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8-2017

Myanmar's desperate need to escape clutches of fear

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Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. Myanmar's desperate need to escape clutches of fear. (2017). *Today*. 46-46.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/3844

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EUGENE K B TAN



The recent escalation of the ethnic conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State drives home the hard truth that much remains unchanged despite the country's tentative transition to a democracy.

The latest surge in ethno-violence seems timed to coincide with the release of a report last week by an advisory commission led by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

In its final report, the commission appointed by the Myanmar government highlighted the need to surmount the political, socio-economic, and humanitarian challenges in Rakhine State.

"Unless concerted action led by the government and aided by all sectors of the government and society is taken soon, we risk the return of another cycle of violence and radicalisation, which will further deepen the chronic poverty that afflicts the Rakhine State," said Mr Annan.

The spectre of even more conflict, violence and division will only derail Myanmar's democratic transition and integration into the international community, to its collective peril. It could also reprise Myanmar as the black sheep of the Association of South-east Asian Nations and generate tensions within the regional organisation as to how to deal with savage internecine strife and uphold human rights.

Although Ms Aung San Suu Kyi's government took over the reins of power in April last year, it has not clearly articulated how Myanmar shares a common purpose in national unity. What are the shared values that would undergird and discipline how the shared purpose will be attained?

The policy choices made during this political transition will have a significant impact on her development, progress and democratic evolution.

Notwithstanding the dominant Bamar majority, there must be strong political will to genuinely embrace and recognise Myanmar's rich diversity, promulgate laws and policies that are fair and equitable, and resist ethnic discrimination and persecution.

Overcoming fear of the "other" is crucial. Ms Suu Kyi herself had said this in 2013: "If people are frightened that they would be killed, or that their houses would be burned down above their heads, you would not be able to

FIVE BRAVE STEPS TO DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Myanmar's desperate need to escape clutches of fear



persuade them to sit down and sort out their differences".

As the iconic freedom advocate, freedom from fear was Ms Suu Kyi's rallying cry. This was prior to her National League for Democracy party decisively winning Myanmar's parliamentary elections in November 2015. Now as State Councillor and the de facto leader of the government, she has to make that aspiration a reality.

As Myanmar embarks on its arduous journey of peace-building, there are five key considerations the government should bear in mind to release the country from the clutches of fear. First, the democratic transition provides an opportunity for new ways of unifying a deeply divided country.

The military junta had justified its tight grip on society between 1962 and 2011 on the need to keep violent sectarianism at bay and to maintain stability and unity in a country with 135 racial categorisations.

Given the deep-seated suspicion and distrust, top-down regulation alone is manifestly inadequate and unsustainable in nurturing trust between the ethnic groups and the government.

Integrating the majority and mi-

Members of Myanmar Red Cross helping an injured policeman in Sittwe, Rakhine State, yesterday. The latest surge in ethnic conflict indicates much remains unchanged despite Myanmar's tentative transition to a democracy. PHOTO AP

norities must be central to Myanmar's political and economic transformation.

Second, fair and equal treatment of various ethnic communities is a non-negotiable for sustainable national cohesion.

The government cannot speak of national unity while remaining patently silent on the visceral loathing of and violence against minorities, especially against the Muslim Rohingya who bear the brunt of ethnic discrimination and persecution.

Notwithstanding Buddhism's special constitutional position, Myanmar's leadership must govern with a strong secular bent and without fear or favour.

This does not mean confining religion to the private domain. The sacred and the secular are not distinct realms. Religion, like education, can be a powerful socialising platform and mobilising force in the nation-building quest.

Third, the security of the individual, government, and state are indivisible. The insecurity of one entity negatively affects the security of the others.

It is vital to protect religious freedom as a fundamental right, especially when faith is integral to the identity and values system of the people of Myanmar.

Trust and confidence are necessary building blocks for a harmonious and cohesive society. Urgency should be accorded to establishing adequate and meaningful platforms across various strata of society for continual engagement, understanding, open-minded dialogue and trust-building.

Fourth, Myanmar must appreciate that her people have multiple identities. These different identities need not undermine the central precept that one's civic identity and loyalty as a citizen must take precedence over one's subnational affiliations.

Being a good citizen and a good person of faith are not incompatible. Often, if a person's religious identity is secure, citizenship is likely to be meaningful, which in turn enhances the nation-state's security.

Fifth, tolerance is necessary but insufficient for the sustenance of a multi-ethnic society. Understanding, empathy, and an appreciation of differences are needed. The introduction of democracy does not miraculously transform people into tolerant, fair- and open-minded citizens.

Instead, to win popular support in a divided society, politicians often find it tempting and expedient to appeal to populism stoked by primordial connections, prejudices and fears. Blood ties reinforced by religious loyalties and insecurities are powerful levers to instil fear, provoke confrontation and intimidate. This must be strongly resisted.

Incentives have to be urgently developed by which political and religious leaders and ordinary citizens alike will subscribe to moderation in law- and policy-making and in the profession, practice, and propagation of one's faith. This is the best way forward in engendering greater security and freedom for all.

Legislative fiat and coercive state power cannot will to life tolerance, understanding, and harmony. Neither should harmony be an exceptional state of affairs that requires explanation or justification. What Myanmar urgently needs is a decisive break from the past. For that, bold, visionary and exemplary leadership is a must.

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