

Democracy Dialogue

MAKING DEMOCRACY REAL

8 January, 2012

Address sent by Aung San Suu Kyi for the opening of the dialogue

“One of the most frequent questions I am asked these days is that how we will know that we have got to the point that people refer to as ‘no return’ with regard to the process of democratization. I explain that I do not think that there is such a thing as a point of no return. One can always turn back at any time. So what do we look for to let us know that we have succeeded in our quest for democracy? This is a big question. I am not sure that I have all the answers but I think we will know when we get there, when we get to the point that our people do not have to live in fear and democratic practices became a matter of routine for them. How do we get to that point? Not one step at a time but many steps at a time in many different directions.



Democracy is to do with society; it is not just to do with government. So we need to take all kinds of steps in all kinds of directions: politically, socially, educationally, and of course, civil society must be involved, and also the international community. Because Burma is on the verge of a breakthrough, (I say we are on the verge of the breakthrough, we have not yet made the breakthrough) we appreciate the support and the intense attention of our friends. It is very important that the international community, our friends from all over the world keep a very keen eye on the developments in Burma. And we need you also to tell us when you think we have got to the point when we can say we have made it. That of course is not the end of the road. There is never an end to the road of democracy. Once we have achieved political democracy, we have to achieve social democracy; and once we have achieved that, we have to consolidate it to make sure that it is keeping in time with international developments. So the process of democratisation is one without an end as such. It is, in fact, a march towards several doors at the same time.

Making Democracy Real

We in Burma are now at a point when we think we may be able to shape our destiny. That is a great thing, to be able to shape one's own destiny. And for the people of a nation to be able to stand up and say 'We are the makers of our own destiny' is a great development in the history of that nation. When we achieved independence in 1948 we thought that we had got to that point, but over the intervening years we have learnt that independence from a foreign power is not enough. We need to be independent from our own weaknesses. Burma has been under a military regime for many years; well, until last year, although some would argue that this is still a semi-military regime. Those years came about as a weakness on the part of our country. I would not like to blame only the military for what happened over the last few decades. It is something that happened to all our people and all of us have a responsibility in some way or the other. This is why we must understand that shaping our own destiny requires not only a sense of purpose but also a sense of responsibility. Responsibility and duty, I have been emphasizing greatly over the last few months, because when people think of democratization in Burma, they think of the rights that they are going to get but not the responsibilities that they will have to assume.

So in this 'Dialogue on Democracy', I would appreciate very much if you would concentrate as much on the responsibilities as on the rights. How do we develop a sense of democratic responsibility? Where does it start? At the family? In the schools? In university? In the polls? There are so many different ways of starting it but I believe that it starts in the family. From the family, outwards into society we should understand what democracy entails not just in the matter of rights but also in terms of responsibilities.

We in Burma have looked at Gandhiji as a great leader who combined democratic principles with an unwavering belief in non violence. I would say that he is the father of non-violent politics. Without him there would not have been other non-violent movements in the world over. We have studied his teachings and realised how sensible he was. People would perhaps use the word 'wise' but I think the most important thing in politics is to be thoroughly grounded in common sense, and that Gandhiji was. And combined with that was not just intense intelligence but also imagination. And a combination of intelligence and imagination made him a visionary such as we had not seen before in the world. If he were alive now, I wonder how he would advise us? What he would tell us to do, how he would recommend that we go forward with our process of reform? I am sure he would have been able to give us much invaluable advice. And now it falls on you, his heirs, I am not just referring to the Gandhis but to all those who believe in democracy as his heirs to help Burma to follow the right path in the right way.

Thank you."