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The Opening in Burma

STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY

Min Ko Naing

Min Ko Naing has been described by the New York Times as Burma's "most influential opposition figure after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi." He was the chairman of the All Burma Federation of Students Union (ABFSU) and a leader of the prodemocracy protests in 1988 (popularly known as the "Four Eights Uprising") that were eventually stopped by a brutal government crackdown. Min Ko Naing spent much of the last twenty years in prison; he was freed on 13 January 2012 in a mass presidential amnesty. This essay is based on a speech that he delivered to Burmese civil society representatives in Rangoon on 25 August 2012. It was translated from the Burmese by Ma Oo and Aung Maw Zin.

Revolution is not enough. We also need a strong society.

When we were young, we believed in revolution. We lived as revolutionaries. We shared everything from cigarettes to clothing. We thought that revolution was the objective. But we never asked, "What happens after the revolution?" We did not understand then how hard it would be to go from dictatorship to democracy. We understood that the government needed to go, but we did not understand that society also needed to change. After the revolution, we thought we would all be free to pursue our own interests and dreams.

As children born and raised under military rule, however, we saw things as black and white. We did not anticipate a transitional period when things would be unclear. Today, we find ourselves in exactly this situation. We cannot say that the revolution has been won, but nor can we say that we are still fighting for revolution. In the past, we understood that without personal sacrifice we would never attain democracy. If only enough people were willing to sacrifice all, we knew we would win.

Yet all of a sudden, everything has changed. This is not like the situation with independence, where one day you are a colony and the next day you are free. What is happening now is very different. We used

to believe that we would go straight from dictatorship to democracy. Now we understand that one goes from dictatorship into a transition *toward* democracy. Where are we now? We are free but not free. We are neither here nor there. It is no longer clear what we are fighting for. We prepared for revolution but we never prepared for transition. Today, we understand that we need to take part in the transition, but we do not know what role to play.

Please understand how life was for us. Since birth, all we ever heard from authorities were commands—do's and don'ts. They even told us when we could cook and when we could not. If we did not cook exactly at the time we were told, they would threaten to act according to the "existing laws." Since there were no laws, the authorities could do what they pleased.

The authorities threatened citizens every single day. But there was no one to tell us what our rights were. There were no opportunities, only punishments.

As a result, people rarely asked questions. People followed directions from authorities, with as little effort as was needed to complete the task. The point was to "get it done." People did not have the time, money, or other resources to challenge the authorities. For instance, people were asked to take preventive measures to control fires during the summer. They were asked to keep sand, water, and a long rod in case of a fire emergency. As they were required, people kept those things on display in front of their houses, but everyone knew that they were there only for show. A small amount of water, sand in two separate bags, and a makeshift rod could be found in every house in every township, yet both the authorities and the people knew that those things would be of no use against a real fire. That was the kind of cooperation that the authorities got from the people. What cooperation! Perfect! I want to say our government and the people were in perfect harmony.

Obviously, that kind of "cooperation" does not help to build a modern, developed nation. Just because you can put up a big showy signboard welcoming people at a city's border does not mean that there is a city there. A small palm-leaf hut sitting next to the signboard does not miraculously become a brick building.

It takes more than wishful thinking to build a city.

That is why civil society is so important. Our country's leaders and the people themselves need to understand that people are the essential element for building a nation. Without contributions and cooperation from people, change cannot happen.

After living so long under the military, our people are not used to asking questions or making demands. We can see that in the way people responded to the mandatory fire-prevention measures. But do people not have the right to ask what the role of the fire department is and whether

it is doing an adequate job? Of course they do. The fire department exists to prevent and put out fires, not just to impose silly requirements. It has equipment and manpower, but what does it do with them? Where is the taxpayers' money going? Before the transition, no one raised such questions.

People themselves were not educated enough, not strong enough, and not free enough to ask questions.

I want a nation where our people are living their lives with knowledge and wisdom. I want people to be free to ask questions. I want them to have the courage to speak out loud.

For our country to develop, we need an informed and engaged citizenry. Citizens also need to have the skill, knowledge, and freedom to question those in power—and to do so publicly, without fear.

I want to tell you a story. There were two new graduates who entered an official office building. One was a young teacher who had just graduated from university. The other was a military-academy graduate. But when they entered the building, people received them differently. One can be sure who was better received—the one in uniform, of course. This is one of the things about our society that needs to change. People only respect those in uniform, as only those in uniform have power. This cannot go on.

What about their roles in society? Why is one superior to the other? Do we not need teachers as much as we need soldiers?

This is just one example, but it helps to show why we need to make civic education a priority. People always ask me what I am doing in preparation for the 2015 elections. We need to do more than prepare for the elections. We need to visit places around the country, meet with the people, and begin to educate them about the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

Look at the 1990 election. We won at the ballot box, but then, in effect, lost when the military nullified the results. So that this does not happen again, society must be better prepared. We need more knowledge. We need more information. We need more courage. We need to ask questions. We need to respectfully challenge authority. And we need to know our rights. We must prepare. And if we are to succeed, everyone must contribute to this effort.

Without the cooperation of the people, the government cannot build a democratic society. The government did not introduce reforms out of concern for the well-being of the people. They changed because the people demanded it. When one individual stands alone, he or she is vulnerable. But when people stand together, they can demand change. Without everyone's cooperation, nothing can get done. With everyone's cooperation, anything is possible. Everyone needs to contribute whatever he or she can. Share your skills, knowledge, basic necessities, or even donate blood for patients. The time is right to build an open society.