Never the twain shall meet
by Henri-André Aye

It is widely reported the new government in Naypyitaw is split into two factions: Thein Sein, the new president, leads the group of doves, whereas his vice-president, Tin Aung Myint Oo, heads the hawks. Some people say that the doves will prevail as Thein Sein has upper hand as president, while the others think the hawks will win due to the support they have from the army. When the president’s advisor remarked that there are no political prisoners in the country it indicated that the same old game is going on in government, with nobody taking responsibility, although the election have put the game on a new footing.

It is always hard to reach a compromise between the two opposing factions: the diehards and the reformists, the reactionaries and the progressives, the anti-war activists and the pro-war counterparts and so on. In politics, such compromise is more complicated than in a business negotiation: each side has to consider what is entailed in the aftermath. There is more than one source of “public opinion” for the politicians to court; the importance of the popular vote has to be weighed against other forms of political patronage, not least of all the military.

I don’t know all the names of the political prisoners but I do know the name of one outstanding prisoner of conscience in the country - Khun Htun Oo - a Shan patriotic and political leader. His only crime is that he had the courage to say “no” to the junta. In a sense, the whole population is held prisoner in their own country, deprived of all their basic rights, including freedom of expression.

The debates between “the good, the bad, and the ugly” in Burmese politics have been a tragicomic spectacle since 1962. In these disputes, neither the hawk nor the dove ever wins, but, instead, the referee who oversees and controls the match is the one who is always standing at the end of the fight. We all know that the name of the referee here is Than Shwe; he oversaw so many of the matches between Khin Nyunt and Maung Aye throughout the SLORC period, and he is in a position to oversee and judge the debates unfolding now.

This pattern of a general presiding over hawk-and-dove debates has some earlier precedents. First, there was a match between Brigadier Aung Gyi, playing the part of the dove, and Brigadier Tin Pe, the hawk, overseen by General Ne Win. When both hawk and dove were ousted, one after the other, a second match ensued up between Sein Win, then playing the dove as prime minister, and San Yu, being the hawk as secretary of the Council of State. In this case, when Sein Win was ousted, the hawk San Yu switched roles and became the dove when he assumed the presidency. Sein Lwin thus filled the shoes of the chief hawk.

In the same period, the good General Tin Oo and the bad Brigadier Lanbar Tin Oo kept a similar match going, with Ne Win as the referee, who fundamentally could not lose no matter what went on between the other two. Even after his official resignation in 1988, Ne Win’s imprimatur was prerequisite on important matters throughout the 1990s.

When U Thein Sein invited Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to Naypyitaw to play a new match under the auspices of disciplined-democracy paradigm, she accepted. Does she think will it be a fair game? Is it a game that anyone really hopes to win?

Even worse, for those dedicate their lives to such debates, is it really the support of the audience that counts, or are the players just fighting to impress the referee? Than Shwe holds the yellow card, and can hold it up at any time. I suppose the red card would be the military
outright ending the game. Just a little faux pas is enough for the referee to discipline the players, and there is no recourse to any other option - public opinion and even the vote remain powerless.

As a new act opens in the familiar tragi-comedy of unelected politics in Burma, I can say that there will be no power sharing with anyone whatsoever, even if there is some debate - between hawks and doves - to divert the crowd’s attention somewhat. It may be that the Lady has no better option but to comply with the proposition.

From my own perspective, the two crucial aspects of Burma’s current predicament are racial discrimination and unbalanced distribution of wealth.

The Burmese military do not want to recognize that the ethnic problem is the core issue the country is currently facing. Instead they want to marginalize the ethnic rebels of many different flags and ethnicities by emphasizing their negotiations with the Burmese opposition led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In this sense, one negotiation is a substitute for another, and bipartisan talks can never really be sufficient. Representatives of all the nationalities need to be at the table, and, if it is one table, you would therefore need tripartite talks.

Meanwhile, Naypyitaw wants to discuss the ongoing ethnic conflicts as per 2008 constitution, which is totally unacceptable to both the opposition and the ethnic groups. In this context, the Panglong Agreement is the de facto constitution that all sides can recognize the legitimacy of, even if it is now a distant and inadequate precedent for talks to proceed on. I don’t think the military will give an inch; it is their only and official mindset that the armed forces are indispensable to a beleaguered nation, and they see their role as preventing the country from disintegrating. In a way, prolonging the ethnic conflicts becomes a good pretext to maintain their firm grip on power. The civilian government serves as an emporium to do business with the international community while the military establishment retains de facto power to run the country.

The late Shan academic and visionary leader Sao Tzang Yawnghwe - as a Shan I prefer to write his title as Sao instead of Thai-style Chao - foresaw this political impasse in the 1960s when he wisely observed that, “The negotiations between the military and the ethnic rebel organizations were nothing more than a ruse, which was the government’s alternative to continuing the war. The Burmese military made it clear that there would be no return to plurality for a long time to come”.

The concentration of wealth in the hands of military elite corresponds to ubiquitous poverty elsewhere. How can the majority of the people survive if the wealth of the nation is virtually monopolized by the military and their cohorts in industry? Even within the army there is a disparity between the privileged top brass and the under-privileged lower ranks. The situation is worst for the internally displaced persons [IDP] in the Shan, Karen, and Kachin states. These people have lost everything they had: their homes, livestock, orchards, their capacity to work or farm, and so on, and predatory elements set upon the population of the helpless that results. There is always an increase in the number of reported rapes in these areas.

The other side of that conflict has had its own debates between hawks and doves. Until recently, the Shan State Army South and Shan State Army North were two different entities in their fight against the Bamar military and could not come to terms. They somehow resolved their differences to fight their common enemy. Had they not shared the same inspiration and democratic hopes for the Shan homeland, they would not have succeeded in doing so.
As I am living outside Burma, in a free and democratic society, I have my own full rights both as a Shan and an ordinary citizen to freely express my views and opinions about my long-lost homeland. Some unscrupulous people - both Shan and Bamar - want to dictate rather than candidly discuss these subjects; my hunch is that they misinterpret my intentions. I can only hope to serve my less fortunate brethren by contributing something positive. To put it in a nutshell, my conscience is clear and that I am not exacerbating these problems by admitting, frankly, that they exist, and trying to address them. The Reverend Dr. J.N. Cushing, a scholar on Shan *par excellence*, gave a very wise remark on our people, “The Shan have much independence of character but are given to jealousies and personal dislikes, which have kept them politically and socially divided”.

All of these debates are set against a background of dire poverty, and extremely brutal repression: when the authorities in Naypyitaw won’t listen to reason, we cannot afford an agitation *à la* Arab Spring, and the people of Burma know that even peaceful protests can be repressed brutally, as happened before. The Burmese army is not like their Egyptian counterparts, they are rather like Kaddafi’s mercenaries. If they shoot protesters in the streets, as they have done even with monks in robes, NATO will not come and bail us out. Perhaps we don’t have enough oil to compensate them for the bills? So, what should we do if we don’t want to be permanently cowed by the Burmese military? We keep fighting.

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*Henri-André Aye is a Shan and the author of *The Shan Conundrum in Burma* (revised edition 2010 available at amazon.com and amazon.co.uk).*