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Role of the Civil Society in Myanmar since 2010-2015

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Abstract

[As Immanuel Kant says, “to recognize that autonomy is the highest human good, humans have to disentangle themselves from the ‘leading strings’ by which the guardians priests, lawyers, and the rulers have made them ‘domesticated animals’. According to Kant, only the enlightened can form a state. In the recent times, what Myanmar is strongly lacking, is a strong civil society. Ashley South is in favor not only does the country lack a strong civil society but has also proposed ideas as to what would enable the country to have a civil society in the future. Albert P. Blaustein states that states should be based on civic, rather ethnic or national principle. This will enable the people to have an equal stand in the society. There should not be any ‘insider’ or ‘outsider. If a country is not homogenous in terms of religion, language, ethnicity or culture, then there needs to be a largely felt commitment to the rights of minority groups. Therefore, in the recent times, there has been a call for the formation of the second Panglong Agreement minority concerns and d that would address the determine the ethnic principles for the future union. Suu Kyi’s idea of the second Panglong Agreement Conference was denounced by the state and therefore, the crisis of a union still stands firm in Myanmar. Further, according to Robert Conquest, even if democracy is brought about in a nondemocratic s democratic society, it cannot function without a fair level of political social stability (Conquest, 2004). The idea of Conquest is particularly true in the case of Myanmar because right after independence, when the country entered into democracy for a while, intense political instability and unrest resulted into the toppling of the newly formed democracy. Conquest further argues that there is a strong need to cultivate a civic culture in a civil society (when formed) in which various elements can express themselves politically. This idea can be strongly related to the recent situation of Myanmar where the country lacks both the civil society and the independence of the mass media. The answer to both the problems of the country would be invariably democracy but as of now, Thein Sien has taken steps to allow the mass media to express their views and carry on the reform process. If one has to imagine the prevalence of democracy in Myanmar in the future, even then, according to conquest, perfect social order is unobtainable in any democratic state]

Introduction

Civil society activities are not new to Myanmar. Religious and community-based organizations were active under military rule, providing services to people living in areas affected by conflicts (Kramer 2011: 3). The newly acquired freedoms in recent years have led to a considerable expansion of civil society activities, which might give the impression that civil society has emerged out of nowhere. Civil society activities have expanded considerably since 2011, partly due to the newly acquired freedoms and partly due to financial support from international donors. Ashley South (2013) and Kristin Jesnes (2014) have identified a formal relationship of civil society in Myanmar along with the political parties. Both South and Jesnes are of the opinion that NLD started building formal alliances with civil society towards the end of 2013 in order to create a more unified opposition, with the goal of amending the constitution. It was observed initially that Aung San Suu Kyi was less inclined to the civil society when she was building alliances with the military regime and the USDP since 2012 in order to be able to influence the transition from within. However, this trend has changed in the recent years. As Lwin (2014) states, the aim of the civil society organizations is not to transform into a political party but to help the opposition to bring in reforms in the country. In this regard, the NLD recently issued a statement with the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society declaring that the two organizations would work together to achieve constitutional amendments.

Jesnes (2014) points out that as there is a growing link between the civil society organizations and the political parties, there is both an advantage as well as a disadvantage to it.

The advantage is that, the civil society organizations act as a “watch-dog” by advocating for policy change, putting issues on the agenda and promoting democratic participation. One example where civil society has succeeded in this role is the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project in 2011. The protestors of the civil society organizations pointed out the lack of transparency along with the potential environmental damage that might be caused by the Chinese company involved. As a result of this protest, the President declared that the project was against the people.

The disadvantage of this relationship between the civil society organizations and the political parties is that, there is a hint of suspicion that that grown among the people along with the other civil society organizations. People of Myanmar believe that such organizations are closely linked with the government or the ethnic armed groups. Further, as marked by Jesnes, such civil society organizations are termed as “not true CSOs”, or “sewing circles”.

In spite of the disadvantage of the relationship between the civil-society organization and the political parties, it can be mentioned that the civil-society organizations inside Myanmar are extremely important in the current context. It is so because the country currently is facing several critical processes such as the national ceasefire negotiations and the upcoming 2015 elections. In this context, two vital points mentioned by Jesnes can be identified as follows:-

1. The civil society organizations should learn to identify their role in the society rather than getting dissolved within the political party system. In simple words, both the political parties and the civil society should have their separate spelt out work to reinforce the reform process.
2. Encouraging political actors such as the government, the military and ethnic armed groups to include a wider segment of society in discussions of processes that are critical to democratic development, such as the national peace process (Jesnes 2014).

The idea of civil society is a threatened concept especially in the authoritarian regimes. According to the definitions of the civil society, it is considered to be the space between the private and the public, i.e. the state and the individual. More specifically, the civil societies are public associations, independent of the state that works in order to meet public needs. According to Larry Diamond, the objective of the civil society is to improve the political system and make it more democratic. However, according to Diamond, civil society is different from the political society because unlike the political parties civil society does not seek to take control of the state. According to the liberal-democratic school of thought, the state has a greater degree of legitimacy and capacity of governance, whereas the civil society upholds democracy and creates trust. Interestingly, Alagappa notes that although there is a conceptual distinction between the civil society and the state, in authoritarian regimes the civil and political societies tend to merge. In a study made by Lorch, religious and ethnic rifts in the society are often reflected in the civil society. Particularly in authoritarian states where such above problems are pertinent especially in the case of Myanmar, the state tries to penetrate into the civil society and tries to manipulate it. Alagappa also notes that political and civil societies merge when people who object the authoritarian rule take refuge in the civil society and take action against the existing rule when the opportunity arises. An example of the above kind of merge would be Aung San Suu Kyi's association with the Buddhist *Sangha* after her release from the house arrest before the 2010 election.

Civil society in Myanmar and its problems

Myanmar, during the initial years of the coup (i.e. since 1962) was devoid of a civil society. The reason is obvious because of the Tatmadaw¹ that curbed all social movements and initiated the National Solidarity Act that prohibited any political organizations apart from the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) to function inside the country. When the new constitution of 1974 was framed, all avenues for the creation of a civil society were curbed. In this regard, Steinberg notes that the civil society was ‘murdered’ during this time. Later, the Tatmadaw framed Government Organized NGOs (GONGOs) to restrict the development of the social movements of workers, peasants, youth and literary workers. A similar kind of picture was also seen during the 1990’s when the SLORC² framed the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) which was created to foster loyalty towards the government. According to Steinberg, the creation of the USDA was a state attempt to initiate their own kind of civil society in order to suppress the other emergence of other civil societies in the country. Later, the USDA transformed into a political party which is now known as the USDP³ and won 76.5 percent of the contested parliamentary seats. This trait of the USDA turning into a political party has been discussed above by both Lwin 2014 and Jesnes 2104 where both the scholars note that civil society organizations should never dissolve into a political party, rather they should learn to identify their role in the society.

In the line of the above discussion, Hewison and Prager note that it was difficult to imagine Myanmar, having a civil society that is not politically organized given the fact that the military regime is extremely strong. On the other hand, the authors also suggest that if there is at all a civil society in the country that is not politically inclined, it means that those organizations are necessarily against the government. In this situation where the all the above authors suggest that the freedom of the civil society in Myanmar is strangled, Ottaway suggests that there is a difference in the status of the civil societies in authoritarian states such as Myanmar. According to Ottaway, when the state fails to provide the basic amenities to the citizens such as education, health etc. the modern civil societies that emerge in such states to provide them such as NGO’s tend to be weak. However, the traditional civil societies such as the Buddhist Sanghas etc. which focuses on the religion and ethnicity are generally strong. This is so because the authoritarian regime tries to use religion or even ethnicity as a tool to rein the nation and therefore forces these traditional civil societies to remain loyal towards the state.

¹ The Myanmar armed forces, officially known as Tatmadaw. The armed forces are administered by the Ministry of Defence and are comprised of the Army, Navy and the Air force.

² State Law and Order Restoration Council or the SORC is now known as the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC. In 1997, the SLORC was abolished and was reconstructed as SPDC. The SPDC comprises of the commanders of the service branch and the regional military commands. See. www.networkmyanmar.org/image/stories/PDF2/spdc.pdf

³ Union Solidarity and Development Party was framed in 2010 as a political party by the Union Election Commission. The USDP is headed by President Thein Sein of Myanmar and the headquarters are in Naypyidaw.

Modern civil society in Myanmar

Considering the above discussion made by Ottaway, it can be discussed that during the rule of the SLORC, the modern civil society was 'murdered' according to Steinberg. Some of the local civil society organizations were registered as NGOs and the rest of the many organizations were unregistered. Even among the modern civil society, there were community-based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs that emerged since 1990s. The freedom of these civil society organizations differed from time to time with the government's ability to control the areas in which these organizations functioned. Therefore, in other words, these civil society organizations were under the control of the state and therefore, the freedom of these organizations was extremely poor. At the local or village level, the CBOs operated to provide small humanitarian relief along with some of the basic needs of the people such as education, community donations etc. above the village level, if the organizations had to function in the cities, these organizations had to be registered as NGOs. As discussed above, it is extremely difficult for an organization to register itself into an NGO. In some areas these CBOs and NGOs remain apolitical to the possible extent to ensure their safety but in areas where there is a strong government control these organizations operated for the welfare of the ethnic communities. The Development Support Programme in Mon State, and the Metta Development Foundation and Shalom Foundation that grew out of the Kachin ceasefire are some of the examples. The reason for such support has been discussed above where the government seeks support of the ethnic groups and uses them as a tool to remain in power. Moreover, the organizations that operated in these areas had merged with the religious groups especially the Buddhists which are the majority religious group in Myanmar. According to Nixon et al. 2013, the nature of the civil society organizations have changed over the years and during 2012 and 2013, Myanmar has given space to the growth of the civil society organizations in urban areas. However, in areas that are dominated by the ethnic groups have weaker civil society organizations due to the unstable Hluttaws. As discussed earlier, the civil society organizations have registration problems which restrict them from working properly in the ethnic areas. The government had been endorsing the ethnic groups over the years to remain in power. However, according to the civil society organizations, in the recent times; the ethnic groups have been heavily neglected not only by the government as discussed in the previous chapter but also by the fact that the civil society organizations functioning in these areas have been suppressed. The civil society organizations that are registered in the urban areas are comparatively more active in the recent times than before. Further, the international communities express their interest to fund the larger but few urban projects that are generally based in the areas of Yangon and Naypyidaw Kramer, 2011: 38. However, on the contrary the organizations in the ethnic dominated areas are heavily suppressed as discussed above. According to some of the scholars the claims of the civil society organizations which expresses that the organizations are heavily suppressed, have brought in a serious rift between these organizations and the political parties. In order to resolve this rift, the international actors should promote interaction between the civil society organizations and the political parties.

Traditional civil society in Myanmar

Unlike the modern civil society, the traditional civil society in Myanmar has been tabooed for following the direct dictates of the government. However, the Buddhist Sanghas (which is one of the traditional civil society organizations) have provided welfare to the people that the state had neglected at certain times, Ashley South 2013. The traditional civil society or the Sangha in particular provides free education to the poor and operates Buddhist monastic educational centers. The reason for which the Sanghas have earned the taboo is due to the reason that some of the Sanghas also teach the government curriculum and are registered with the Ministry of Education. The traditional civil society of Myanmar particularly the Sangha provides monastic education to the orphans and had provided relief post the Cyclone Nargis in 2008⁴. Sanghas have been involved heavily with the local development projects in Myanmar. The minority religious groups such as the Christians inside Myanmar have also been operational in the cease-fire areas which the state has neglected. The Christians have initiated schools and colleges where theological education and the propagation of English Language has been conducted and have established links with the international community for funds. In the case of religion based civil society organizations especially the Sanghas in the case of Myanmar has always been receiving grants from the Government for their development (Ashley South 2012). From the above discussion it can be figured out that the civil society in Myanmar was not actually murdered or strangled according to what Steinberg explained but the space for growth of the civil societies were shrinking. The reason for this narrow down of space is due to the fact that some local civil society organizations that wanted a proper growth of their organization was co-opted by the regime and the rest who wanted to remain apolitical were left alone.

Traditional civil societies and co-optation by the regime

As discussed in the above section that the traditional civil societies has always been receiving support and grants from the regime as well as from the international community. However, it cannot be mentioned here that the entire traditional civil society always moves according to the dictates of the state or the regime. Certain elements of the traditional civil society make it difficult for the regime to remain in power. Some of these traditional civil society elements that are not within the reach of the regime build a democratic political position inside the society that is in opposition to the regime in power. This section of the civil society is extremely respected by the people. The Buddhist Sanghas are generally not a part of this section but some exceptions remain. The Christians are a marginalized group in comparison to the Buddhist majority in Myanmar and therefore, they form the section of the civil society that is in opposition to the regime.

During the initial phase of the military regime in Myanmar, i.e. during 1962, General Ne Win believed that the monks should remain strictly apolitical. This idea of Ne Win was opposed and a large section of the monks

⁴ On 2nd May 2008, Cyclone Nargis made landfall in Myanmar, crossing the south of the country and devastated the Ayeyarwady Delta region. Official records estimated the death of 84,500 people and around 53,800 were missing. However, the United Nations estimated that approximately 2.4 million people were affected.

were arrested in 1965 and later in 1974 (Ashley South 2012). As a result of the above incidents, the then government in power took certain initiatives to control the movements of the monks and their Sanghas. A Supreme Sangha Council or Sangha Maha Nayaka was established along with Sangha councils at the village level to tighten the control of the government. In spite of such initiatives taken by the government, in 1988 the monks protest in support of democracy in Rangoon and Mandalay became a serious matter of concern for the then government in power. Later in the 1990's the then government initiated the Sangha Organization Act which categorized the monasteries into two categories:

1. The monasteries which would oppose the government in power would be under strict government surveillance. Monks who would resist the government's action would be arrested.
2. The monasteries which would be compliant to the government's initiatives would receive sufficient donations and grant of honors and titles by the government.

The All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA)⁵, organized a religious boycott and opposed the military. Peace marches began at Rangoon and later spread into Mandalay and further elsewhere. Serious action against the monks was taken whereby the ABMA was banned by the government. In line with the above discussion it has to be noted that the religious boycott that occurred in 2007 was organized by the private monks whose Sanghas were not co-opted by the government. Ever since 2007 and then onwards, the Sanghas had been considered to be a potential force to oppose the government.

Although the operations of the civil society organizations had been restricted for many years as discussed earlier, the advent of the new government in 2011 Nilsen & Tønnessen, 2013: 2 has opened up avenues for the civil society organizations for proliferation. Andrew Morgan states that the country's regime allowed rigorous debate to take place on the matters of the civil society since 2013 and 2014. The restrictive law that was placed after the 1988 Monks Rebellion was also abandoned. Although the country showed signs of improvement in dealing with the civil societies but the idea of repression was still lingering; as discussed in the earlier section. The government passed the Right to Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law in 2011. The Section 18 of this law disregards citizens' constitutional rights of freedom of procession and assembly. Contrary to this law, the Paragraph 354 of the 2008 Constitution states:

⁵ ABMA—an organization formed by a group of senior monks in response to the severe economic and social problems existing at the time.

‘Every citizen shall be at liberty in the exercise of the following rights, if not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality:

1. To express and publish freely their convictions and opinions
2. To assemble peacefully without arms and holding procession;
3. To form associations and organizations’ . . . (Constitution of Myanmar 2008)

Therefore, a representative body of 275 civil society organizations as stated by Morgan expressed their criticisms and demanded for an amendment. The government revised the law in 2013 and the final version of the Association Registration Law was published in July 2014.

Political Transition and the Civil Society

According to Jesness 2014, the relationship between the political parties and the civil society in Myanmar can be defined as limited, informal and based on personal relations. After the advent of the Thein Sein regime, the strangled situation of the civil societies has been somewhat resolved. In simple words, the Thein Sein regime allows political parties and the civil society to work on a larger scale of issues. Since the political landscape is changing every day, new political parties and alliances are emerging (South, 2008). With the advent of the new political parties, new agendas are evolving as a result of which there is a political confusion observed in Myanmar. Civil societies on the other hand are trying to establish links with the political parties but they are generally informal. During the initial stage of the advent of the Thein Sein regime, according to Jesness, politics in Myanmar was considered to be elitist in nature. Therefore the civil society’s attempt to establish a formal relation was affected. The author has shown the advantages and disadvantages of the close relation between the political parties and the civil societies and how the people inside Myanmar observe this relationship to be (as discussed in the first segment of the chapter). However, in spite of the disadvantages, the close association is necessary for the country to move into democracy. In the last few years particularly since 2013 onwards, the civil societies have received support from one section of the political parties. In simple words, the political parties who are in favor of the reform process have extended their support to the civil societies and are also willing to learn from the expertise that the civil societies have. On the other hand, the parties who are not in favor of the reform process tolerate the growth of the civil societies due to the international pressure. Interestingly, Jesness mentions that the USDP has also started engaging with the civil society after their loss in the 2012 by-election. The reason for this engagement can therefore be explained as an attempt to revitalize the political party and also ensure new political recruitment. In the recent era, the other political parties have also formally engaged with themselves with the civil society organizations. For example the NLD⁶ has also

⁶ The National League for Democracy is a democratic, socialist and a liberal political party in Myanmar. The NLD was founded in the year 1988 and has now become one of the most influential political parties in Myanmar’s political reform process. The party is headed by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

established close links with the civil society during the end of 2013 in order to build a strong opposition Jesness 2014. The close link between the civil society and the political parties inside Myanmar proves that the opposition is gaining strength which will be perhaps reflected in the upcoming 2015 election. During the initial years of the Thein Sein regime, Aung San Suu Kyi's historical meeting with the military regime created havoc inside the country. The civil society organizations also felt that the civil-military alliance was becoming a threat to the growth and the ambitions of the civil society. Suu Kyi was then less inclined to speak to the civil society organizations. However, after 2012, the situation has changed in the recent times where the NLD has established close links with the civil society in order to not only achieve a strong opposition but also to bring about political reforms in the country along with Constitutional amendments Lwin, 2014.

Civil society organizations, according to Jesness 2014, South 2013, and South 2008 are of two kinds,

First, the organizations that are not in alliance with political parties but act as 'watchdogs' in the society and; Second, the civil society organizations that are in alliance with political parties and actively participate in the reform process of the country.

The author mentions that both the kinds of civil society organizations are required in Myanmar to ensure reform process. During 2011, the civil society organizations that have a close alliance with the political parties were triumphant in suspending the Myitsone Dam project that was initiated by China. Political party members along with the civil society workers protested against the idea of the dam construction project that would affect thousands of people and also involve displacement of people from the adjacent areas of the dam construction site. President Thein Sein declared that the Chinese Dam construction project was against the will of the people in spite of knowing the fact that the suspension of the project would bring in huge economic losses for the country Sun, 2014. Later, economic aid was extended to the country from the United States of America, by the help of which the country successfully came out of the economic losses that was initiated from the Chinese Dam Construction project suspension.

In spite of the success of the alliance of the civil society and the political parties, there is a suspicion among the people and the other civil society organizations that the relationship of the alliance is often kept secret. Some of the people also believe that this alliance has close links with the Government and also the ethnic-armed forces. Therefore this alliance is not considered by some as true civil society and are termed as 'sewing-circles'. These kind of civil society organizations do not work to bring in substantial reforms in the country but operate according to the will of the political parties. This idea of the people cannot be ignored due to the fact that the government has co-opted some of the civil society organizations as discussed in the earlier sections of the chapter. According to some of the people, these organizations are considered to be the government institutions rather than independent working bodies. The reason for the growth of this idea is because some of the members of the civil society organizations are selected by the government as advisors on various issues.

According to Jesness, this mistrust between the people and the government should be addressed. Greater transparency needs to be present in order to avoid the mistrust and suspicion among the people, civil society organizations and the political parties in areas which are under the control of the government.

Reform process and the civil society

With the improvement of the relationship between the civil society and the political parties, a range of issues pertaining to the reform process is being concentrated upon jointly. One of the important issues is the law amendment process, where the role of the civil society is vital in the recent years. The members of the civil society actively participate in the debate on the law making and amendment process in the parliament. For example, the trade union members actively participate in the debates pertaining to the Factory Act, Social security Act and Health and Safety Act. One of the other issues that have been addressed by the civil society is the land acquisition problem by the state. According to the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar, the land, sea and the airspace belongs to the state. This creates an impression that the state can acquire any part of the land at any point of time. In this situation, the civil society organizations established the Farmlands and Other Land Acquisition Inquiry Commission in 2012 in order to address the land acquisition problem. According to the Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2013 a report was produced in 2013 which stated that the land that was acquired by the state should be returned to the actual owners and the state should also provide necessary compensation to the owners for the above reason.

Civil society has also been an important factor in the law-amendment process. Several civil society opinions were considered and integrated to amend the Association law. According to the ICG, 2013 this law initially suggested that the registration of the non-governmental organizations was mandatory. The non-governmental organizations that were not registered invited the risk of imprisonment. Protests came in from several civil society organizations for the revision of this law. Later, during the end of 2013, the revised law was published that suggested that registration of the non-governmental organizations was mandatory but state action and imprisonment would not be carried out for those who did not register ICG, 2013. Fault-lines of this law still exist where the non-registered non-governmental organizations cannot bear a logo nor can they have a bank account. Therefore, further revision of this law is perhaps required according to the civil society organizations.

An interesting fact that has been reported by the ICG, 2013 is that, during the revision of the Association law, the civil society organization members were not present. Therefore, the law has fault-lines that are still required to be addressed. According to Kramer, 2011 after the revised law was published towards the end of 2013; some civil society organization members claimed that the registration process of the non-governmental organizations has become extremely slow. However, the risk of imprisonment for the non-registered organizations is no longer present. This achievement has only been possible for the existence of the close relation between the civil society organizations and the political parties inside Myanmar.

Although this relationship between the civil society and the political parties have brought about a misconception among the people of the country but this association is perhaps required for Myanmar, given the fact that both the political party and the civil society learns from the experiences of each other. Although both Jesnes and Ashley South have suggested that the civil society and the political parties should be independent from each other but in order to bring in reforms inside the country, the association is much needed.

Ethnic groups and the role of civil society in Myanmar

The liberty of the association between the civil society and the political parties that has been discussed in the above section of the chapter is only observed in the urban areas and not in the ethnic areas. The regional bodies that function inside the ethnic areas are answerable to the government, which curbs the growth of the civil society and the political parties, Nixon et al. 2013. The author points out that the reason for the non-development of the civil societies and the political parties in the ethnic areas is due to the weak regional bodies that fail to support the growth of the civil society and the political parties in the region. As discussed above about the slow process of the registration process of the civil society organizations, the organizations working inside the ethnic areas face the same problem of late registration. Therefore, the civil society organizations inside the ethnic areas are lagging way behind the organizations operating in the urban areas.

Ashley South notes that the civil society networks should function to achieve success of 'bottom-up' social and political transition in Myanmar, South, 2013. Therefore, the author notes that conflict resolution is required both at the national level and regional level along with the fact that the ethnic groups should feel a sense of ownership in order to bring in complete reform process in the country. In 2011, 'the Myanmar army set a major offensive against the KIO⁷, which broke a 17 year old ceasefire'. According to the Human Rights Watch, 2012, around 80,000 people were displaced along the border of China. In the late 2011 and in the beginning of 2012, preliminary ceasefire agreement was confirmed between the government and other ethnic groups, but the only ethnic group still at war was the Kachins.

The Shan and the Karen ethnic groups inside Myanmar have establish contacts with the civil society organizations to address the problem of conflict in the borderland areas of Myanmar and Thailand. However, this is area is necessarily government controlled and therefore efforts of the Civil society organizations are being affected. The challenge of the civil society operating in this area, according to Ashley South is of peace building and confidence building among sub-groups of the ethnic communities, given the fact that the Karens are extremely diverse in their culture, language and religion. In contrast to the Shan and the Karens, the Mon ethnic group is more or less homogenous in nature and has cooperated with the civil society organizations in the reformation process along with peace-building, Ashley South, 2013.

⁷ The Kachin Independence Organization or the KIO is the main Kachin armed ethnic group in northern Myanmar.

Peace-building process and the ethnic groups

Ashley South notes that the political reformation process in Myanmar depends highly on the peace-building process. The government is concentrating on a National ceasefire, as a result of which, the government is conducting several dialogues with the ethnic groups and their associations. However, in reality, whether this ceasefire agreement will be signed or not is still unclear. Peace-building process in the ethnic areas is a difficult task, given the fact that the issues of the ethnic groups are confined only to the armed groups and the Tatmadaw. The civil society organizations or the political parties hardly have a role to play in this regard due to the strict exclusiveness of the issues in the areas. Ashley South explains that the Kachin state is however an exception where, the people are more or less eager to explain their issues to the civil society organizations and the political parties. In this situation where the civil society organizations and the political parties are almost non-functional in the ethnic areas, Nyein 2014 notes that an initiative by the Pyidaungsu Institute of Thailand has been taken; where the ethnic groups would negotiate directly with the government. Further, the Institute would also advise the civil society organizations, ethnic groups and the political parties on issues of peace-building. One important issue that the author notes is in regard to the process of amending the Constitution of Myanmar. The author states that the ethnic groups have expressed their willingness to amend the Constitution but outside the parliament; the reason being that the parliament is controlled by the junta. If the civil society, ethnic groups and political parties are not willing to negotiate with the parliament then the political reform process will become a difficult task to achieve.

Conclusion

With the advent of the Thein Sein regime, civil and political liberties increased inside Myanmar. Civil society organizations have been functioning either independently or in association with the political parties. During the initial phase of the regime, the registration of the civil society was mandatory and the ones which failed to register were subjected to imprisonment. Later, with widespread protests from the civil society and political parties, the law of registration was revised. As discussed in the previous section of the chapter, the revised law made the registration of the civil society organizations as mandatory but the ones which failed to register were no longer under the risk of imprisonment. Although civil societies should have an independent space and work as watchdogs in the society but in the case of Myanmar, the association of the civil society organizations and the political parties is essential to bring about political reforms and peace in the country.

Two important issues that the civil society has to focus on are:

1. The upcoming 2015 election, and
2. The national ceasefire negotiations to bring an end to the ethnic problems.

Apart from the internal efforts of the civil society organizations and the political parties to bring about peace and political reforms, the country should also invite the advice and support of the international actors to

strengthen the relationship between the civil society organizations and the political parties. Further, the international actors should also

Exert pressure on the government to allow the regional Hluttaws to have more powers than it has.

Pressurize the government to create the decision making process into a more inclusive than an exclusive one.

Demand transparency of the relationship between the civil society and the political parties.

Exert pressure on the government so that the law of registration of the non-governmental organizations undergoes a second phase of revision because of the existing fault-lines and,

Focus on the prospects of peace-building and political reformation process, whereby strengthening both the civil society organizations and the political parties so that after the upcoming election of 2015, the political reform process is complete inside the country.

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