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Editorial

Traditions and Human Rights Practice

Human rights practice requires an appropriate mindset. Human rights, being part of modern ideas, are bound to clash with some of the traditions and customs in any society.

Traditional and customary practices that keep women, minorities, and other marginalized sections of society subject to violence, discrimination and oppression do not deserve protection. Human rights are meant to address these problems.

Traditions and customs inevitably change however. In the present context such change is largely driven by modern practices that have already affected most societies in terms of livelihoods, daily needs (food, clothing, housing, medical care), systems of governance, and technologies. Human rights provide a guide to this inevitable change by maintaining that all human beings, as individuals and as members of the family and community, should enjoy the fruits of modernity as a matter of right.

Human rights likewise ensure that traditions and customs that protect the human being, individually and collectively, are sustained and enhanced.

Human rights practice works within the traditions and customs in any society. It helps maintain (or promote in many cases) a society that is just, democratic and protective of its weakest members. Traditions and customs that appear at odds with the idea of human rights deserve a careful review in a manner that leads to a change of mindset, and eventually practice.

FOCUS Asia-Pacific is designed to highlight significant issues and activities relating to human rights in the Asia-Pacific. Relevant information and articles can be sent to HURIGHTS OSAKA for inclusion in the next editions of the newsletter.

FOCUS Asia-Pacific is edited by Osamu Shiraishi, Director of HURIGHTS OSAKA.

Women's Rights in the Backburner?

*Vanessa Heleta**

Local 'prophets' prophesied 2008 to be a very big political year for Tonga. They are being proven right, so far.

The election of People's and Noble's Representatives in the Parliament took place in the first week of May 2008. Certain candidates, during the campaign period, said that they wanted change to take place in 2008, a move against the Standing Order of Tonga's Parliament that once a bill was passed, it could not be discussed again. The Parliament passed last year a law providing for political reforms to take place in 2010.

The election results came out last week with not even half of the registered voters voting. There are three thousand new voters registered since the last general election of 2005 but the voting dropped from fifty per cent at the last election to forty-eight per cent this time around.

Who is being represented in this recent election then? More than half of the population of Tonga is younger than thirty-five years. So whose rights are being represented and whose rights will not be fulfilled? What about the rights and voices of women and children?

Interviews with male candidates before the election revealed that issues about the rights of women and children (considered as marginal rights) were in the backburner. Candidates said that "...there are other more pressing issues like the political reform, economic development, and women and children issues will follow."

2008 is also the election year with the highest number of women-candidates. But why is it that not a single woman-candidate got elected? Even though some of the women-candidates are highly educated and capable, the social and cultural attitudes are still very much rooted in the traditions of the tiny kingdom.

The reign of her late Majesty, Queen Salote Tupou III, was a significant period because she amended the Constitution in 1951 to grant women the right to vote and stand as candidates. From the time the women were given this opportunity, only four women had been voted into Parliament as People's Representatives. This was started by Princess Si'ilikutapu (1975 -1977), followed by Papiloa Foliaki (1978-1980), 'Ofa Fusitu'a (1993-1995) and Lepolo Taunisila (2005-2007). It was only in 2006 that a woman was appointed for the first time as Cabinet Minister, 'Alisi Taumoepeau as Minister of Justice.

Mele 'Amanaki, Secretary for the Public Servant Association was one of the eight women-candidates who stood for the recent election. She believes that the election results show that people think that political reform is the most important issue, which she herself campaigned for as her major issue. "The voting results indicate the decisionmaking power within the family. The majority of women voted for whoever their husbands vote for. The husbands make the decision on who the members of the family are going to vote for," she said.

'Alisi Pone, a retired teacher who ran for election for the second time, said that

> The reason why a woman did not get elected was the women themselves. Firstly, women are in denial. They don't believe in themselves and [were] always putting each other down. Secondly, it's because of discrimination. Many women compare us with men and think that we are not good enough or not capable of becoming a politician. But I go in not as a female; I don't care about

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> my womanhood. I go in as a human being and I believe in equal entitlement.

The former Director of Friendly Island Human Rights and Pro-Democracy Movement, 'Akanete Lauti, who also stood for election thinks that the seventy-one candidates competing for nine seats is far too many. The results showed that people trust the candidates to push for political reform. She said:

> I also have a personal hunch that there is discrimination against women in Tonga. I believe Tonga is not ready to embrace women in the political arena and I hope one day we will [be able to] jump [over] that hurdle. The saddest thing is women themselves are not supportive of us.

The Electoral Supervisor Officer, Pita Vuki from the Prime Minister's Office, stated that women candidates should review their campaign strategy in order to increase the votes they get.

The second woman former Member of Parliament (1978-80), Papiloa Foliaki, observed that based on the results of the 2008 election there was a need to educate the Tongan women. She said, "I think we need to analyze why there is no woman in Parliament. The role of mothers needs to be heard in the house." She believed that women who were prepared to stand for election should be capable to cope with the pressure, have confidence and be competent. "I don't believe that we should get a woman to represent women but to represent [the] family, every member as a whole," she said.

Tonga is one of the three Pacific countries yet to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Some Members of Parliament (MPs) attribute the very slow process of ratification to "Tongan women already [having] a high rank (fahu system) in the society." But how many women enjoy the privileges brought by this high rank? Due to the shift to a more commercially-driven society the fahu system is no longer as strong an institution as it was in the past. MPs need to be educated that these privileges are only honorific not a right in itself!

The composition of the new Parliament is also worrying lots of people.

In the last Parliament, seven members of the people's representatives were from the pro-democracy movement with only two outside of it. After last week's election, the pro-democracy movement lost two seats. A new member was with the movement before the election but it is still unknown whether he will stay with the movement or not. Why is this worrying lots of people? Will a loss of two pro-democracy members have that much effect?

The agenda put out by the pro-democracy movement before the election somehow now looks shaky as far as the support of fellow People's Representatives and the unknown support of Nobles' Representatives (who returned six of the incumbent members) are concerned. The Speaker of the House lost his seat.

A noted failure in this election is the loss of a female Representative of the People from the northernmost islands group of the Niuas. Lepolo Taunisila, the only female representative of the area in the last Parliament, lost her seat. "I think the people still do not understand the importance of having a female inside Parliament. There are some issues that only women can push like CEDAW. It's a pity that people overlook the qualities of a woman and tend to focus on her personal life. This is one of the major problems - people have higher [standard for judging] women than for men," she said.

This is followed by the view of the elected male candidates to leave women's and children's rights in the backburner "until later."

The dilemma is whether or not the reform, or "change" as the pro-democracy movement calls it, will take place this year or in 2010.

Even though Tonga is getting closer to democracy, the rights of women are still ignored to a large extent. This is due to negative social and cultural attitudes toward women's participation in politics and decision-making processes.

The government's lack of political will to address this issue largely contributes to the slow progress of women's participation in politics and decision-making processes as a whole. A clear evidence is the under-represented level of women in the decision-making levels of the public sector.

Women in Tonga are so inexperienced in politics that the majority of registered women-voters do not vote for other women. The question is: why do women act in this way towards other women? The survey conducted by 'Ofa Gutteinbeil Likiliki of the Advance Women's Political Representation in Forum Island Countries among two hundred fifty women shows that women are more judgmental of other women when it comes to promotion at work, allocating positions in the community and churches, and even at the secondary school where female students compete with other female students.

During our Voters Education Program community meetings before the election some women said that they do not vote for a woman-candidate because they do not want another woman to be above them. This clearly shows that women are their worst enemies. This is an attitude that has slowed down the progress in of women in Tonga towards equality.

It is a wonder if we are trying to eliminate discrimination against women in a male-dominated society, or working to eliminate discrimination among women themselves? Some men said that "only women can sort out the problem themselves and it's a woman thing."

The eradication of these negative social and cultural attitudes toward women in politics can only happen by working together. As Papiloa Foliaki said "There is still a lot of work to be done - more education to change our attitude among us women."

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Additional Information on Tonga

People

Tonga's population lives on forty of its one hundred sixty-nine islands. More than half (64,000) of the people live on the main island of Tongatapu and half of these (34,000) live in the capital Nuku'alofa. Education and work attracted many Tongans to live overseas. Over 40,000 Tongans live in New Zealand, and more than 10,000 in Australia and many in the United States and Canada.

Culture and identity

Tonga has a complex social structure broken into three tiers: the king, the nobles, and the commoners. Each group has obligations and responsibilities to the other groups. Status and rank play a powerful role in personal relationships, even within families.

Economy

As Tonga becomes more connected to the world the traditional patterns of social security are challenged and landlessness and unemployment are major problems, especially among young people. A substantial part of the country's income is from foreign aid and money sent home by Tongans employed overseas.

Government

Tonga has a hereditary constitutional monarchy.

Source: Global Education Website, http://globaleducation.edna.edu.au/

Youth in the Solomon Islands

*Elwin Talo and Carol Pitisopa**

Youth[1] in the Solomon Islands make up about twenty-nine per cent of the total population.[2] They consist of thirty-six per cent of the urban population and about twenty-seven per cent of the population in rural areas.[3] Youth in the Solomon Islands face a lot of issues. But this article focuses on two main issues: the commercial sexual exploitation of children, and youth and decision-making.

Issues

1.Commercial sexual exploitation of children

An emerging issue in the Solomon Islands is the commercial sexual exploitation of children. A report[4] carried out by the Christian Care Centre (CCC) of the Church of Melanesia in the Arosi Region of Makira Province, Solomon Islands, found cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children in an area where logging activities took place. Such exploitation included child prostitution with those between the ages of eleven and nineteen. According to the findings in that study young girls were taken to the logging camps, some to work, and later lured into sexual relations and early marriages with those working in the camps.

The findings in this study are not new. They are similar to an earlier study[5] undertaken by the CCC with assistance from the Regional Rights Resource Team in 2004.

The findings in these reports highlight a human rights issue that affects the rights of these young girls.

2.Decision making

In a society where the leadership structure is based on seniority, youth in the Solomon Islands face a lot of challenges when trying to voice their concerns or when participating in decision-making processes.

The Youth in Parliament Pilot Project 2006 is an example of the push by youth to participate at national level politics. The implementer of the project, the Solomon Islands Youth for Change Team (SIYC Team), is made up of young people with a "youth for change concept" that reinforces inclusive, youth-friendly, informal, and non-bureaucratic approach to youth development.[6] The rationale for the project included the need for the young generation to be represented in important decision-making levels seeing that the Solomon Islands population is young. Further, the Constitution provides that Solomon Islanders from the age of twenty-one may stand for elections.[7]

The aims of the project are the following: to empower young people in the social-economic and political paradigm of all levels of the state; to recognize the contribution of suppressed and marginalized population particularly women and youth in the political scene; to ensure that youth issues are adequately and properly addressed through a young voice in the national parliament; and to raise the issue that young people's issues should not be taken lightly.

The candidate who represented the youth contested in the 2006 elections. Out of twenty contestants the SIYC candidate polled 10th place with two hundred two votes. Despite this, the SIYC gained recognition by youth stakeholders, were consulted by the Electoral Commission in the 2006 National General Election Assessment, and the idea of a home grown youth parliament gained momentum.[8]

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One of the challenges faced by youth during the lead up to the election was the competition against senior political figures. Other challenges included criticisms and mockery from the public in a society where leadership is based traditionally on seniority; inexperience; the perception by others that the move by youth was a political move engineered by some politicians and organizations; the perception that it was a form of youth rebellion; and that it was a short-sighted undertaking by young people which was unacceptable to the society.

Despite these, the SIYC remains committed to young people and its members aspire to lobby political parties to include a youth wing, and to lobby for legislative reform to allow for the direct representation of women and youth in the national parliament.

3.Other issues

A study[9] carried out in 2003 showed that the main areas of need as highlighted by youth and communities were learning opportunities, livelihoods and income generation, community participation, youth activities and sports, and reproductive health.[10] The study also found that many issues that affect youth such as education opportunities, unemployment, and youth participation in the community were those that had been identified previously,[11] but were still faced by youth even today. This implies that youth needs are not being addressed, or not adequately addressed by the relevant authorities.

Government policy on youth

It should be noted that the policy goal for youth of the current Solomon Islands government, the Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement Government (CNURA), is to:

> To uphold and promote the rights of...young people...through effective partnership and strong commitment, thereby creating equal opportunities for all to advance the wellbeing of this nation.[12]

Based on this policy statement the CNURA government's expected outcomes include a "synthesized national and international policy development and policy initiatives for women, youth and children, ensuring suitability, adaptability and streamlining of these synergies to our local needs and situation"[13] and "conditions enabling young people to actively participate in all aspects of nation building and development, including decision-making at all levels."[14]

Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Solomon Islands acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995. The CRC's definition of a child overlaps with the national definition of youth. This overlap makes the CRC provision on a human rights approach to young people and decision-making very relevant to the Solomon Islands context.

Article 12 of the CRC states:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

It is hoped that the Solomon Islands government would take actions that fulfil its policy goal and statements and its obligations under CRC so that the needs and rights of youth are recognized, promoted and protected.

Conclusion

As identified in the Youth Report[15], the needs of the youth include being given the opportunity to engage in income generating activities and other activities to

keep them occupied. They should be given the opportunity for better education and employment. They would also like to be engaged in decision-making processes on various issues, at all levels.

Despite being a party to various international human rights conventions, the government still has a long way to go in implementing and realizing the rights instituted in those conventions. It is hoped that the present government will implement its policy of creating an enabling environment for the active participation of youth in nation-building, development and decision-making. After all, as the SIYC theme goes "Youth of Today, Leaders for Today."

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**With assistance from Hugo Hebala*

Endnotes

1. In the Solomon Islands youth are generally referred to as those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine years old and for the purposes of this article this age group is used when discussing youth.
2. *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2005/6: National Report*, Solomon Islands Statistics Office, Department of Finance and Treasury, Honiara, September 2006.
3. See above.
4. Tania Herbert, 2007, *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Solomon Islands: A Report Focusing on the Presence of the Logging Industry in a Remote Region, Honiara, Solomon Islands*, Solomon Islands: Christian Care Centre, Church of Melanesia.
5. Christian Care Centre of the Church of Melanesia and Regional Rights Resource Team (2004), *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Child Sexual Abuse in the Solomon Islands*. Unpublished report. Suva, Fiji: United Nations Children's Fund, Pacific Office.
6. Elwin Talo, "Youth in Parliament Pilot Project 2006" summary of activities.
7. Clause 48, Constitution of Solomon Islands 1978.
8. The youth parliament concept is now in its initial stages with a reference group working with the Youth Division of the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs to establish a Youth Parliament in the country.
9. Hassall and Associates International, 2003, *Youth in Solomon Islands: A Participatory Study of Issues, Needs and Priorities, Final Report.*
10. See above, page 53.
11. See above, page 36.
12. Policy Goal 24 of the Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement Government Policy Statements (CNURA), January 2008. CNURA Translation and Implementation Framework, February 2008
13. Expected Outcome 24.1, CNURA Policy Statement.
14. Expected Outcome 24.3, CNURA Policy Statement.
15. Hassall, *op. cit.*

Additional Information on Solomon Islands

People

The population of Solomon Islands is predominantly Melanesian (about 95%) although there are smaller Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European communities. The Solomon Islanders live in small villages scattered over three hundred forty-seven of its nine hundred twenty-two islands. About 30,000 people live in Honiara, the capital city. There is great variation between the people in each settlement and there is a complex communal customary ownership of the land.

Culture and identity

The social structure is extremely diverse and complex and varies from island to island. Different customs - codes of behavior, systems of land tenure, leadership rules, blends of traditional and world religions, marriage rules and so on - exist throughout the nation. Most communities recognize strong kinship links and obligations with the broad language group.

Government

The Solomon Islands have a parliamentary democracy.

Source: Global Education Website, http://globaleducation.edna.edu.au/

Peace and Environment in the Marshall Islands: Beyond the Rolling Waves of Development

*Chisato Mano**

For the people of Marshall Islands, the ocean and islands are life itself. The people lived their daily lives, traveling to and from islands in small boats and canoes, and taking the fruits of the ocean and islands.

Viewed from above, the Marshall Islands, consisting of twenty-nine atolls in the center of the Pacific Ocean between Guam and Hawaii, are small islands floating on the bright cobalt blue and emerald green sea. Each atoll has over ten islands, and Marshall Islands as a whole has over 1,200 of them. The total land area of all the islands is only one hundred eighty one square kilometer, but the ocean spreads endlessly. In this vast and remote, even by Pacific standards, ocean state, there are currently about 60,000 people.

Looming environmental crisis

The survival of Marshall Islands is under threat. This issue has been raised by non-governmental organizations over the years. In their December 1997 statement issued on the occasion of the 3rd Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 3) held in Kyoto, they asserted that "80% of the Marshall Islands will be underwater in the 21st Century."

In recent years, significant changes in the shorelines and the bleaching of the corals in Marshall Islands have become noticeable. The islanders talk about the changes in the environment, saying, "the corals no longer shine" or "you can't catch fish in the lagoons."

Frequent drought, water shortage and high waves that cause damage in Micronesia (of which Marshall Islands form a part) are attributed to abnormal weather. With only two meters above sea level on the average, the Marshall Islands are vulnerable to changes in tide levels.

An area on the ocean side of Majuro Atoll, the current capital, emits a strange smell. It comes from the only waste dumpsite on the island. Wastes, collected from all over the island in large containers, are simply dumped in this site. Concrete shore-protection walls are there as stopgap measure to prevent the wastes from flowing into the sea, but the pollution of the land and sea as well as damage to the health of the inhabitants are serious.

The sad state of the island filled with non-degradable waste represents the rapid life-style change in the Marshall Islands in the last half century.

The environmental crisis closing in from outside and within the islands is undermining the traditional way of maximizing the limited resources.

Generations of Marshall Islanders have lived in self-sufficiency gathering the fruits of the land (such as coconuts, breadfruits and pandan) as well as that of the sea. But scarred from the unfortunate history of being at the mercy of foreign powers, life on the islands even today remains complex and difficult from pressures beyond their control.

Years under successive foreign powers

While the Pacific islands as a whole share the same experience of suffering, the Marshall Islands in particular suffered from a varied past. It was originally "discovered" by Spain in 1528 during the Age of Great Voyages. Germany acquired the Islands in 1885 and made it its protectorate. Then, after a period of occupation by the Japanese, it came under U. S. rule. In the final days of the Pacific War, while it was under the military occupation of the then Japanese Forces, many islanders came under fire and lost their lives.

Remains of military hardware, dating back from the Pacific war (second World War), litter areas on the islands. On the Imiej Island in the Jaluit atoll, Japanese military airplanes and vehicles are left untouched in over one hundred battle sites.

From 1946 to 1958, sixty-seven nuclear tests were conducted by the United States in the Bikini and Enewetak Atolls. The Bravo hydrogen bomb test on the Bikini Atoll on 1 March 1954 caused volumes of radioactive fallout on the islands and irrevocable environmental pollution. These effects displaced the

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people of Bikini and Enewetak Atolls for half a century.[1]

Marshall Islands stand on the frontlines of arms development.

Recovering the shattered harmony

One of the concrete main roads of Majuro is jammed with cars everyday. The capital has many fine buildings made of corals and cement. It also has a large population of people from other islands looking for education, medical care and work. Many of them suffer from alcoholism, while some commit suicide with no apparent reason.[2] The inhabitants are forced to make a uniform effort in adapting to the image of the "south sea island" that tourists' demand, for the benefit of visiting divers who come looking for beautiful corals.

Some people in the Marshall Islands are trying to rediscover the abundant sea and islands, and their sense of community. They try to recall their myths and history to be passed on to the next generation. They would like to understand the history that led to the shattering of community harmony in the islands. Victims of nuclear tests try to orally pass on to their children and grandchildren the story of their suffering. Every year, the memory of 1 March 1954 nuclear test is recalled on the islands.

Integrity of the environment and peace for the people of the Marshall Islands are not raised in international conferences, neither the "picturesque" images of the islands that reflect the challenges of the human race. But the Marshall Islands people make the effort to recover their own dignity and celebrate their origins in the midst of looming waves of development, to pursue their simple yet strong wish to pass on the beautiful sea and the islands to the next generation. The message from the Marshallese nuclear test victims (called *hibakusha* in Japan) is strong. "We are concerned about the health of our children and grandchildren. Of course it is important that all islands in the Marshall Islands become a safe place. But the world becoming a completely weapons-free place is more important."

In the Marshall Islands and in Japan, we hope to work to recover the wisdom and pride that do not get caught in the chain of development, by each one of us rediscovering our own lives and trying to connect ourselves and the world.

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Endnotes

1. The Nuclear Claims Tribunal awarded compensation to the people of Bikini and Enewetak Atolls in 2001 and 2000 decisions respectively. The Tribunal noted the loss of use of their land as well as the suffering they endured in resettlement areas that could not provide the conditions similar to their previous life in Bikini and Enewetak Atolls. See the website of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal for the full text of their decisions: www.nuclearclaimstribunal.com/

2. A study of youth suicide in Micronesia over three decades shows the high rate of suicide in Marshall Islands, see Donald H. Rubinstein, "Youth Suicide and Social Change in Micronesia," Occasional Papers (December 2002), Kagoshima University Research Center of the Pacific Islands. Also, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has identified youth suicide as one of the serious problems in Marshall Islands, see "Priorities of the People: Hardship in the Marshall Islands" in www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Priorities_Poor/RMI/rmi0500.asp?p=ctryrmi

Social, Economic and Cultural Rights in Burma

*Neil Lawrence**

Human rights violations are an endemic feature of Burmese life. Although the most blatant and highly publicized violations are those committed against adversaries of the country's ruling junta - particularly the National League for Democracy (NLD) and a host of ethnic resistance groups, as well as student activists and members of the Buddhist monastic community - there is scarcely a sector of society or an area of life which is not adversely affected by the regime's disregard for fundamental human rights.

Last year's crackdown on monk-led protests and an attack on supporters of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi nearly five years ago left many dead and many more in detention. However, it is commonplace among Burmese dissidents to refer to their entire country as a prison, which many have been forced to flee to preserve their freedom and their lives. But the reality they are describing is not merely their own personal circumstances. For ordinary people, too, material and spiritual survival in Burma is a daunting struggle.

The country's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) exerts almost total control over social institutions and the economy, and is obsessive in its efforts to circumscribe expressions of cultural values. Its involvement in each of these spheres - social, economic and cultural - has served only to strengthen its hold on power, and has been deleterious both to the lives of individual citizens and to the country as a whole.

Social Rights in Burma

There are few social institutions in Burma which are not subject to some degree of control by the military. Even ordinary interaction in such venues as teashops is affected by the presence of low-level informers to the SPDC's military intelligence apparatus, whose role, apart from collecting information, is to instill in the minds of Burmese a habit of extreme circumspection about overt expressions of political sentiment.

In formal institutions, such as schools and hospitals, the degree of control is nearly absolute. Educational institutions, insofar as they are available and affordable, are especially subject to severe restrictions, as they are regarded by the regime as potential hotbeds of dissent because of the historical role of students in the country's independence and pro-democracy movements. Consequently, teachers are required to join the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a junta-backed mass-based organization which has been implicated in violent attacks on opposition figures.[1]

The curriculum at public schools is confined to areas which are regarded as non-threatening to the SPDC's agenda of promoting a narrowly interpreted notion of national unity. However, many students do not receive even this rudimentary form of education, due to poverty or isolation in underdeveloped rural areas, as well as to government budgets which typically spend a vastly larger portion of the nation's wealth on the military than on education.[2]

When it is not able to control students, the regime does not hesitate to shut down educational institutions. Throughout most of the 1990s, almost all of Burma's universities were closed to prevent student protests.[3] Since then, new campuses have been designed to isolate students from each other and from urban centers.[4] Despite the reopening of universities, however, graduates face limited opportunities for employment,

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forcing many to seek a subsistence income through self-employment or to go abroad, often to work illegally in other countries in the region.

Girl selling watermelon (www.asiaphoto.de)

The lack of adequate healthcare has had even more far-reaching effects than the limited access to education. Here, again, neglect is coupled with an overarching preoccupation with control to produce results which have been devastating to the country. Spending on healthcare as a percentage of the total budget is among the lowest in the world.[5] The strain this places on the healthcare system is barely mitigated by privately funded facilities, which often operate on a charitable basis, or by international aid.

International aid to Burma is problematic for a number of reasons. One is that the democratic opposition has called on the international community to refrain from offering means of support to the ruling junta, although this position has been softened in recent years in regards to efforts to address the country's health care crisis.[6] But the problem most often cited by relief agencies is the lack of cooperation, or outright interference, from the SPDC.[7] The result has been that efforts to contain diseases such as HIV/AIDS have met with limited success. In a country where poverty has fueled a thriving sex trade and widespread intravenous drug use, the overall impact of a failing health care system on the well-being of the country and its people has been inestimable.[8]

Economic Rights in Burma

The current regime seized power in the wake of massive nationwide protests that were triggered, in part, by a failing economy which grew drastically worse due to a sudden demonetization of large denominations of the national currency, the *kyat*, in 1987. Similarly, twenty years later, the SPDC raised the price of fuels, in some cases fivefold, without regard for the impact of their decision on the general population. This is relevant because it demonstrates that, despite the supposed liberalization of the country's formerly socialist economy, the military remains very much in control of Burma's national assets. And it also shows that the vicious cycle of economic mismanagement leading to hardship and protests, which in turn lead to brutal crackdowns and further consolidation of military control, is far from broken twenty years after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

Burma's economy operates on several very different planes. In terms of natural resources, the country possesses wealth that is the envy of the region. Thus extractive industries, such as gem mining, logging and the exploitation of offshore natural gas fields are firmly in the hands of the military and the cronies of top leaders, and, to a lesser extent, armed ceasefire groups which have been granted limited economic concessions in exchange for "joining the legal fold."[9]

In many cases, these activities have been directly linked to specific human rights abuses. For instance, the construction of pipelines used to transport natural gas to Thailand from the Yadana and Yetagun natural gas fields has involved forced labor and forced relocation of local villagers (although the regime's international business partners, including Total of France and the US energy giant Unocal, have denied direct responsibility for the actions of the Burmese military in these areas).[10] Investors from China - the

regime's most important international ally - dominate the trade in gems and teak, in close partnership with regional military commanders.[11] Logging, which has resulted in massive deforestation, is carried out without any attempt to limit the environmental impact on surrounding populations.[12] Meanwhile, the exploitation of labor in the gem mining industry is closely associated with intravenous drug use, which is fueled by the nearby cultivation and trade of opium.[13]

Roadside tailor (www.asiaphoto.de)

The poor are not the only victims of the SPDC's control-oriented approach to economic management. Entrepreneurs who do not enjoy high-level military connections - or whose military connections have been purged in occasional attempts by the top generals to consolidate their dominance - have also been subject to the junta's arbitrary approach to economic management. In 1998, for instance, Yaung Chi Oo Trading, a Singapore-based company owned by a Burmese national, lost its US $6.3 million investment in the Mandalay Beer Co., Ltd. after the company was abruptly nationalized.[14] Many smaller investors have reported similar experiences, which are often prompted by the desire of powerful figures to eliminate competition or simply seize control of profitable businesses.[15]

Cultural Rights in Burma

As noted above, some ethnic ceasefire groups have enjoyed a degree of economic autonomy in their areas of influence in exchange for ending hostilities with the regime. However, cultural autonomy for non-Burman ethnic minorities remains anathema to the country's nationalistic military leaders, who recognize only cosmetic differences among Burma's multitude of ethnic nationalities.

Education, which is woefully under-funded throughout the country, is in a particularly poor state in areas where most students belong to ethnic minorities. Children are not permitted to study in their native language, even when there are no Burmese-language schools provided by the government. In Mon State, for instance, there has been a concerted campaign to close Mon-language schools since a ceasefire agreement between the regime and the New Mon State Army was signed in 1995.[16] In areas where hostilities have not ceased, efforts to eradicate any evidence of a distinct ethnic identity regularly escalate to the level of atrocity, as in the Karen and Shan States, where villagers suspected of harboring sympathies towards ethnic insurgent armies are routinely subjected to rape, summary execution, and use as forced porters and human minesweepers by the Burmese Army.[17]
The denial of basic cultural rights is not confined to ethnic minorities. In urban areas, where there is a higher rate of literacy, access to information is severely restricted. All non-state publications are heavily censored, and are required to publish propaganda attacking the democratic opposition.[18] Journalists and academics are frequently given lengthy prison sentences for disclosing information regarded as damaging to the state.[19]

Conclusion

The situation described here would seem to indicate that there is an almost total absence of basic human rights in Burma. Indeed, some argue that the country's cultural values preclude a rights-based political orientation. However, there is abundant evidence that

Burmese people are deeply aware of their rights. For instance, since the International Labour Organisation was permitted to open a liaison office in Rangoon in February 2007, it has received numerous complaints of forced labor and abduction of children for the purpose of military recruitment, despite the threat of reprisal by the authorities.[20]

Last year's crackdown on monk-led protests has demonstrated that, despite its self-appointed quasi-monarchical role as defender of the Buddhist faith, the SPDC has acted almost exclusively in its own interests. Geopolitical factors - chiefly, the ability of the regime to rely on the economic and military support of China and other regional neighbors which have little interest in protecting human rights at home, much less in Burma - explain the country's current situation far better than any supposed cultural predisposition to authoritarianism. Although human rights can scarcely be said to exist in Burma today, the continuing insistence of its citizens on a more equitable and accountable form of governance serves as evidence that the current situation is not the country's natural condition.

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Endnotes

1. "The USDA now has a reported 23 million members nationwide. Public servants, local officials and even university students have been coerced into joining the organization." See Human Rights Watch, "Burma: Violent Attacks on Rights Activists" (24 April 2007).
2. "Analysts have estimated that about 50% of the central government's budget has been spent on defense since 1988." See Asia Times Online, "Myanmar's junta fears US invasion " (28 April 2006).
3. For much of the past decade, Burma's universities and high schools have been silent." See BBC News On-line, "Burma's Lost Generation" (14 August 1998).
4. "[Campuses] had been shifted from the capital to paddy-field locations and next to army bases to prevent them from becoming hotbeds of resistance." See The Straits Times (Singapore), "Myanmar university re-openings "a sham" (available in "Burma Related News --Aug 23, 2000").
5. "Burma's government spends least [in the world on health care], at 0.5 percent of GDP." See Progressive Policy Institute, "Almost Half of All World Health Spending is in the United States" (17 January 2007).
6. "The position of the National League for Democracy (NLD) on humanitarian aid has been described by some analysts as remaining ambiguous." See Refugees International, "Ending the Waiting Game: The Aid Dilemma" (2004).
7. "[NGO] project staff is so limited that they must be accompanied by at least [one] responsible official of the government." See Burma Issues Weekly, "Burma to create a body in charge for NGO's" (16 February 2006).
8. "[Decades] of repressive rule, civil war and poor governance in [Burma] have contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other infectious diseases there." See UC Berkeley News, "Burma junta faulted for rampant diseases."
9. "[Many ceasefire] groups [have been] co-opted by State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime (formerly SLORC) through offer of economic (e.g. timber) concessions." See International Crisis Group, "Conflict history: Myanmar/Burma" (updated 22 September 2004).
10. "In 2000, a United States federal judge found there was clear evidence that Unocal knew that the military government held a poor human rights record prior to joining the energy project." See EarthRights International, "Another Yadana: The Shwe Natural Gas Pipeline Project" (27 August 2004).
11. "'For local people, it just gets more difficult,' said a community leader in Kachin state, in Northeastern Burma, bordering China, where Chinese logging has stripped mountains bare. ... 'The commanders sell our natural resources and our local people get nothing.'" See The Washington Post, "Corruption Stains the Timber Trade" (1 April 2007).
12. "Forests that for centuries provided the livelihood and cultural milieu for many ethnic minority peoples are

being destroyed at an alarming rate exceeding that of Amazonian rainforests." See Burma Project, Open Society Institute, "Country in Crisis: Environment" (updated October 2005).

13. "The 2003 UNAIDS epidemic update says intravenous drug use and commercial sex are responsible for most HIV/ AIDS infections [in Burma]. It says migrant workers, especially gem miners and loggers, are becoming a major conduit for the spread of the virus." See ADB (Asian Development Bank) Review, "Fatal Attraction" (May-June 2004).

14. "The SPDC forcibly took over the business with all its assets and ejected all personnel, with no compensation. Yaung Chi Oo's bank accounts were frozen and the owner was threatened with arrest." See Burma Lawyers' Council, Legal Issues on Burma Journal No. 9 (August 2001).

15. "Around 1994-95, the car import market in Burma grew dramatically because of an increased demand fueled by a mini-economic boom. And this growth sector caught the attention of many generals and their relatives. " See The Irrawaddy, "Used Car Salesman" (1 January 2001).

16. "[Since] 1998 there have been reports of government and military officials forbidding even Mon community schools from using the Mon language as a medium of instruction, despite the NMSP's initial successful efforts in building up this system of private schools." See Minority Rights Group International, "Myanmar/Burma: Mon"

17. "There were new reports of 'atrocity demining,' with civilians used as human minesweepers in front of Army troops." See Landmine Monitor, "Burma (Myanmar)" (2004)

18. "The military government has constantly hounded Burma's journalists during the three months that have gone by since 27 September, the day that Japanese video reporter Kenji Nagai was murdered by a soldier in Rangoon." See Reporters sans Frontieres, "Three months of quiet repression, arrests, censorship and propaganda" (26 December 2007).

19. "[Journalist U Win Tin] has been sentenced three times since 1989, each time while imprisoned. U Win Tin was most recently sentenced in March 1996 to seven years imprisonment. He was penalized for communicating with the United Nations." See Amnesty International, "Human Rights Defender Turns 75 in Prison."

20. "Till last September, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) office in military-ruled Burma had received few complaints about children being forced to join the army. But that is no longer the case." See Inter Press Service, "RIGHTS-BURMA: Back to Child Recruitments " (18 March 2008).

Additional Information on Burma

People

Most observers estimate the total population to be around fifty million persons.

There are eight major ethnic groups in Burma, each comprising part of the total population. Karen and Shan groups comprise about 10% each of the total population, while Akha, Chin, Danu, Indian, Kachin, Karenni, Kayan, Kokang, Lahu, Mon, and Naga groups comprise the rest.

Economy

The economy is dominated by agriculture, which accounts for over fifty-nine percent of the gross domestic product and employs about two-thirds of the labor force. Rice is the main product. Production declined after independence but increased during the late 1970s and early 1980s because of the introduction of high-yielding varieties, fertilizer, and irrigation. Since that time, production has barely kept pace with population growth, and Burma, once the world's leading exporter of rice, is barely able to meet the subsistence needs of its own population. It continues to export some rice to earn foreign exchange. The production of narcotics from poppies and other sources is widespread in the northern highlands, and Burma is the world's leading supplier of opiates. Foreign investment is concentrated in "extractive" industries - US$142.6 million in oil and gas out of a total of $158.3 million in 2004/2005, compared to $35 million in 2005/2006 out of a total $35.7 million.

Government

A military junta has been ruling the country despite general elections in 1990.

Source: US Campaign for Burma, http://uscampaignforburma.org/aboutburma/facts-figures.html; ALTSEAN-Burma, http://www.altsean.org; http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Burma.html

HURIGHTS OSAKA Activities

HURIGHTS OSAKA participated in the 2008 One World Festival held on 2-3 February 2008 at the International House Osaka. The One World Festival is a "Festival of international cooperation connected with the world to feel, to touch, and to help each other"[1] with the participation of major non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government institutions related to Japanese official development assistance (ODA) programs, United Nations agencies, educational institutions, and private companies in the Kansai region. It is held annually in Osaka city.

One World Festival includes various "programs related to international understanding or cooperation ... presented through exhibitions, symposiums, an ODA town meeting, field reports, discussions on international understanding and development education, an environmental experience corner and much more."[2]

HURIGHTS OSAKA organized a panel discussion on Burma. The panel discussion, entitled "Democratization in Burma and its Relation with Us" was held on 3 February 2008 in cooperation with Burmese Relief Center-Japan (BRCJ).

The panelists included Mr. Yuzo Uda, a photojournalist who has been working in Burma for many years, Mr. Tetu Hakoda, Co-Director of BurmaInfo.org, Toshihiro Kudo, Director, South Asian Studies Group II, Area Studies Center of the Institute of Developing Economies.

Mr. Uda reported on the background and the incidents of use of force by the Burmese authorities in cracking down on peaceful demonstrators in the summer of 2007. He based his presentation on his field research and on videos showed by the Al Jazeera television news network.

Mr. Hakoda gave a presentation entitled "Background of the 2007 Democratization Uprising and the Task for Us." He criticized the indecisiveness of the Japanese government in responding to the situation in Burma at that time. He said that the government did not send a strong message to the Burmese junta after it used force on the peaceful protesters. He also said that the Japanese government has an obscure aid policy, and has not provided aid to Burma refugees living in Japan.

Mr. Kudo's presentation entitled "2007 Myanmar Turmoil - Economic Background and Perspective for the Future," explained the economic background of the peaceful protest demonstrations, the economic base of the Burmese Junta, and the U.S. economic sanctions against Burma and their effect.

The participants, on the other hand, raised several questions relating to the possibilities of a tripartite political dialogue (between the pro-democracy movement, ethnic minority groups, and the Burmese Junta), the expected Japanese aid to Burma, and how can Japan be active involved in the country.

In collaboration with the Asia Volunteer Center (AVC), HURIGHTS OSAKA also organized a concert featuring Ms. Yuko Arakaki from Okinawa who played *sanshin*, a traditional Okinawan string instrument, and sang several Okinawan songs. Okinawa is a prefecture composed of the southernmost islands in Japan where most U.S. military facilities are concentrated.

For further information about the panel discussion and other activities, please contact HURIGHTS OSAKA.

Endnotes

1. See One World Festival, in International House Osaka website, http://www.ih-osaka.or.jp/i.house/english/010/one-world-festival-2007.html
2. Ibid.

HURIGHTS OSAKA CALENDAR

The full report on the multi-country research on educational policies and human rights awareness of secondary students has been published. The book entitled Educational Policies and Human Rights Awareness - Japan, the Philippines, India and Sri Lanka covers the analysis of educational policies in the four countries and survey of human rights awareness in Japan, the Philippines, and India. The book is available at Academic Excellence in New Delhi, India (visit: www.indianacademicpublisher.com/fulldetails.asp?id=356).

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HURIGHTS OSAKA, inspired by the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, formally opened in December 1994. It has the following goals: 1) to promote human rights in the Asia-Pacific region; 2) to convey Asia-Pacific perspectives on human rights to the international community; 3) to ensure inclusion of human rights principles in Japanese international cooperative activities; and 4) to raise human rights awareness among the people in Japan in meeting its growing internationalization. In order to achieve these goals, HURIGHTS OSAKA has activities such as Information Handling, Research and Study, Education and Training, Publications, and Consultancy Services.

HURIGHTS OSAKA

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