

The New Light of Myanmar

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Volume XXI, Number 229

14th Waning of Tazaungmon 1375 ME

Sunday, 1 December, 2013

President attends the forum on peaceful nation-building and the role of civil society

Nay Pyi Taw, 30 Nov—“It is important and essential to restore the long-weakened trust between the government and the people, between institution and the people, and between citizens,” said President U Thein Sein in his address to the forum on peaceful nation-building and the role of civil society held at the Diamond Jubilee Hall of Yangon University in Yangon this morning.

The forum which is aimed at enabling the government and the civil society to effectively carry out Myanmar’s reforms took place at the Diamond Jubilee Hall at 9 am. It was attended by the Union ministers, the Yangon Region Chief Minister, the deputy ministers, local and foreign NGOs, Inter Faith Groups and over 100 civil society organizations.

The President said: This is the time our administration is undertaking all necessary reforms with the aim to turn the country into a new peaceful and developed nation. In so doing, we have regularly consulted with the general public. As we continue to undertake more reforms, civil society organizations will need to play an increasingly crucial role in state and peace building activities. The government is holding this civil society forum primarily because it wishes to intensify its cooperation with civil society organizations.

I would first like to say that the government takes the role played by civil society organizations in the ongoing reform process in Myanmar seriously. The cooperation of civil society and community based organizations is vital in building a peaceful country amidst difficulties and challenges, he said.

The past experience of our country has raised mutual suspicion and distrust among members of our society. This situation has posed a major challenge to our effort to sustain and intensify the current political reforms, and implement a new political process. It is true that other political forces like the Hluttaw, political parties and associations, business enterprises and associations have worked very hard on the successful implementation of reforms and the implementation of the new political process. However, I believe that in the process of undertaking reforms and building the new political process, civil society organizations can and will do more than others in enhancing trust among the general public, he continued.

This is because only civil society organizations can accomplish political, economic and social objectives by adopting society based approaches and build social capital with a clear conscience and in good faith.

Here, I would like to comment on some important attributes of social capital. The problems one finds in low trust societies are that: people give priority mainly to their own self-interests; they

negatively portray other people's good work to suit their own interests; they refuse to accept new ideas and values that can help them to have vibrant lives; they hold on to the extreme conservative ideas; they are always negative and pessimistic about the weaknesses of other people's effort to develop the country; they try to gain the upper hand over others by not sharing information with them. Such problems hamper finding solutions through transparent and just negotiation. Such problems also prevent society from achieving national unity and this in turn subjects the people to one cycle of underdevelopment after another.

To emerge from the environment of suspicion and darkness, societies where the above-mentioned attributes are present must promote trust building. In addressing the challenges, there will be a need to build a vibrant society, and an economic system that guarantees development for all, must begin by strengthening conflict resolution practices, and share the accurate and reliable information on which these practices can be based. Then, only if there is collective problem solving, a healthy debate based on accurate facts, a commitment to trust one another, and taking responsibility for one's action will an open and unified society emerge. If we can adopt these practices, Myanmar society can pull itself from underdevelopment on to a road to development.

Since it took office, the government has moved determinedly on a three pronged process to achieve political and economic reforms, as well as a sustainable and lasting peace in the country so that Myanmar can emerge from underdevelopment under development and take its rightful place as a developed, democratic nation in the region and the world. The government has relaxed political control in stages, and we are now seeing gradual progress down this correct path of reform. These reforms have introduced a new political culture where disagreements are now resolved through dialogue and discussion. We can see that these reforms guarantee further reforms that will take shape after the 2015 general elections. The guarantees strengthen the roots of the democratic system essential for an open and free society.

I would now like to explain reforms of the economy. My government is now putting policies in place for the emergence of a national economic system. In particular, we floated the currency and made it stable, simplifying the previously confusing exchange rates that were hindering trade and economic development. We loosened restrictive trade policies. We reduced unnecessary costs, and prepared the ground for the adoption of sound fiscal policies, and an independent central bank. Additionally, we negotiated the resumption of loans from international institutions, drafted new investment laws, and formed an investment commission. We worked on EITI and related efforts so the majority of our citizens can reap the benefits of economic development while ensuring that the environment is protected.

The success of political and economic reforms depends on achieving internal peace. Therefore, this government invited ethnic armed organizations to participate in national reconciliation-fundamental to achieving peace. If we look at the progress of the peace process, we are now in the final stages of negotiating the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement, drafting a framework for political dialogue, and holding political dialogue. I believe we have reached a point where the successful completion of these final stages is in sight.

Related to political reforms, my government has promoted dissemination of truthful information to the public, freedoms of speech and expression, and freedom of the media, which are so critical to a democratic society.

I seriously believe that if the entire nation, and each and every citizen takes advantage of the opportunities that are now available to us, the reforms will succeed. I make this statement because just like the 1920 student uprising started a national awakening, and rally national consciousness and national unity to achieve independence, I believe we now can similarly rally around our strengths.

He continued that for national reconciliation to occur, we must restore trust between the government and the people, between institutions and the people, and between citizens. To overcome this daunting challenge, the role of civil society in trust building is essential. This is the reason why I come before you today.

I would like to say that civil society and community-based organizations can freely work on political, economic, and social development issues according to their principles and beliefs. However, at present when your organizations are facing a delicate situation, uncertainty or other challenges, I encourage you to avoid confrontational attitudes and instead resolve issues through dialogue. In conclusion, as you find solutions through dialogue, I urge you, in your capacity as an organization or as a private citizen to act in a manner that further strengthens the current political reforms to achieve lasting change.

Later, representatives from CSOs held discussion on development, women's rights, youth sector, peace, inter faith, labour, social organizations, the ASEAN civil society conference, environment and educational organizations.

Afterwards, President U Thein Sein also reviewed their discussion and cordially greeted those present. In the afternoon, the forum was resumed. Topics on "peaceful nation-building and the role of civil society", "the role of CSOs for emergence of national character essential for building up of a peaceful human society" and "the roadmap to the establishment of a peaceful human society" were discussed at today's forum. Later, Union Ministers U Soe Thane and U Aung Min carried out review discussion. The forum came to an end in the evening.—*MNA*
