Burma: cross-border civil society for Burmese democracy struggle

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Burma, a country with eight major ethnic groups and dozens of smaller ethnic groups, has been under military dictatorship since 1962 and racked by civil war for more than sixty years, since its independence from the British colonial rule in 1948. While political crisis has been prevalent in the country since 1950s and the Burmese economy has been suffering mismanagement under military dictatorship, the civil society in Burma had a short and turbulent history, and has been severely suppressed under the military rules.

The country’s worsening economy has produced little prospect for dignified means of living. Education and basic health care have been largely ignored while the ruling military regime concentrates its effort on upgrading its military might and defense system in the name of the state security. In the meantime, insurgent forces in the country which have been waging armed conflict with the ruling military regimes have been offered olive branches for those groups that are willing to accepted a cease fire arrangement under the terms of the military regime. Most armed resistant groups have accepted the offers, providing the option that they can still retain their arms and continue controlling their own territories. In consequence, the cease-fire arrangements have created conditions for civil society to emerge in frontier areas where people’s welfare and basic needs have been ignored for several decades due to armed conflict between the military regime and insurgency organisations.

In September, 1988, a nation-wide democracy movement was suppressed with force and subsequently led to several thousand political dissidents and young students forming political alliances with armed ethnic democratic groups mainly on the Thai-Burma border.

The curry military regime that took the power after crushing the democracy movements in September, 1988 reinvented a new set of rules accommodating the open market economy. The current system has allowed some room for the private sector in the economy and civil society. However, the economy continues to deteriorate and as a result a large number of the country’s capable work force has gone to seek work outside the country. For the last two decades, Thailand has been the most popular destination for Burmese migrant workers, especially, in the illegal form. Due to the illegal status of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, the accurate number is unknown, but several studies and reports in 2007 indicated that more than two million Burmese migrant workers were in Thailand (Lang & Banki, 2007 and Lubeigt, 2007) and the number continued to increase as Burmese economy continues to decline.

Civil society inside Burma remains tightly controlled in their ability to work independently and competently. I have categorised six types of civil society in the context of Burma and have closely examined the nature of cross-border civil society, a type of civil society that emerges amid political crisis and economic chaos. Cross-border civil society refers to Burmese civil society organisations largely based on Thai-Burma borders and in Thailand. This type of civil society has been shown to operate independently and vibrantly. The uniqueness of cross-border civil society is in its ability to contribute to democratic change in Burma.

Cross-border civil society that emerged through political crisis and economic chaos also entails a new form of democracy and promotes informal (adult) education and build up citizenship and grassroots participation. The role of cross-border civil society in empowering and providing consciousness change education for the most marginalized population is
examined, and the research focuses specifically on informal and non-formal educational activities of the cross-border civil society. My field research in which I applied case studies and in-depth interviews illustrates that cross-border civil society, in less than a decade, has been transformed from a function of emergency response to capacity building measures that enhances citizens’ ability to participate and make changes. In fact, cross-border civil society is a form of social movement that strongly favors democratic reform and has helped defines a new form of democracy- power from below.

My paper will explore the crucial role of cross-border civil society and its informal educational work that promotes active citizen participation, and I will also look at the challenges and the impact that the work of cross-border civil society has on the democracy movement in general and other types of civil society inside the country.

References
