

Education and Development in the Post-2015 Landscapes: Will education reform be successful in Burma?

By Thein Lwin, 22 July 2013

It is difficult to predict what will happen in the post-2015 Burma according to current political situation. Although President U Thein Sein is showing his interest in political reform, his cabinet is held up by the ex-army officials while 25% of the parliamentary seats are occupied by the current army officers. Besides, 2008 constitution is widely criticized as undemocratic.

In this situation, democratic education reform is not easy. There are three major groups responsible for education reform in Burma. They are Ministry of Education (MoE), Parliamentary Education Promotion Committee (PEPC) and National Network for Educational Reform (NNER), which is an alliance of civil society organizations.

The MoE has launched a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) for three years supported by international donors. However it is difficult for the CESR team to get academic freedom under the centralized control of MoE. The members of PEPC are former military government officials and they have already approved four old education laws with few changes of the words. It was happened before Daw Aung San Suu Kyi entered into the parliament. When they submitted the fifth one of centralized Higher Education Law, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi rejected and it was suggested to rewrite. The NNER has been trying to collect public opinions widely although there were limitations. The NNER's draft of National Education Policy was submitted to the President and PEPC. There were two remarkable progresses after the submission of NNER's draft. The NNER representatives have had opportunity to participate in the Higher Education dialogue in Naypyitaw on 29-30 June 2013 together with CESR team and PEPC team. The NNER representatives also met with the President and Education Ministers on 13 July 2013 informing about reform in thirteen educational areas.

However, the MoE is reluctant for democratic change and still practicing centralized control and considers only for education of elites. The quality of teaching is very low at the public schools and they do not consider teacher professional development. The assessment system is based on rote learning and university selection is based on exam marks. Majority of students have no autonomy to choose subjects at the university and the curriculum does not provide skills and competency to the students. The indigenous minorities do not have freedom to implement education in their regions and their languages were not allowed to teach at schools. If education system is going this way, the ordinary citizens including indigenous minorities will continue their suffering of social injustice and low human capacity. If this happens, national reconciliation will not come true. Besides, Burma will not be ready for economic integration when it becomes chair of ASEAN.

Some people may consider that education reform can be done after 2015 when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD wins in the election. The situation is not that simple. The 2008 constitution does not allow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to become President of Burma. The 25% of parliamentary seats will still be occupied by army officers. The indigenous minority groups will not get autonomy and there is no guarantee for peace. Besides, it is believed that some elements of the former military regime are playing power behind the seen.

If Burma would like to integrate in the international economic community and, to enhance national reconciliation and peace, both constitution reform and education reform are urgently needed. The responsible persons are required to work for social justice, human dignity, human capacity and education for sustainable development.

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