

# **The Culture Clash and Political Breakdown: Relations between the United States and Myanmar**

by  
**Ms. Ma Thanegi**

**Ma Thanegi:** Good evening ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for your attendance this evening and the warm, and the hot welcome. By now you would be aware that for many years the political situation has been at an impasse and with inflexibility on both sides, and that means that especially, the people suffered. I think many of you who are Myanmarese, would know the proverb that when two buffalo fight the grass gets trampled and we have been very much trampled by now.

But fortunately, since last September, about a year ago, over a year ago, the government and the opposition leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has started a dialogue, and since there were so many long years of mistrust on both sides before that, I think it is taking a lot of time to set up confidence with each other. And I know that a lot of people are impatient, that we are not hearing any results from that. But personally, I feel that it is up to them to be satisfied with their dialogue, with their talk, whatever settlement they have to make, before they come out with a joint statement. So I, for one, am prepared to wait patiently.

And the fact that the dialogue has started is making the Myanmar people very happy, because we are a Buddhist majority country, as you know, we are very peaceful and, the unfortunate and unavoidable violence of 1988 was a great shock to us. It has brought about change, no doubt, some changes, we got rid of the socialist system, but in many ways, too, this is something that the people living in the country would not like to see again.

People outside the country seem to think of that as a popular uprising. I'm sure it was very entertaining to watch on CNN what was

happening in my country, but those who were there, on ground level, know that it was not fun and a repeat is something that we do not want at all. It's not only the government that doesn't want it, it's the people themselves, it's something we do not want to go through again.

And my role here tonight is not to condemn anybody or to defend anybody. I would just like to present the situation and how the culture differences have had an impact on the situation and maybe, how these can be understood and used for better and effective work for the political situation.

First of all, I use the term, the name Myanmar because it is a name in our local language. We have been "Myanmar Naing gan daw," which means country, for centuries. It is just a name in our language and Burma was something, the name that the British used during the colonial days. Because I think the majority of the people are "Bama," I think they misunderstood the term Bama, the name of the race, to mean the country.

But anyway, some people object to that, to the use of Myanmar, because they say it was changed by the present government. But whatever, they did not sort of invent that name; it was already there. I feel that the name should have been changed immediately after independence, but I think in the excitement, they forgot to do that, so it came like 40 years too late.

## **Cultural Differences between East and West**

And it may be sort of a cliché to talk about culture clash, culture differences, but it is true, even among the Asian countries who have not the same background in history or religion,

there are — because of their different cultural values, there are totally different ways of looking at a situation or reacting to it. So if you do not understand that, if you impose your own cultural values and your views on a situation, while the other side, in any country, is looking at it in a totally different way, there is going to be misunderstanding, total misunderstanding. So I hope to explain a little bit about that.

Let's say that we cannot compare my country with Indonesia; we have different religions, or with the Philippines, we have a different history, also a different religion. The Catholic Church there is the majority, I think, and is very different from the Buddhist order, not only the organizations of the church and the priesthood, the monkhood, but also the policies are different, and the rituals — by ritual, I don't mean the ceremonial rituals, but how the philosophy is different.

And especially, you cannot compare my country with South Africa. People make a very simplistic comparison when they say that, "Oh, sanctions worked in South Africa, they will work in Myanmar." But in the same way it can be said that sanctions are not working in Cuba, so it is not only unfair, but unrealistic to compare countries.

Every country's politics is complex because of the nature of the society, the culture, the history, and especially in Myanmar, I think, it's not just good or bad or fair and unfair and whether one deserves this or one deserves that. There are maybe, like 20 points about history or culture or personalities, their character, how they think, that are interconnected, so you can't just put two points together and say, "If I do this, this will happen." It doesn't happen, because with 20 points, you push one button and about five light up, and you push another and it's different; it's very complex.

And if you put too simple a view on something, the problem will never get solved and that is, for me, as somebody living in the country and somebody who knows all levels of

society — since I'm an artist I get to know everybody, and since I was in prison, I knew the most, the poorest vagrants — so I have a view that it takes great understanding and patience to bring about any change in my country.

And with that, if you cannot focus, if one wants to bring change, it is not very effective if one is focused too much on what somebody deserves. And so the culture difference, especially between the West and Myanmar, or maybe with some Asian countries, is that by cultural values, one is about honesty. For the West, honesty in a dialogue and in dealing with people, means you have to be open, you have to be frank, there is a need for transparency, cards on the table, straight talking. And in Asia, in Myanmar, honesty, that we have, not to lie, not to steal, but in dealing with people, to be honest, to be straightforward, to be too frank that, in many ways, is tactless, that is impolite, and that is something almost against our culture.

And diplomacy is something we value, but in the same way, sometimes the Myanmarese can be very straightforward too. They might ask you how old you are, or if you are married, how many children, or you're looking fat. But beside the point, when it is on an official level, there are certain taboos against straight speaking.

It is not that you need to lie or be deceitful or hide things, or not tell what you need to tell to the people, to anyone, it's that you have to be careful with your choice of words. And also, my Asian friends will agree, that the tone of voice, the expression, the body language, all play a very important part.

But also, this keeping things private, the concept of not washing dirty linen in public and the importance of face, not to lose face or to have the other person lose face, with that we have something that is unique in Myanmar, the Bama word "ah-na-de." It means consideration for the other person, not to embarrass the

other person or not to be confrontational, not to be thought rude. So sometimes it means that if the answer should be no, they will probably say yes, or vice-versa. And if that is not understood that can create a lot of misunderstanding.

I have experience with some foreign companies working in my country where they need to stress the need for safety rules. And when they announce that such and such a thing has to be done to be safe, and if they ask the people, the local people, they will say, yes, we understand. And by now, the foreign companies know that they have to make sure that they really understand and that they're not saying we understand out of politeness. That is the extent of the trouble that "ah-na-de" can cause. As a Myanmarese, I hate that situation, I wish we don't have that, but unfortunately it is part of our culture.

And another thing that the Myanmar understand, "Thi thar thi say, M'myin say ne," it means another unique thing, let it be known but not be seen. It means that if there is something unpleasant or something that others need not know, it is there, you can do it, but don't flaunt it, don't announce it. It's like, for example, if a 15-year-old is going to smoke, he's not going to announce to his parents, "Hey dad, I'm going to smoke." Maybe he is seen smoking and if the parents can't control him, they would pretend not to notice. But knowing Burmese parents, I'm sure, the child would get a thorough bashing.

And another thing is that criticism especially is not to be announced; that is impolite. And if it is done using diplomacy, tactful words, and in private, that is fine. They do accept critical judgement. I have, as a political prisoner, many occasions to be interrogated, and if I take my stand politely, frankly, but not in an aggressive way fine, they don't have any problem with that.

So when interacting with each other with sincerity — that is important, sincerity — the

Western people should realize that the East, Myanmar, is not deceitful and also that the East, Myanmar should know that the West is not insulting. But this has been so instilled in our culture that it will take a lot of exposure and a lot of experience to get over that.

Another thing is filial piety, where you do not talk back to your parents and if you do, it is thought to be disrespectful, ungrateful, so that also is another cultural factor that has a great influence on how the Myanmar deal with each other as a people.

And like most of the other Asian nations, Myanmar was in self-imposed isolation for thirty years, and still very conservative and very aware of the need to keep the national identity and the culture. Apart from the teenagers, I can say that the older people are very aware of the danger, not the danger, but they don't like Western influences in dress or song. MTV is viewed with a lot of suspicion by the Myanmarese parents.

And in the government, the top-level people, are very conservative. They came from very conservative families, they're very traditional in their thinking and they are very intent on retaining the culture. So that is maybe more than ordinary people — ordinary people who are working with foreign companies — this is the mindset; they are very conservative. And anybody who needs to talk to them has to understand that, otherwise the intent is going to be misunderstood. I think the ASEAN country leaders understand that. A lot of people think that Myanmar should have been isolated and not allowed to join ASEAN, but if there's some sort of engagement, somebody who can talk to them and change things for the better, that's fine.

For us, for the people in my country, the most important thing is that we have more freedom, our lives are better, so it doesn't matter whether — the priority for us is not condemning somebody or punishment, because usually I've seen the international community bent on

punishing the government has punished the people.

But when criticism is not done with sincere intent to help, then it will be just mere insult without any good will for change. I will come back to this later.

### **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Idealism**

In any country people want a better standard of living; even in a rich country like America, I'm sure everybody wants to be on a higher level than he is already. Apart from Bill Gates. After the political unrest of 1988 and the elections of 1990, the international community rallied to help Myanmar. Unfortunately the process of change was greatly harmed by the media hype of corporate media, the activist and lobbyist industry, and by those grabbing the reflected glory of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's fame.

Now, she was brought up as a daughter of our great hero, Bo Gyoke Aung San, and the glory of his memory is on her all the time, since she was a child. Afterwards, she lived for long years in England as an academic, she has deep interests in English literature, the classics, and so these have made her a person of very high standards and high idealism. And because she is so charming and beautiful, the popular media has played up to this, and I think, by degrees, they imposed this image of high ideals upon her. She already has very high ideals, but with this constraint from the media and from her upbringing, she had no chance to mingle with the ordinary Burmese as an ordinary person. She can meet anybody in Myanmar and she will still be the General's daughter.

So with that high idealism, I think she was pushed into a position by the media as well, into a very narrow ideal path from which, for her, it is very difficult to break out of. But now she is finally talking to the government, but I'm sure, I think, things will go well.

### **Current Economic and Social Conditions**

Now, about wanting to help the country. The easy, as I said, the easy example of South Africa was that sanctions or embargoes would somehow topple the government and change-over to the democratic government, to have the power transferred over like that. But as I said, each country is unique and this cannot be compared. So as Myanmar was in self-imposed isolation, more isolation is not going to matter. And South Africa already, I think, had a lot of international investment before, but we had nothing, so it was not a shock to the system.

And also, Myanmar is very rich in resources, we have seas, rivers, streams, and ditches full of fish, fertile land, and since we don't have this caste system of India, we can easily pluck vegetables from a roadside hedge and survive. Inflation is high, I agree, it's true, but people are not dying of hunger, and during the socialist times we had no way out economically. There was nothing that we could have done. But now with inflation, now at least people have chances to earn and personally, I feel those chances should not be denied to the people.

Medical care is not enough but by tradition most of the people prefer to rely on Myanmar herbal medicine like what their grandmothers taught them to use, certain leaves with certain fruits.

And education is, for a lot of people, still a problem, but we have more schools than before. But in my travels over the country, I've met children who cannot afford to go to school, they have to, you know, maybe sell snacks by the roadside, and I've talked to them and they are very bright. They are not dull-eyed, lazy, they are very shrewd, street-smart, extremely bright, it's a tragedy that some of them can't go to school or learn reading and writing, but that has not harmed their intelligence at all, they're very intelligent, they're very down-to-earth.

And our TV programs are not very good, so reading is still a very popular past time. Most people cannot afford to buy books or magazines, but on every street corner there are little lending shops where you can borrow a book or a magazine for maybe two or three kyats a day. And I've seen people, young people, in the farms, herding cows, they have a book tucked somewhere and they do read.

And of course we still have censorship for our publications but as compared to the socialist times, now we have a lot more publications that are very good, like I think most of you know the financial magazines in our language like *Dhana*, *Myanmar Dhana*, *See Pwa Yay*, *Living Color*, they have very good articles on the situation and the financial market, the economy. And we do have a lot more translations of English language books. Before, during the socialist times, I remember we had something like only Sidney Shelton translations. Now we have like *Lateral Thinking*, the *Minute Manager*, even *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

### **Economic Terrorism**

Now I'd like to mention a bill introduced into the Senate very recently. This is a bill introduced at the 107th Senate to respond to a call for action. I'll go through it very quickly. Section One, Findings, Congress makes the following findings. The International Labor Organization, ILO, invoking an extraordinary constitutional procedure ... adopted in 2000 a resolution calling on the State Peace and Development Council to take concrete actions to end forced labor in Burma.

In this resolution, ILO recommended that governments, employers, workers, take appropriate measures to make sure that their relations with the SPDC do not abet the system of forced or compulsory labor in that country and that other international bodies reconsider any cooperation with Burma, and if appropriate, to cease, as soon as possible, any activity that could abet the practice of forced or compulsory labor.

Section two: the United States support for multilateral action to end forced labor and the worst forms of child labor in Burma. Trade ban. In general, notwithstanding any other provision of law, under such time as the President determines and certifies to Congress that Burma has met the conditions described in paragraph two, no article that is produced, manufactured, or grown in Burma may be imported into the United States.

That is under conditions that the SPDC releases political prisoners and an acceptable conclusion for the dialogue, and to work, to make measurable and substantial progress towards full cooperation with the United States counter narcotics efforts.

So apparently, this bill is about making political changes in Myanmar but they are targeting innocent workers, at least 100,000, especially women, because most are garment factories, targeting their livelihoods. It is so unfair, whatever changes that can be made, why can't there be other means to use rather than to target innocent people, especially people with no higher education, no technical skills, for women to earn for themselves, their families. Maybe if we have around 300 or 400 garment factories, and if they close down, there would be like 200,000 women out of jobs and their families, who are going to have to struggle a lot to survive and most of the women, the young women, may be forced into prostitution.

This, I think at the start of my talk, I said that I am not going to condemn anybody, but this, to target innocent people, it makes me very, very bitter. This is economic terrorism.

And this is something that is not going to bring change. Nothing will change because these 300, let's say 400, garment factories shut down. The government is not going to say, "Oh, 400 garment factories close down, we better go away." I don't think this is going to bring any positive change and, at the same time, it is hurting the people, it is so unfair and so cruel. And think of... well, let me not talk

about the human rights conditions of other countries, this is not my affair.

### **Hindrance to Democracy**

I hear this always that eco meltdown will bring about the downfall of governments, but such situations seldom bring good changes for the country, for the people, especially for the people. And I'm afraid, also, democracy is not an instant cure. You can look at the examples of the Philippines and Indonesia. Democracy is a practice that needs solid economic foundation to grow and to prosper. Voting for a government and having a government installed is only just one step. Maybe it can also be the first step of a process toward democracy, but without solid foundations already in place, not only of the economy but education, whatever, but also of the people's mindset, that would be very difficult. Because as I explained about the Myanmar culture, we are not people who, when we have a problem, we sit and say, okay, I have a problem, my view is this, I disagree with you but I respect your view. This does not happen because that is contrary to our culture, it is rude. So I don't know how we're going to get out of this mindset. I wish we could as quickly as possible, but unfortunately it is there. And that, plus the whole process of "ah-na-de," which I really hate, maybe is the biggest hindrance, one of the biggest hindrances to democracy.

Now about bringing about effective change, we have to take into account not only the cultural values of the people, of the government, whatever, but also human nature. Discussions for change should be private, and that is why, I think, neither the government nor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is coming out with statements of what they are talking about, that is correct in my mind. And they have to be done with diplomacy, as I said, ASEAN understands that.

Politics is the art of the possible and there is more possibility if no one cares who gets the credit. A lot can be done if you don't care who gets the credit. This is, of course, based on

sincere good will towards the people. Political correctness sounds very good but if victims are made because of political correctness, that is very cruel and that is very unfair.

I think I've used up my time, thank you very much, I apologize that I'm not an experienced speaker. Thank you.

**John Ikenberry:** Thank you very much. Brian, why don't you start and then David.

**Brian Joseph:** Okay, I've got five or seven minutes? Okay. I figured I should start, I wasn't sure, to be honest, exactly what the subject of tonight's discussion was when it was defined as cultural clash. I'll move onto a few other points, but I'll start out by saying I think it's important, at least for those of us in the United States who work on this issue, I think most of us see this as an internal issue in Burma. And the culture clash, as I see it, is more between two forces or three forces inside the country. One, the military government, the SPDC, and the other in the National League for Democracy, and the other component I think we need to bring into this is the ethnic nationalities.

And so when you talk about the cultural clash, I think it has much more to do with what's going on inside the country than any sort of clash that's taking place between what we in the United States of America or the West, more generally, think, and what's actually going on inside the country.

And one other quick point, I think it's important to know, at least my experience has led me to believe, that almost everyone I've come into contact with who works on Burma comes out of this with a real feeling of wanting to work for and support democratic change in Burma. And the vast majority of people we come into contact with, both in the United States of America, in Thailand, in other places overseas, are people, are Burmese who were part of the 1988 and 1990 movement. These are people who all of us know quite well and

we all understand, at least I think the vast majority of us, understand that this was not a time of happiness, the turmoil inside Burma, the lives which were torn apart, the people who fled into exile. I don't think there's anybody who works on this issue who wants to see that again in Burma, so I hope you understand that even though people are pushing tough policies on Burma, including sanctions and other things which you might not support, I think it's done not out of any conviction to see the country face turmoil and bloodshed again, but out of the belief and understanding that Burma will do better and fare better, as will its people, with a democratic government.

### **Elections of 1990**

But those are just a few points. As you can probably tell from the organization I work for, it's called the National Endowment for Democracy, we sort of come at this from the angle that democracy is in the best interest of the people of Burma. And from there we like to think that efforts to promote democracy in Burma should be based on the 1990 elections. What's being said often these days is that's almost time to move beyond these elections, these were in the 1990s, this was when the first George Bush was president, this was a long time ago, it's time to move on.

But I'm not so sure that's really the case. I think as long as you have a strong democratic opposition in the country, you have a strong democratic opposition in exile, you have many, many voices from those same people who were elected in 1990, who continue to speak out on behalf of democracy and human rights in the country. And I think until we're led to believe otherwise, we really need to defer to those voices that have a constituency inside the country to take our guidance in what we do to try to help improve the situation inside Burma.

In closed or authoritarian countries, it's next to impossible to determine what the sentiment of the people is. You often hear a single voice or

maybe a dozen different voices coming out, representing various positions inside the country. But what's unique about Burma, I think, are two things. One, you have an elected government in waiting, where you have virtually no people who were elected during those 1990 elections now speaking out against the government, the National League for Democracy. In other words, eleven years after elections in 1990, the only people inside Burma with a democratically constituted constituency, still support the National League for Democracy and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. And I think that's important to keep in mind.

We hear many, many voices, there are a lot of Burmese dissidents in this room, but the only people who really now I think in Burma can speak authoritatively as representatives of more than just themselves, continue to be the elected members of parliament.

### **National League of Democracy**

And the second thing, I think also implicit in much of what's been said is that the National League of Democracy in some way or another no longer really represents the aspirations of the people of Burma. And I've heard this repeated in a number of different circumstances and situations recently. And although we don't know what would happen if new elections were held today, we can guess from what we think the regime thinks, we think they would lose and that's why they choose not to hold new elections. And if you ask yourself the question, why else would they continue to detain and harass NLD members and others, refuse to allow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi or any members of the NLD to speak publicly or travel, to clamp down on the media, I understand that there's some sort of growth in that field now but I think it's fair to say that by and large the media still remains state-controlled.

And the other thing is they close universities at whim, and I think this is an important part of understanding the situation. For the last ten years, something that has nothing to do with

sanctions, external pressures, or anything else, there's been nobody pushing the SPDC or its predecessor to close universities and close schools and deny students and others an education. And I think without those things inside the country it's hard to see how this is going to lead to positive change.

And the other thing I think we need to look at, although there are former political prisoners in exile inside the country, I remember from your FEER piece in 1998, you said many former political prisoners you know have now stopped supporting the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. And although I understand that, I think it's important that we also not forget there are still over 1,500 political prisoners inside prisons in Burma today and we don't know what they think. I think the vast majority of us would assume we know what they think, but we don't, and I don't think it's fair to move beyond understanding that hey, there are former political prisoners, both inside the country and exiled, who hold different views on the matter, but the vast majority of them still continue to support Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the vast majority of them, or at least a significant number of them, are still in detention inside the country.

### **Economic Sanctions**

And all this I bring up because I think the question of sanctions is an important question. You brought up the case of Cuba, you brought up, I guess, just Cuba today and South Africa in the 1980s. Every country is unique, South Africa was a unique situation, Cuba is a unique situation and I think if you poll the people in this room and others from the human rights community, you would have various opinions about what kind of policies are appropriate for each country. In Burma, I think, the really unique factor is that, as I mentioned earlier, the NLD continues to advocate for a sanctions policy. They don't do it, I would assume with the hope that the country will turn to bloodshed, in fact for a movement that is based on non-violence and has been

extremely non-confrontational, I would think it's quite clear that the goal is not to see the people of Burma rise up and be shot down, but to push for systematic change within the country.

So I think sanctions are often a difficult issue, in Burma it's less so, because I think that question of whether sanctions hurt the people of Burma is not really the question, because I think if you look at it this way, and you ask yourself, is it realistic to think that a regime that now feels under pressure domestically and internationally but has refused to moderate the very policies that have led to the current conditions, would they now choose to change their policies to benefit the people in Burma if one or both of those forces mean the domestic or international forces were no longer there?

And I think I should state, at this point in time, that look, it's quite obvious to all of us who work on Burma that sanctions have not accomplished their ultimate goal yet, which is a democratic change in Burma that reflects the will of the people. They have not led the regime in Burma to moderate significantly its policies toward the democratic opposition, end its wars against ethnic minority groups, to allow for a free press, to provide access to the internally displaced, to stop using forced labor, to release political prisoners, the list goes on and on.

And the other thing is it hasn't led the regime in any way, shape, or form, to moderate policies which still, as far as the most recent statistics I have seen, and let me put a note in here, I don't trust any statistics I read out of Burma, I think if you look at the numbers you'll see a detailed analysis of the economic situation in Burma and they don't touch drugs. Or you'll see tariff rates and they don't talk about the cross-border trade that everyone knows goes on in timber and jade, so I think we need to take this with a grain of salt.

That said, the most recent statistics I saw was

that Burma spends 222 percent more on its military than it does on health and education combined. And I think when you look at it that way, it really raises a question of changing policies from the outside will not change those policies on the inside. So as long as you have policies, which are so distorted inside the country, it's hard to imagine how increasing some aid, or not pushing policies which the NLD and others support, is really in the benefit of the people of the country.

### **Commitment to Non-Violence**

One other thing. I think, over the years, Burma has been a model case in another example. Of all the countries I work on, it's one of the few, Tibet excepted, where there's a commitment to non-violence. That although there are occasional people in groups who move from that line, the country has, by and large, stood behind this call for non-violent political action. You haven't seen terrorist actions, or you haven't seen a significant number of terrorist activities, you've seen a couple in Thailand but I think they can sort of be explained in context, and you have a country which has basically been kept in a terrible condition all this time, where, as you say, the conditions are deplorable, it's hard to be ranked 170th out of 171 countries by the WHO and not understand those conditions, but at the same point in time, people have remained committed to the non-violent struggle.

And I think for those of us on the outside, we think that's extremely important, it's one of the things that separates Burma from the other countries struggling for democracy and human rights.

Just a few more quick points. In Burma, all these things we hear about are entirely political in nature. You haven't read in Burma, outside of an isolated flood here or there, mass dislocations related to earthquakes, flood, draught, any form of malnutrition, disease, all these things done in Burma are done in the context of poor policy planning, they're not

the results of—even in places like North Korea where you have horrible governments and policy planning, that coupled with draughts leads to severe starvation and other things, in Burma we don't have that. We simply have bad policy by a government that refuses to recognize, in a significant manner, that its policies contribute to the failed state.

### **Importance of Democracy Promotion**

Let me move on to one other thing, and that is, which has not been mentioned, the positive side of democracy promotion. I think it's important to note that there's a lot of effort being done, not just by the National Endowment for Democracy but by many other foundations, both here in the United States and abroad, who are working on the more constructive aspects of democracy promotion: freedom of expression, freedom of association, student unions, labor unions, ethnic nationality empowerment, women's empowerment, coalition building. And I think all of this, we understand, is a long-term program, and I think in the context of Burma where you have had basically an entire generation, ten years of people without school or with limited schooling, going to, hopefully in the near future, to be responsible for their country, we understand it's a mammoth undertaking. And that's why there needs to be work done now which contributes to the democratic growth in the country, and I think it's most effectively done through various channels including things like short-wave radio programs which can work on civic education, democracy education, rule of law, addressing health and educational issues inside the country.

I'll end very quickly here. I think it's also a mistake, here we often have very short-term memories and we also have very little patience. If our policies don't work we change them, if our policies don't work today we change them tomorrow. We're looking at the next election, we're looking at which constituent group is pushing us for which effort and which initiative.

In the case of Burma, the U.S., among others, and let me say I don't speak for the U.S. government, have really kept strong to their policy and they've shown patience, they've been willing to wait for the NLD, they've been willing to wait for the SPDC, they've been willing to take a step back and say there are tentative talks going on, although we don't know what's being said, we don't know what's being negotiated, all we know is that there is some sort of talk going on between the two parties and we are willing to wait.

And so I think patience, as long as the people inside Burma are patient, there's no need for us now, eleven years later, to become impatient. We've been patient for eleven years, I think we've had some very good and effective policies, I think the work being done to support the pro-active side of democracy promotion has been helpful, and I think now is not the time to be impatient, but it's the time to be patient. We aren't suffering in Washington, we aren't suffering as a result of the conditions inside Burma in Washington today, and I think it's therefore important for us to realize that our patience is not based on the idea that we're willing to watch the people of Burma suffer, I think it's based on exactly the opposite.

**David Steinberg:** We've heard two very articulate differences of opinion here, and I would agree with Brian that the solution to the problems of Burma, assuming that there are solutions, must come from the Burmese people themselves.

But that does not deny the role of foreigners, there are many different roles for foreigners, to encourage, to analyze, to suggest, and in this case, to offer, I think, some different sort of views and I take the issue of culture clash here as the theme of the evening, and I want to take it to a little bit different level. I want to talk about a half a dozen differences in perceptions and cultures that the United States, or some Western societies or industrialized societies, may have about situations and how they relate to how I interpret, and this is an

interpretation, of how the Burmese regime, in this case, views things.

### **Different Perceptions of Legitimacy**

The first issue is legitimacy. To the United States, legitimacy lies in elections, very clearly, and even though we have our problems with our own elections, as we all know, but still the concept is there. And in Burma, there is a set of different government actions to try and get the various regimes to be legitimate, and elections have been part of a process but they haven't been the whole process. The first, of course, is nationalism, that's very obvious, that's very, very strong, throughout all the regimes, you have to be a nationalist to get elected in Burma.

The second, of course, was U Nu and the use of Buddhism, Buddhism is still exceedingly important, if you read *The New Light of Myanmar* every day you'll see the military leaders having some relationship with the Buddhist monks in some appropriate kind of role. But U Nu brought that to a state level as a matter of articulated national policy.

The military were against it at that time because they knew it would cause problems with the minorities, and they turned to socialism, which is another force to get the economy back into Burman control as the basis for legitimacy. They screwed up, not because of socialism itself, but they purged a bureaucracy that might have managed socialism of all the people who could, and therefore they tried to run it on a rigorous military control and a single-part mobilization and it just didn't work.

Since the SPDC came in in '88, things have changed. Of course socialism went out, but the military has now devoted the legitimacy of the regime to the military itself, the military is the source of legitimacy because they are the military. Now that sounds like a tautology, but I think it's true and if you look at the museums that are being built, the history that is being rewritten, the military role is one where the

military embodies all that is good in the society, in their view, of course. And that is something you have to understand, because that to them, I think, gives them legitimacy. It may not give legitimacy to them from outside, but inside, I think, that is what they believe.

### **Cultural Clashes and Concepts of Power**

The second issue of cultural clashes and concepts of power, we in the industrialized world think of power as depersonalized in general, institutionalized, we think of the presidency, we don't think of ex-presidents so much, our loyalty is not to Bush or Clinton, it is to the president or the presidency of the United States.

In Burma because power is basically considered as limited rather than infinite, power becomes very, very personal, and then personal power leads to factionalism, leads to entourages of all sorts and this has been true from the days when the British first allowed political parties in 1937 on. And I think it's a very important difference and it's important for the future in that society.

### **Role of the Military**

The third issue is the role of the military itself. For us here, the role of the military is to go back to the barracks and Sam Huntington, in the early days of theorizing about the military used to talk about the proper role of the military was to be professional, which he meant, being non-political.

And of course the military in Burma is conceived quite differently by them. They think they are the only group in the country that can hold the country together, and I think they truly believe that, whether it's true is a separate matter, this becomes very important to them. If you read the newspapers, what they do, whether it is the building of infrastructure, which they built a lot, I don't know how good it is, but a lot of roads, bridges, dams, irrigation systems and so forth, they have done with

loving kindness, a very good Buddhist concept, but if one does that using that term, you can't disagree with it because it's done with a kind of fervor and goodwill that makes disagreement almost inappropriate in that society.

The other culture clashes are conditions or what we think of as propaganda, coming from the regime, and what are truly strongly held beliefs. And I think we must make a distinction here between those things that are clearly propaganda, whether it is based on spurious data or sometimes what they think foreigners can or will believe, and what is truly believed by them whether it's inaccurate or not. And one of those things is the military's role in national unity, the military's role in the preservation of the state, and that sort of thing. I think they strongly believe that. And if you are going to negotiate with them on anything, then you've got to understand where they come from, and then you can begin to negotiate whether you accept that or not.

The next issue is on minority rule. And I still think, that despite giving a modicum, a plan to give a modicum of local autonomy to minority groups, there is a Burman sense in the society which prevents the minorities from assuming any sort of power at the national level and so I think this is the most intractable problem facing the state beyond the political issues and one that will not go away despite the cease fires. It will erupt in some future time, under some future government unless they deal with it more appropriately.

The next issue is economics, and of course socialism is gone and the government talks about an open economy or a market economy, the private sector. And yet if you look at the military control of economic assets, their control is enormous and their control will mean that no matter what government comes in, and if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD come in tomorrow, the military will still have the Myanmar Economic Holding Corporation, they will still have the Myanmar Economic Corporation, they will have a massive

influence on that economy. And, in addition, because they have that influence they can control the markets and it will not be the kind of economy where market forces play a role. It will be a quasi- open society, if you will.

### **U.S. Position towards the Military**

The question of U.S. position towards the military. It is, of course as we all know, to honor the elections of 1990. That basically says to the military, you turn over power and then we will talk to you. And of course the military is not going to do that, in simple terms, that is what the United States is asking.

Now, from our point of view, given our history, that is quite logical because we've determined legitimacy based on the elections, there's no doubt what the NLD did in that election, it devastated the military and the military-backed parties. But that is not something that is likely to appeal to the military as a basis of negotiation because it is a unilateral approach that makes life, that makes it difficult to negotiate. Now, Brian talks about having patience, and the question of patience is not for us, it's a question of patience for the Burmese people, this all goes back to them and what they want or might have under optimum conditions.

The sanctions issue is a very important issue; there are differences within the United States on sanctions, as we all know. When I was in Rangoon in January, when the new administration was coming in here, I told the military at senior levels, look, in general the Republicans don't like sanctions, it's not a question of Burma, it's a general principle. If you read the Republican literature, they want business to operate freely.

But no administration, even a Republican administration, cannot change sanctions politically unless you do something significant which will give them the ability to go to Congress and change it, because otherwise it will not happen. And this has to be something

substantial. I don't know what that substantial is and it's up to you guys to decide, but if you want to change the U.S. position, this is what you've got to do. And of course as we've seen, nothing has happened.

Now I want to close on one item and that is the difference between the regime since '88 and the regime from 1962 to '88. And if we look at these regimes, as regimes, the period from '62 to '88 was worse, in a way, because the military intelligence was there, there was a single party unitary state, there was no opposition at all, not even titular opposition, there was still the same censorship, there was still the same control. The minorities were fighting more at that period than they were later on. What's the difference in our attitudes between that regime and the one that came in in '88?

Well first, of course, are the killings of '88, that in itself shocked a lot of people. The organizations that monitor human rights, democracy, these organizations have increased their capacities and their interest, and the bureaucratic mechanisms in the United States and elsewhere have been established to do this in terms of government, and, of course, what you have is a most attractive leader. So that one is able to personalize these feelings of democracy and human rights, where we did not have them before, they were amorphous, they were so vague, they didn't appeal to us. But we do think of things in personal terms, whether we're talking about a dissident like Kim Dae Jung before he was elected president, in jail, attempted assassinations, or we think of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi or Mandela and the Dalai Lama and so forth.

This is a very good way for us, emotionally, to deal with these issues, but it's not the only way to deal with them. But we have dealt with oppressive regimes in the past, ineffectually, and we've done this in many different parts of the world, of course. And the U.S. record has not been very good, overall, in human rights, even with our allies such as South Korea, which I have studied, but it is a question

whether how much patience we can have and if we have patience, whether other countries will have the same patience. And there have been differences among our allies about what we should do there, and basically, the dialogue we're going through today is part of the discussion of those differences. I'll stop there, Mr. Chairman.

**Ikenberry:** We're going to give Ma Thanegi a few minutes to respond to a couple of points and then we'll open it up for Q&A.

**Ma Thanegi:** One is that yes, I do agree that the political situation is an affair best handled by the internal forces, but I think throughout the years we have heard a lot of strident messages from outside of the country, especially the West, to really believe that they also think that it is an internal matter.

And with the ethnic groups, I agree, they should, even with this dialogue going on, personally, I think that they should have a role to play in that. But unfortunately, both the government and the NLD feel that it is not time yet for them to talk but that is their position.

And I have heard, I have had a lot of messages from previous groups, not only personally but also to others in the country, from groups working outside about, "Why aren't you doing anything?" So there are, obviously, many who feel that we should be rising up. I think that is all; I don't want to take up too much of the time.

## Q & A

**Ikenberry:** If you want to go to the microphone, if you'd give us your name and affiliation and then a quick question. Third row back on the left.

**Questioner:** Ma Thanegi, thank you for coming and opening up a dialogue here. I'm interested in your analysis of the reasons why SPDC entered into the dialogue last summer. And are those reasons strong enough to keep

them engaged in the dialogue all the way to the end?

**Ma Thanegi:** Personally I feel it is not my place to make any speculations. I think maybe one day we will know from both sides directly concerned. I don't want to comment on something that I don't know, I don't want to guess.

**Questioner:** When you phrased your talk you spoke often of the Burmese people, the Burmese culture and you were also a political prisoner, but right beside me are also some former political prisoners, I wonder who you are speaking for, you know, because as Brian Joseph just said, the elected MPs who were elected in 1990, they were elected to speak for us, so when you make these broad statements such as "the Burmese people," and "our culture," and "we don't like this," and "we can't do this or that," who exactly are you speaking for, yourself, or the 50 million people of Burma?

Also, how would you know that the sanctions themselves cause X number of people to become unemployed out of which so many are women and children? Because as Mr. Joseph just said, since 1962, you know, or earlier, our country has always, as you yourself said, it's always been very full of fine natural resources and also the people, until the military government declared otherwise, are pretty literate and are enterprising, bright people. And yet out of all this, one thinks the military has made such an abysmal mess, how can you tell that it's just sanctions, you know, now that sanctions are hurting, it's why did the sanctions come? You know, why are the women in the factories, why is there this vast movement of people to the cities? This breakdown of families and this large, displaced population and so on?

Anyway, I'll come to the point. Part of the mismanagement is right there in the trade figures, Burma is buying, through the last seven or eight years, buying twice as much as the money it's getting from exports, now what are

these imports? I think we have to look into it. What kind of imports are they, what are they, military goods of what? And so that's my question, how do you know, among all these different variables, you know, that it's sanctions alone that are causing this, how do you get the exact number? Thank you.

**Ma Thanegi:** I speak as an ordinary person, somebody who knows, as I said, all levels of society, as a journalist and as a writer. I've traveled, I talk to anybody and everybody on the street, peddlers, market people, business people, and as somebody who has an understanding of both Myanmar and Western culture and somebody with some fluency in English and somebody who is not afraid to speak up, somebody who is not afraid to be branded a traitor by the NLD, that is why I'm speaking out. Certainly, I am not talking for the whole country, but as somebody living in the country, I do know what the people want. They want peace, they want more freedom yes, certainly, but they also want economic prosperity. And another thing is that you say only MPs should be allowed to talk..... as I understand? Yes?

**Questioner:** You are obviously a member of the elite and there are so many other writers and your point about patience, you know, we in DC can wait for things but think about Min Ko Naing. He just celebrated his 39th birthday, he has already served his sentence, can he wait? I'm sorry, I was just talking about Min Ko Naing, he just celebrated his 39th birthday, or we wanted to celebrate the birthday with him but we could not because of the anthrax scare. However, what I want to say is he's already served his sentence and he's still not let go. Min Ko Naing, we hear from reliable sources, is now in Sittwe prison, he sleeps on concrete floors so long and been in solitary confinement so long, he's very weak, his left leg is dragging, can he wait? A 39-year-old man by now should have a family, children, and an education. Can he wait? I ask you a rhetorical question, you need not answer it.

**Ma Thanegi:** I do still have a lot of my colleagues in jail and I do sympathize. But other than wait until both sides come to an agreement and come out with their decision what is there to do? Really, our hands are tied. It depends on what they are talking about, which I don't know and I don't presume to guess. Yes it's true that there is a lot of economic mismanagement across the government personnel. They're military people, they know how to fight; they don't know anything about business. But what I've always said, earlier on, several years ago, was that if there had been no investment ban and if big, global companies had come into the country, they have enough financial clout, I'm sure they are richer than some countries. They have the financial clout to see the smooth-running economy, and they have the financial clout to change the political situation, which is also to their benefit, at the same time. For me it's not very realistic to put aside economic change or education or medical aid until we have democracy. I do want a democratic government and certainly, it's true that NLD was elected in 1990, however long years ago that is, but sometimes as I said, politics is the art of the possible. We just have to get what is possible, and maybe that means we have to give up some things. I don't know what the give-and-take, the compromise is, at the moment.

**Steinberg:** Just to comment on the role of business and political change. Those optimists who say if you have foreign investment coming in you're going to get political change should look at the history of some of the countries in East Asia. It takes a long, long time and a lot of other factors are involved.

I mean after all, Korea started its export policies and foreign investment in 1961 and they got political liberalization in 1987. And Taiwan started, you can either say in 1929 or 1949, and it took until about 1992 until it politically liberalized. Singapore? Great place to do business, but at the same time politically, it is stultifying. So it's not a simple matter. What you need to have business succeed is not

just having them there but you need to have dispute settlement mechanisms that are judged to be fair, you need consistency, you need to have reliability, predictability. Business wants predictability and in Burma there has been no predictability and that will prevent foreign investment even should it open, except in the exploitative fields which, in the long run, do Burma very little good.

**Questioner:** I was former vice chairperson of the All Burma Federation Student's Union in 1988, '89, I was a former political prisoner in 1989 to 1993 so I have two questions for Ma Thanegi and one question for Mr. Steinberg.

So Ma Thanegi said very emotionally and angrily about the bill S 926. You even accused that this is economic terrorism. So you know that we in Burma are living under economic terrorism for many years, since 1988, friends of mine, friends of yours, have been killed by the military. Dozens of people were killed in demonstrations. Dozens of our friends were put behind bars for many years, you, me also. Dozens of our friends have already fled as refugees and became citizens of other countries. So my question is that do you know the only responsible person for this bill is the current military regime, not Americans sitting in Congress, do you understand this? That's my first question.

The second question is I notice you are the one who got the chance to meet with the General for an interview in the Myanmar Times I think in 2000. Just like in S 926, there are some conditions. If SPDC generals release all the political prisoners, if there are positive results from the secret talks and if they have sustainable results in the anti-forced labor measures with the Americans. So this is what we want, what our people want. I think you may know that all the 40 million people of Burma want democracy, they want peace. Also we want to cancel our name from the list of the most narcotics-producing country. So you have the chance to meet with the left and the General, why don't you ask him to follow those

conditions if you are really sorry for the workers inside Burma. So I have two questions for you, please answer.

**Ma Thanegi:** Can I answer now?

**Ikenberry:** For Mr. Steinberg?

**Questioner:** Oh, my question for Mr. Steinberg. You mentioned about the generals, you see them in the newspaper doing something with monks, something like that. Do you know that in December 2000 three senior monks issued a letter to the SPCD generals and the NLD, they requested to all to negotiate for the sake of the people. So when they issued the letter, the military intelligence came to their monastery and said, don't be used by politicians of the NLD, so do you understand that, how the military generals are using their religion to cover their sins? Thanks.

**Thanegi:** May I answer first? Yes, I do remember the 1988 tragedies and the violence and I do know that a lot of my friends are in jail as well. But for that and other, whatever weaknesses the government has, to change them in that aspect by using, by denying the very poor women who have to work, it doesn't make sense. For the garment factories, as I said, we have very rich natural resources, I don't think it's going to make a significant loss to the government by whatever tax they're getting out of the garment factories. It hurts the women most of all because they have to work to earn to feed themselves. I don't think the generals have to worry about where their next meal is coming from.

And also, oh yes, the general's interview. For that interview, nobody set it up for me, I was on a media trip with other media people and he went around talking to everybody, so at that time I asked for an interview. He doesn't like interviews and he was not very happy about it but I was very persistent. And my main intention of doing that interview if you will read through it again was to focus on the AIDS situation. Before that, the projected UN finding

was that 30 percent of the people are infected with AIDS. They took as examples, they did some research in the border areas, with the very poor people, like porters or sex workers, so naturally enough they would find 30 percent if not more, but that is not representative of the whole country. And when the outside media very stridently picked upon that number and kept accusing the Burmese government, you know, "AIDS! Everybody, 30 percent of the people are dying of AIDS!" then with that accusative comment, the government started to say, "We don't have it, we don't have that problem." And I knew it had to be brought out in the open for them to come out on record and say it is a problem before anything could be done.

So that was my intention. I asked things about his personal life, his rumored fight with General Maung Aye, but tucked into that, in the middle, was my question about the AIDS situation in Myanmar. And I asked in such a way that it was not aggressive and he came out, for the first time on record, that yes, AIDS is a problem, we have to deal with it, it's a national cause.

And after that, strangely enough, even for *The New Light of Myanmar*, I don't know for the English version, but in the Myanmar version, for several weeks there was every day a question-and-answer thing about AIDS, it ran for several weeks and I felt that was a very small breakthrough but a breakthrough anyway. This is a different society and also, this is a society where apparently the government and activists, the lobbyists want to help the people of Myanmar. And I'm just saying that doing something like this is going to starve or make life very difficult for 200, 100,000 people, and these figures, I cannot quote you offhand where I got them, there are materials inside my country about the list of factories and how many workers there are.

**Ikenberry:** Go ahead David.

**Steinberg:** Just to answer your question,

which is, was I aware of these, of course I am aware not of particular cases, but of a number of cases including repression of monks in Mandalay some years ago. There are three aspects to this; one is a very strong belief in most Burmans in Buddhism. The second is the political and personal uses of Buddhism, which involve, in the case of U Nu building a pagoda, in the case of Ne Win building a pagoda, in the case of Than Shwe building two pagodas, in the case of Khin Nyunt repairing the Shwedagon. These are very important political acts as well as they are personal acts. And the third thing is that the purpose of the regime is survival, and if Buddhism is going to undercut that, then they will move against those monks whom they regard as basically heretical, not in a religious sense, but in a political sense. So sure, that's to be expected, but if they do it enough, then the people will rise against that because this is a very, very strong emotional, psychological bond that I think even the military can't move out of.

**Ikenberry:** We've got at least five or six questions, so just keep them short so we can have a lot of different people ask short questions.

**Questioner:** My question is do you have any comment on a quote by CPJ, which stands for Community Protecting Journalists, which is issuing our annual reports on Asia and countries around the world about the press freedom.

So here you are represented as a Contributing Editor of *The Myanmar Times*, okay? Here's a quote from *The Myanmar Times* by CPJ 2000 Report. "In February, the junta allowed the publication of a privately owned newspaper for the first time. The Myanmar Times, a joint venture between a local firm and an Australian businessman showed no evidence of independence. However, merely presenting government propaganda more professionally than the official press."

My second question, you said that international community regards the S 926 bill as economic terrorism but I think why is

economic terrorism with support from a few governments in the international arena, or international tourism, I see the Burmese government, the military regime, as a state organized terrorism, targeting its own people. So my question is S926 is the result of the ILO's proposal to impose sanctions on Burma because of the evidence of long-practiced use of forced labor. But they are saying that they can't work with a government that is committing human rights abuses, so by lifting the sanctions and stopping S926, if there is no democracy, come with me, I'll go to Capitol Hill and the White House and lead a demonstration, singly, but I don't think it will help any.

**Ikenberry:** Okay, excellent, we've got the next one over here and then the lady over here.

**Questioner:** I'm also a Burmese student dissident and I'm studying conflict resolution right now. I really appreciate you sharing your views, I also wish I could share my views on Burma.

You said it is unfair to have such a bill, so in conflict, there are people on both sides who try to hold power, so as dissidents, what is our power? We don't commit terrorism, we don't have any other pressuring tactic in Burma, so the power we have is the legitimacy of the 1990 election and our ability to impose some of the economic restrictions on the country.

So when you say we decrease some of our pressuring tactic, why don't you tell the regime to decrease some of the pressuring on us?

**Ikenberry:** Great, well done, and then we'll take a couple more and then we'll switch to the panel. And just identify yourself and we'll go from there.

**Questioner:** I'm from the State Department, and I'm not a Burma expert, so I do actually have a point of information I'd like to have. It's hard these days to think about truth but I would like to know the extent to which our

panel believes it is actually true what the generals are saying in terms of the country spinning out of control or ethnic control should they use power? And I think this is a vital question given what is happening throughout the region right now.

**Ikenberry:** Very good, and very patiently this, just identify yourself, just a quick question.

**Questioner:** No need to introduce myself to Ma Thanegi, because I was in the same cellblock as Ma Thanegi for 12 months in prison. Now I'm a student in Boston. I would like to ask two questions. [Speaks in Burmese.]

[Translator] Let me translate it. There is no freedom of expression, people cannot talk about politics openly in Burma, even in some cases outside Burma, because if they do they will be interrogated and detained. So won't you be in danger when you go back to Burma because you talk about politics so openly?

**Ikenberry:** Second question?

[Translator] But when people are taken, forced to work without pay and without knowing where they will be taken to, is that Burmese culture?

**Ikenberry:** Ma Thanegi, why don't you see what you can do with those questions?

**Ma Thanegi:** Okay, okay. With regards to *Myanmar Times*, we do go through censorship. I get the paper, certainly every week, and I read through it and I know how it works. I'm a freelance but I know the young people who work there and I know that we try to push for press freedom but sometimes my stuff, other people's stuff, gets censored. But we try and sometimes it gets through.

And you were saying something about the government being terrorists, and that's your right to think whatever you want to think of the government, of me, I don't have anything to say about it, that's your right, I think.

And about the forced labor issues, the ILO representatives were recently in the country and they just left and they will be giving out a report soon. I don't know what it's going to be, but as far as I know, they had freedom to move about in the country, as far as I know, I'm sorry, I did not really focus on what they were doing.

And yes, the focus of the ban on imports, saying that the President has to prove and certify that forced labor was not being used in the production, it is something like the accusation that you are guilty until proven innocent, and that I find very strange in a country like the United States.

And another—oh, the dissidents power to put pressure on the government. I understand very well that you are bitter against the government and you want to put pressure for change, but all I'm saying is please, don't use the people for that. I don't know what other choices you have, but certainly, please don't hold the people hostage.

And for me to tell the regime, I am nobody, they are not going to listen to me! And as for the political talks, by now I know how to put my words in a certain way so that I will not get into trouble. Maybe they will ask me, but hopefully I will still have this ability to walk the fine line between the crocodiles and tigers.

And the forced labor issue, yes, certainly you know that community labor, villages coming out to build a bridge, that is culture, but with the forced labor question, I think the ILO will make its report.

**Ikenberry:** Very well done, those were a lot of questions. We're going to let our discussants have a few minutes to add their reflections and then we'll be wrapping up.

**Steinberg:** There are three questions here that I'd just like to address very, very quickly. One is, would the minorities spin out of control; that was the question, as the military claims.

The military are in a time warp. They believe 40 years ago, when a lot of the minorities wanted independence that this situation still exists. It doesn't exist; it's quite changed. They have destroyed every other institution in the society that might have held things together and their distribution of power means that without military repression, unless they do something very, very different from what they've been proposing, it could happen. But I think this is a product of their own doing. U Nu had a system that didn't really work well but it did, basically, keep the country together for a certain period. But this is, as I say, the most intractable problem facing the country.

Secondly, on journalists and freedom of the press. I told a military intelligence guy, you have the worst newspapers in the world bar none. And he said you're right but it's your fault. I said it's my fault? He said it's American's fault. Why is it American's fault? He said, well you cut us off so where do we train these guys, we train them in China and what do you expect anyway? I said that's cute, it's not accurate but it's cute.

Third, on people can't talk. This is a real issue and it was a real issue in the BSPP. I knew a guy on the executive committee of the Socialist Party, a military man who said we devised a system where we would have feedback from the people, we would go back to the provinces, we'd talk to people and they would tell us their problems, we'd come back and change policies. It didn't work. He said people wouldn't tell us, and it was the feedback system that failed, socialism didn't fail. And I said under your military system, it is impossible, the climate of fear is so pervasive that nobody is going to talk and it's inherent in this kind of system. And I'll stop there.

**Joseph:** I think any of us in this room could probably answer the question as well as anyone else as to whether the country will stay together. I think one thing, which is apparent, is that there's been so little dialogue, both

between the ethnic groups and the military junta and the NLD and also, among the ethnic groups themselves, that it's a very difficult question to answer. My hunch is, or my experience would lead me to believe that most of the ethnic groups, certainly not all of them, but the vast majority are committed to maintaining a unified Burma. And there are two things. One is you maintain the state through repression, which we've seen has been quite successful now for 40 plus years. When you have a 400,000 person military, it's not that difficult to maintain the integrity of the borders of the country.

But the other thing that you do often hear from the ethnic groups themselves is that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi does present a unifying force to them, this is not something that can be lightly dismissed, that she's simply the daughter of General Aung San, and I think if you took her out of the equation, all bets are off. But as long as she's there and as long as the NLD continues to make the right moves and to accommodate, hopefully, their aspirations, I think there is hope for the country to stay together in that sense. But no one knows, those of us who work on the issue and work on ethnic issues, you don't get that much information and the

information you do get is often contradictory. But I think in the end, I hope there is a chance that the country will stay together.

And I also wanted to add one thing. I think we need to keep in context any sort of developments, which we see in Burma. You often read about political prisoners being released and people get very happy that ten political prisoners were released this week, and ten the next, and it adds up to significant numbers, I think there have been 100 plus, maybe 150 political prisoners released in the last year. But if you took the figures that are widely thrown around by Amnesty International and others, that there are well over 1,300 political prisoners, we'd be applauding for the next ten years the release of political prisoners. So I think we really do need to look very carefully at the numbers and the facts and the statistics being thrown out in context.

**Ikenberry:** Well the purpose of the Asian Voices seminar series is to promote dialogue and thanks to a very insightful and distinguished panel and terrific audience participation, I think we did have dialogue tonight. I hope you will join us in thanking our panelists for a very interesting evening. (End)



## About the Panelists

**Main Speaker** **Ms. Ma (Khin Win) Thanegi** is an author, contributing editor with the *Myanmar Times*, and editor of *Enchanting Myanmar* magazine. She worked as the personal assistant to Ms. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from 1988 to 1989, after which she was put under house arrest and imprisoned for three years. Ms. Thanegi was released in 1992 with a suspended sentence of ten years with hard labor. Ma Thanegi studied German and French at the Institute of Foreign Languages, Yangon. She has published *The Illusion of Life: Burmese Marionettes* (White Orchid Press 1994), *The Native Tourist – In Search of Turtle Eggs* (Swiftwinds Books 2000) and an article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. She has also given interviews on CNN and CNBC. She plans to publish *Cities of Gold – Architecture of Old Burma* and *The Thirty Seven Nats*. Ms. Thanegi also is an accomplished painter and had her seventh solo art show in 1998.

**Discussants** **Mr. Brian Joseph** is Program Officer for Asia at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). He has worked on NED's programs in Myanmar (Burma) and other Asian countries since 1995. Mr. Joseph travels regularly to the region to monitor and evaluate current NED grantees, develop future programs and consult with experts in the region. He also serves as Amnesty International USA's country coordinator for India. Mr. Joseph earned his B.A in history from The Colorado College and his M.A in South Asian studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Mr. David I. Steinberg**, Director of Asian Studies, Georgetown University, was previously Distinguished Professor of Korean Studies in its School of Foreign Service. He had been President of the Mansfield Center for Pacific Studies, a representative of The Asia Foundation in Korea, Burma, Hong Kong and Washington, and a member of the Senior Foreign Service, AID, Department of State, in which he also served in Thailand. He was educated at Dartmouth College, Lingnan University (China), Harvard University, and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Mr. Steinberg is the author of *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (2001), nine other books and monographs, and over 80 articles on Korea, Burma and other Asian topics.

**Moderator** **Professor G. John Ikenberry** is the Peter F. Krogh Professor of Geopolitics and Justice in World Affairs at Georgetown University. He is also a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Additionally, he was a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Dr. Ikenberry is the author of numerous publications, including, *State Power and World Markets: The International Political Economy* (forthcoming), *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (2001), and *Reasons of State: Oil Politics and the Capacities of American Government* (1988).