

**Burma Information Evening
NSW Parliament House**
***“The Road to Inevitable Freedom and Democracy – A personal ‘Australian’
perspective”***

Andrew Boe¹

I am compelled to say that I do not accept that the achievement of freedom and democracy in Burma can be viewed as being inevitable. The word “*inevitable*” makes me uncomfortable in this context, both because it is too loose – referring to an undefined time in the future - and because whether correct or not, it may tend to promote complacency both within and outside Burma about the urgency of the task at hand. Now is not the time for complacency. Many things need to change in Burma for the words of “*freedom*” and “*democracy*” to become anything more than empty rhetoric.

In making this observation, I am not attempting to be cutely cynical about the prospects for improvement to the situation in Burma; nor do I wish to appear negative: we must resist the temptation to think, from the safety of distance, that the problems are either too far away or too insurmountable to be usefully addressed. I am also sure that my perhaps undue pessimism arises from:

- the limitations in my knowledge, or indeed ignorance, of the situation in Burma;
- my personal perspective on those facts; and
- my interpretation of the notions of “*freedom*” and “*democracy*”.

The limits of my knowledge

My knowledge of Burma is limited. I was born in Rangoon but was brought to Australia in 1969 as a child. I have made two brief visits to Burma since then, in 1994 and 1999. Otherwise my information comes from the 20 odd years of anecdotal information through family and occasional visitors, as well as local media, a few books, and internet/email information available in Australia. I do not nearly make enough time to stay in touch with the day to day developments in Burma, which is readily available on the internet.

My perspective

My perspective is also limited. I have grown up in Australia as a child of Burmese immigrants. My father was a newspaper proprietor in Rangoon. He wanted to shield his children from the pending assault by Ne Win, and the foreshadowed nationalisation of industry (including his newspaper) and the prohibition by the Ne Win ‘government’ on English being taught in schools. In Australia he toiled as a labourer to support his children in a strange country. He thought it necessary for us to assimilate in order to ‘succeed’, and watched as his 5 Burmese boys became “aussies”. English however was my

¹ This paper was first presented at a conference convened at the NSW Parliament House on 31 October 2000.

second language until I started school. My mother barely spoke English for the first 10 years after arriving in Australia.

I now work as a criminal lawyer in private practice in Brisbane. I have experienced some of the difficulties of being a Burmese immigrant living as an Australian. In my attempts to assimilate, I have largely lost my ethnic cultural identity. Although I speak English, I remember only the simplest Burmese. Travelling to Burma and talking about Burma is therefore profoundly difficult for me, and this language barrier limits the extent of my insight.

Notions of "freedom" and "democracy"

My views of "freedom" and "democracy" are necessarily limited by what I have experienced in Australia. I remain unconvinced that those ideals in practice mean what they are supposed to for many people, even in comfortable 'democracies' like Australia. They are but words of empty rhetoric to the marginalised in this country. Immigrants, refugees, Aborigines and the poor remain marginalised in Australia despite institutional denial. These ideals should not be limited to the removal of physical constraints but rather embrace an individual's entitlement to the same fruits as all others in the community and equitable participation in the political process.

There is little doubt that in the last 20 odd years there have been significant changes in the world and the ideals of democracy have spread to areas previously regarded as beyond conversion. The Berlin wall has fallen, the two Koreas are talking again, totalitarian regimes in eastern Europe, Africa and South America have been voted out, South Africa has now had a majority elected leader for 10 years, and closer to home East Timor has been given the opportunity to embrace democracy.

Burma, however, still struggles with achieving democracy and the struggle does not appear to be gaining momentum at an acceptable rate. Why is it taking so long? How much longer will it take? It might be useful to consider the history of governance in Burma over the last century or so to gain a proper understanding of the present. Although the events post 1988 are the most relevant now, a glance at the more distant past is also instructive.

A brief history²

- **1823-24**
First Anglo Burmese War. The British seize a portion of Southern Burma.
- **1852**
Second Anglo Burmese War. The British annex what remains of Burma's seaboard.
- **1881**
Foundation of the "*Karen National Association*", which was the forerunner of the modern day KNU (which is a group organised around the special views of Buddhists).
- **1885**
Third Anglo Burmese War. The British annexe Burma as a province of India.
- **1906**
The "Young Mens Buddhist Association" is formed.

² The sources for this history appear in the attached bibliography.

- **1916**
Pagoda Footwear Controversy: Buddhist tenets forbade the wearing of footwear in any pagoda area. However, Europeans had generally ignored this rule with impunity. Organised resistance to this illustrated the beginnings of a trend toward the active pursuit of national values through collective political action.
- **1922**
Students strike against the University Act, fearing that the new Rangoon University would favor only the privileged classes.
- **1937**
Burma becomes a separate British colony and is no longer considered part of India.
- **1938**
Aung San leaves the university to become a member of the *Dohbama Asi-ayone* ("We Burma" Organisation).
- **1940**
British issue a warrant for Aung San's arrest. Aung San flees Burma to seek assistance from the Chinese. He is intercepted by the Japanese and taken to Japan. Later he forms alliances with the Japanese to help drive the British out of Burma. Shu Maung (Ne Win) is also involved in a significant role with the Japanese.
- **1941**
On the same day as the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the Japanese invade Burma with the assistance of Aung San, Ne Win and the Burma Independence Army.
- **1945**
27 March - Burmese troops throughout the country rise against the Japanese.
15 May - After a meeting between Aung San and the British General William Slim, the Burmese join the Allied forces to crush the Japanese.
September - Under the so-called "Kandy Agreement", the Burmese army is absorbed into the British Army.
October - Civil government is restored to Burma under British rule.
- **1947**
January - The Aung San- Attlee Agreement is signed (Clement Attlee was the British Prime Minister at the time). The British essentially promise to grant Burma its independence within 12 months. Later that year Aung San and his party, the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL), win the first general elections by a landslide. Ne Win is the deputy commander of armed forces. Kachins, Chins and Shans sign the Panglong Agreement. Notably, the Karens - the largest amongst the minority groups - decide not to sign the agreement.
July 19 - Aung San and 6 other government officials, including his brother Ba Win, were assassinated. Saw, a former prime minister, was later convicted of ordering the assassination.
- **1948**
4 January - Independence Day. Nu is appointed as Prime Minister. In March the same year both the Karens and the Communists start a rebellion.
- **1958**
Prime Minister Nu appoints Ne Win as caretaker prime minister, to restore stability to permit general elections.
- **1960**
Nu is re-elected as prime minister in general elections.

From 1948 to 1962 Burma has many problems, however, but it is run by the popularly elected AFPFL and a wide range of issues are vigorously debated. There is a certain freedom of the press and Burmese citizens travelled freely and without fear. The primary cause for conflict is still along religious and ethnic lines. When the constitution was drafted in 1946, Aung San had been adamant that no particular creed or religion was to be singled out and freedom of religion was enshrined in the constitution. Now, however, the minorities are protesting that their religious rights were being eroded.

- **1962**
1 March - Ne Win's military coup occurs. Prime Minister Nu and the cabinet are placed in prison. During this period the Students' Union Building in Rangoon is blown up, killing many students in the process.
- **1969**
Ne Win declares the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma and a new Constitution is adopted. Protests are quickly suppressed and the press essentially silenced by nationalisation. Burma effectively shuts its doors to the rest of the world.

For the next half generation the Ne Win government applies his interpretation of socialism, with little response from the rest of the world.

- **1987**
December - Burma becomes one of the “least-Developed Countries in the world” - IMF.
- **1987-88**
Mass protests by unarmed civilians are put down with great brutality. Ne Win resigns as Chairman of the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP).
18 September 1988 - The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) is formed as the new military regime. It declares “an open door market economy” approach for the country.
Later this year the National League for Democracy (NLD) is formed.
- **1989**
20 July - Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is placed under house arrest.
- **1990**
The NLD, with Suu Kyi as the most prominent leader wins, the general election by a landslide - taking 80% (392) of the seats and 60% of the popular vote. Voter turn out is 73 %. However the SLORC repudiates the results and puts the opposition leaders into prison. Suu Kyi’s house arrest is extended for a further 5 years. The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (the NCGUB) is formed. Dr Sein Win, a cousin of Suu Kyi, is selected to lead the government in exile. He is based in Washington.
- **1991**
Suu Kyi is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
- **1994**
March - The UNHRC appeals for the release of Suu Kyi, after noting the extensive human rights abuses occurring in Burma
November - The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs in Australia reports that:
“It is evident that international condemnation, including the UNHCR’s comprehensive resolution in 1993, has failed to halt the human rights abuses that are seemingly the norm in Burma...”;
“The Committee believes that the Burmese regime cannot defy the tide of history. Recent years have seen the dissolution of previously immovable totalitarian regimes in a number of parts of the world. It is only a matter of time before similar forces to those that have swept eastern Europe and southern Africa reach Burma”
“Australia should not let up in the pressure it brings to bear on Burma”
- **1995**
Suu Kyi is released from house arrest. The NLD boycott the National Convention in November and the party is formally expelled a month later.
- **1996**
The United Nations Commission for Human Rights finds serious abuses occurring at the behest of the Government in Burma. The SLORC bans Suu Kyi’ s “gate-side meetings” with her supporters. The SLORC run a feel good tourist campaign - “Visit Myanmar Year” - which is a huge failure. The regime passes a martial law decree, that computer ownership and access to the internet without government permission is punishable by a prison term of 7 to 15 years.
- **1997**
The United States bans new business between Burma and American companies. In May Burma is admitted as a full member of ASEAN. SLORC changes its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).
- **1998**
U Kyi Maung steps down as Deputy Chairman of the NLD. Burmese companies begin an expensive lobbying campaign to discredit Suu Kyi and President Clinton’s ban against business with Burma. Japan resumes overseas development assistance with Burma.
- **1999**
The Burmese army continues to engage in skirmishes with ethnic minority groups. The SPDC maintains its savage restrictions of the activities of the NLD and other opposition groups, keeping anyone suspected of opposition under surveillance. In March the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar submitted his report to the UN Commission on Human Rights. Throughout the year the SPDC continued to deny him access to the country.
- **2000**
May - The United States renews its bans on US investment in Burma, but it does not have any effect on companies with existing investment. Dick Cheney who is running for Vice-President to Bush in the US November elections, is a significant investor in Burma and continues to trade there.
Director General of the International Labour Organisation issues a report which concludes that the Burmese government had not amended its laws or practice with regard to the military’s widespread use of civilian forced labour.
June - At the International Labour Organisation Conference the ILO ruled that Burma could no longer attend

ILO meetings or receive any technical assistance until it complied with the ILO Convention No. 29 on forced labour.

October - The European Union also renews its common position on continuing Burmese sanctions.

In the period 1990-1994, the significant trading partners are China, Singapore, India, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong and Germany.

It is clear even from this brief and selective history that some momentum for change is in fact building and escalating to a degree, and external economic and political pressure will likely convince the military government to make concessions to the forces of reform. Although the future governance of Burma will remain complex and the balancing of ethnic and religious interests will continue to be volatile, it is clear that the social and human reality can only ever be properly addressed under an accountable democratic government. Every human resource will be necessary to placate the military, which, since being instrumental in obtaining independence from the British has stamped itself as an institution closely associated with civil rule. In this climate, despite increasing international pressure, systemic change will depend in large part on the efforts of the people within Burma.

Burma today remains a country of significant contrasts, teetering on the brink of change. Since 1988 there has been a professed embracing of economic reform, but there remains however a ruling elite and a bureaucracy that supports and relies upon the *status quo* to maintain their accumulated privileges. Meanwhile the masses, cowering in fear, are doing their best to cope with their starkly underprivileged circumstances as a result of this imperfect political situation. The added obstacle is that the ruling elite have the use of unchecked military force to maintain power. The military has used an Orwellian process of information control, which has been masterfully and brutally maintained.

What exactly is meant by the idea of freedom and democracy in this context? Is it the mere replacement of the SLORC or the SPDC with the NLD or other opposition parties? Or is it necessary for there to be systemic restructuring of political systems, the promotion of judicial independence, accountability in public administration and the restoration of the rule of law where individual rights are placed at the forefront of reform. True freedom and democracy will only be achieved when wholesale changes of this kind occur, or at least are pursued with vigour.

Burma today

The Burma I saw in 1999 remains a far cry from these ideals. I embarked upon a 3 day road trip from Rangoon to Mandalay via Pagan talking to subsistence farmers, food stall operators and other rural people along the way. I had hoped to produce digital footage, which contained stark images of child poverty and slavery, to the NCGUB representatives in New York. With my limited Burmese and the help of my cousin translating, I interviewed nearly everyone I came across. Sometimes I saw the sparkle of survival, but usually it was a story of woe. I stayed at guest houses and hotels and ate in restaurants where almost every waiter or waitress was under 12 years old, had been working for years after leaving behind their families in the rural areas, were paid less than \$US1 per week and from this supported their

families. I spoke to children as young as 4 years old who were employed full-time begging from tourists at temples also to support their families. Busloads of international travellers, mesmerised by the beauty of sites, the grace of the people and the cheapness of accommodation, did not seem to notice that a necessary precondition for this luxurious travel experience is an underclass of people suffering to service a corrupt tourism industry. I saw barefoot children carry rocks to construct golf courses. My cousin, who feared that he would suffer repercussions if they were found on me destroyed my tapes days before I left Burma, and my amateurish attempt to acquire useful footage of the reality 'on the ground' failed. Through the introduction of Amanda Zappia from the Australia-Burma Council, I then had a brief meeting in New York with Dr Sein Win, the prime minister in exile. He expressed the view that it could be anywhere between a matter of months or many years before change, but that none of us could afford complacency.

Earlier, whilst in transit in Bangkok on the way to Burma, I was taken to stay at the tallest hotel in Asia, owned by a Burmese businessman. He is, I am told, well connected with the Burmese military government. Upon hearing that I was Burmese, living in Australia and working as a lawyer, he felt it necessary to order French wine and tell me of his life. He told me that he had been to Australia and met Mike Gore³ and Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen⁴ and had attended the opening of the Sanctuary Cove resort in Queensland. He urged me to stay at a tourist hotel in Burma that he also owned. He told me of the endless opportunities for investment in Burma, exporting rice etc. He was obviously extremely wealthy by international standards. I choked on his wine as I considered the injustice, exploitation and inequity necessary for a man to make any money in a country like Burma, where the average wage is less than \$10US per month, let alone to accumulate enough foreign currency to build Asia's tallest hotel.

The situation in Burma is little different from that which existed in East Timor, apartheid South Africa, Marcos' Philippines and numerous other nations undertaking democratic struggle. Dictatorships are undoubtedly evil. They are not just notional concepts; they exist and in fact survive due to the inactivity of otherwise good men and women. Usually, corruption becomes rife, poverty prolific, and individuals connected to the power structure become profoundly and obscenely rich. The other truism about dictatorships is that, usually, they have a limited period of existence – history has shown that ultimately all tyranny ends.

Conclusion

When asked to speak here this afternoon, I struggled with the idea, mostly because I feared that given my limited experience, I could not usefully add to what others could say. My perspective is necessarily a personal one. When one attempts to outline a history of a nation, it is of course necessary to have a proper regard for the truth. *[One of life's essential challenges is to embrace the truth. I still refrain, sometimes, from speaking the truth on the grounds of diplomacy, respect and even fear. Also, it is*

³ A Queensland businessman – one of the “white shoe brigade” on the Gold Coast.

⁴ A former Premier of Queensland.

difficult to speak the truth if one does not know it. Others would have these same difficulties with the truth. It is little wonder then that collectively, even recognisably democratic communities and nations struggle with the truth; globally, with the added barriers of language, culture and distance, accurate summation of the truth is almost impossible to achieve.]

It must however be said that discussions like this, whilst intended to foster support and inspire greater and wider action in Australia, are unlikely to change much of what is happening in Burma. Australia remains largely impotent in international affairs, despite portrayal in the local media to the contrary. Burma has no historical relevance to Australians generally.

The truth is that it is hard to be optimistic about the possibility of imminent change. It is necessary for more ordinary Australians to become aware of the enormity of the injustice that continues in Burma. The East Timor experience has demonstrated that Australians do respond to injustice. There could be no simpler truth than that all people should treat others equitably and fairly. Yet such concepts eluded the institutions in South Africa for nearly half a century and will take the people in that country, white and black, considerable longer to address it. In Australia, despite the process of reconciliation, institutions still have difficulty addressing the inequities for the indigenous community and women generally. Significant changes are however, taking place.

I will finish with these perhaps pious thoughts. I have found it very difficult to compile a truthful history of Burma without feeling pessimistic. It is abundantly clear that the military have been extremely efficient in their brutal concealment of the truth. I recognise, though, that history also reveals that the human spirit is all enduring and the flickering candle of justice merely needs a moment to spark a fire of change.

A recent example of this are the events surrounding Daw Suu Kyi in the last month or so, when she was apparently stopped and detained by the military when attempting to travel to speak to students and other supporters. Media reports varied considerably. Understandable questioning of the reliability of the reports has diluted the poignancy of the event. However, just imagine, in the context of our political system, Kim Beazley being held up in a car for several days outside Sydney, with elderly members of his party, by an army battalion led by General Cosgrove at the behest of John Howard and his government. It is almost too farcical for words – but Burma is a nation where these sorts of events, and others significantly more oppressive, occur daily.

The behaviour of the military government it is not unlike that of an abusive father locking a child in the cupboard whenever there is a knock on the door, to conceal the evidence of abuse that he has inflicted upon her. The neighbours might see and hear banging and screaming but they just can't capture sufficient equivocal proof to justify intervening. In Burma's case thousands of brutal acts are being concealed.

The truth of the matter is that the current situation in Burma is diabolical and has been for many decades. Colonisation benefited the British and trampled Burmese culture. The transition to independence was unsuccessful. The worst fears that delayed the removal of colonial power were

realised. Unless stopped, the corruption that attaches to autocratic power will benefit the several thousand elite to great and obscene wealth while generally the people will continue to live in poverty. However, significant lessons have been learned and the time has come for change.

Any hope of a change will probably need international intervention and support. A generation has grown up amidst inconceivable oppression and it will take several generations to recover and rebuild.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's most recent video message is an apt point on which to end:

"We cannot do anything about the social and humanitarian problems which are destroying our country today. So 'democracy first', as we keep saying. And we can get democracy because this is the direction which the world is taking"

"We need practical help. Practical help in the form of moral support as well as co-ordinated action to ensure that democratic change comes to Burma as soon as possible"

"It is not enough to pass resolutions in the United Nations General Assembly.... we do not want our international supporters to be split up into different communities... we need help not just for the people inside Burma today. We also need help for those who have been driven out of our borders as refugees. The help that is needed in Burma can only be effectively administered by a democratic government which is accountable to the people..."

Freedom and democracy in Burma is far from inevitable, indeed in some respects it remains unlikely within the next generation. Nevertheless, there remains throughout the world an enduring collective energy and thirst for justice, and as individuals we must never give up our several and joint efforts to move towards that end. Indeed, the closer we get, the more vigilant we must become.

Andrew Boe
© November 2000

References:

1. **Aung San of Burma**,
Aung San Suu Kyi
Kiscadale, Edinburgh
1991
2. **A Review of Australia's Efforts To Promote and Protect Human Rights**
A Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
November 1994
3. **The Anti-Fascist resistance in Burma, 1942-1045 – The Racial Dimension**
source not available at time of address
4. **Statistics on the Burmese Economy in the 19th and 20th Centuries**
Teruko Saito
Lee Kin Kiong
1999
5. **Aung San Suu Kyi – Toward a new freedom**
Ang Chin Geok
Prentice Hall 1998
6. **Perpetuating the Military State**
The New Asians
Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 1997