into the predominant group of Myanmar Buddhists.

While U Nu opted for cultural and religious assimilation into Buddhism, or *Buda-bata Myanmar-lumyo*, as a means of integration, General Ne Win, who came to power through military coup in 1962, removed the rights of the country's religious and cultural minorities, including all civil and basic human rights, as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state. Moreover, General Ne Win imposed his "national language" policy by declaring *Myanmar-sa* as the only official language in the entire Union of Burma, which therefore was required to be used at all levels of government and public functions, and also to be the only medium of instruction at all levels of schools in the country—from primary to university levels. General Ne Win not only imposed the *Myanmar-sa* as the official language, he also suppressed the right to learn the other ethnic national languages of the Union.

Nation-building, for both U Nu and Ne Win, was simply based on the notion of "one ethnicity, one language and one religion"—that is to say, the ethnicity of *Myanmar-lumyo*, the language of *Myanmar-sa* and the state religion of *Buddhism*. Thus, what U Nu and Ne Win wanted to achieve through nation-building process was to create a homogeneous nation of *Myanmar Naing-ngan*, by drawing its political values from the cultural and religious values of *Myanmar-sa* and *Budda-bata Myanmar-lumyo*. Although their approaches to national integration were different, U Nu and Ne Win shared the goal of creating a homogeneous people in the country. While U Nu opted for cultural and religious assimilation into Buddhism as a means of integration, Ne Win used the national language policy of *Myanmar-sa* and denied the rights of the country's religious and cultural minorities as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state. U Nu and Ne Win thus complemented each other, although their approaches in oppressing the cultural and religious minorities were quite different in nature.

Supplementing U Nu's policy of state religion and Ne Win's national language policy, the current military regime is opting for "ethnicity" as a means of national integration, by imposing ethnic assimilation into *Myanmar-lumyo*. The changing of the country name from Burma to *Myanmar*, the name only of the ethnic *Myanmar*, in 1989 is a case in point. When they implemented their policy of ethnic assimilation by force, the present military junta applied various methods: killing people and destroying the livelihood of ethnic minorities in the on-going civil war, using rape as a weapon of war against ethnic minorities, and religious persecution as a means of destroying ethnic identity, especially of the Chin, Kachin and Karen Christians. In this way, the successive governments of the Union of Burma—from U Nu to Ne Win to Saw Maung and Than Shwe—have carried out the nation-building process in terms of "one ethnicity, one language, and one religion", that is—*Myanmar-lumyo*, *Myanmar-sa*, and *Buddhism*.

In the name of nation-building, the successive governments of the Union of Burma have violated not only basic human rights and individual freedom but also all kind of collective rights. In the name of national sovereignty, the rights of self-determination for ethnic nationalities are rejected; in the name of national integration the right to follow different religions, to practice different cultures, and to speak different languages are deprived; and in the name of national assimilation, the rights to up-hold different identities and traditions are denied. In short, the successive governments of the Union of Burma have been practicing cultural genocide, if not ethnic cleansing, for the past fifty years.

In this struggle, we are calling for “state-building” instead of “nation-building” because the state, far from being identical with the nation, is “the supreme protector of a law” which guarantees individual rights for all its citizens as an individual citizen, and the collective rights of all ethnic nationalities in the country as a national group. The state is an open society, ruling over territory where its power protects and makes law. As a legal institution, the state knows only citizens no matter what nationality each and individual citizen belongs to, no matter what kind of religious belief he or she worships, no matter what kind of language he or she speaks; and its legal order is open to all who happen to live on its territory.

In this struggle, we are calling for “unity in diversity” instead of “national integration” or “national assimilation” because “unity in diversity” as political value would allow us to live different ethnic groups, different religious groups, and different cultural and language groups peacefully together. In this struggle, we are calling for “decentralization” instead of “centralization” where power is concentrated only in the hands of dictators. We are calling for the “rights of self-determination” because we believe that granting the “rights of self-determination” for member states of the Union through federal arrangement is the best means to solve political crisis in Burma.

In this struggle, we are opting for the “tripartite dialogue” as a means to achieve our goal. The “tripartite dialogue” means dialogue amongst the military regime, the 1990 election winning party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and ethnic nationalities — who are the founding members of the Union, as called for by the United Nations General Assembly since 1994. The “tripartite dialogue” strategy for us is the core essence of non-violent movement, and finding the common ground between current conflict parties in Burma. Instead of fighting each other and killing each other, we want to solve our political problems through political means on a dialogue table not on the battlefields. So, what we are saying is “stop fighting”, “stop killing”; killing innocent lives will not solve the problem, denying human rights will not make the country free, and destroying human and natural resources will not make any benefit for the future of Burma. However, by finding the common ground through dialogue, negotiation and compromise, we can solve all of our problems together.

Unfortunately, the military government in Burma is still opting for violent confrontation instead of peaceful negotiation, killing and taking innocent life instead of negotiated

settlement, destroying ethnic identity and abusing minority rights instead of building a peaceful country. So, it seems that the current political situation in Burma looks not only unpromising but the political storm is blowing violently into a direction of undesired end.

Despite all these negative images of the country, we are confident that we will be able to turn current political situation and change political storm into freedom breeze. We are quite sure that we will be able to turn the current political situation with the help of international community, including the UN, EU, USA, ASEAN, Japan, China and India, and we are hoping that we will overcome all the obstacles and we will achieve our goal of building a free Burma. The inner strength of democracy movement in Burma, of course, is the peoples of Burma. And we know that the solution of Burma's problem will not come from outside but from inside through the unity and collective efforts of the peoples of Burma. The inner strength of this unity is what you are recognizing today, here in Stockholm.

I am now standing before you to accept this prestigious prize, and you make me realize that the Martin Luther King Prize is awarded not just to me but also to the peoples of Burma. So, I receive this prize as the recognition of our struggle for human rights, justice, peace, democracy, political equality and self-determination in Burma. I thank you for your recognition of our struggle! With all your help, and with the unity and strength of the people of Burma, "We shall overcome some day".

In conclusion, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Martin Luther King Prize Committee for your recognition of our struggle, the people of Sweden for your support and solidarity that you have shown to the people of Burma time to time, and all of you — my dear friends in Sweden. I would like to acknowledge also to my colleagues at the Ethnic Nationalities Council, United Nationalities League for Democracy, Chin National League for Democracy, Chin National Council, Federal Constitution Drafting and Coordinating Committee and National Reconciliation Program; and individually I would like to thank Harn Yawnghwe, Jack Sterken and Sai Mawn — although they are not here today, I must say that without you guys I would not be able to survive in the jungle of Thai-Burma border. And I would like to express my love and gratitude to my wife, Aapen, and my children — David Van Lian and Laura Thachin. Without your support, understanding and love; I would not be able to stand here, and would not be able to work for what I believe and for the oppressed people of Burma.

Thank you!

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