

The Union Peace Conference and Prospects for Educational Reform

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Introduction

This article analyses the NLD party's education policy, included in the party's election manifesto, and the 100-day plan of the Education Ministry of the NLD government. It also examines the education policy of the Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center (ENAC), a think-tank for the ethnic armed groups. Due to differences between these policies, this article gives the following four suggestions for discussion in the upcoming Union Peace Conference.

- (1) To include and discuss about freedom of education based on democratic federalism
- (2) To recognize the schools opened by ethnic armed revolutionary groups, schools in refugee and IDP camps, schools for migrant children, and self-help schools opened by local communities
- (3) To implement the Education for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) decided at the World Education Forum, which were adopted by world leaders at the UN General Assembly in 2015
- (4) To respect and practice The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2008)

The education policy in the NLD's election manifesto

The NLD party released its election manifesto before the 2015 November elections. It included an education policy along with policies in other sectors, such as politics and economics. Even though its slogan to win the elections was 'Time to Change,' the education policy did not involve any commitment to democratic education reforms. It only included policies that are in line with the framework of the 2008 Constitution and the 2014 National Education Law. Regarding educational management, the whole education sector is placed under the control of central management, even though it states that universities will be autonomous, as stated in the 2014 National Education Law. The manifesto generally states that it will carry out education that enhances languages and cultures of ethnic nationalities, but it does not mention the rights of respective ethnic nationalities or regions to have independent curriculums. Regarding learning the language and literature of indigenous people, there is no policy to set up a three-language system based on the mother tongue of indigenous people. It only states that primary students will be able to learn from mother-tongue speaking teachers, while Burmese language will be the main medium of instruction.

The policy states that it will implement a Free Basic Education system so that every child can finish primary school, as expressed in the 2008 constitution and 2014 National Education Law. There is no state policy to increase the education budget. Regarding the financial sector, it only states that educational expenses will have to be transparent. Thus, the main gist of the election manifesto is in accordance with the 2014 National Education Law.

100-day plan of the NLD government's Education Ministry

After the NLD had been in power for 100 days, an authorized person from the Education Ministry announced that the ministry's 100-day plan had been successful. However, a closer

review of their plan reveals that it included no special education reforms, only routine tasks - such as improving school grades, carrying out student registration and cleaning the school environment. Although these is a statement for teachers and education staff getting full salaries and disbursing salaries through the bank, teachers still do not get the amount of salary they deserve for their work. There is only an instruction that action will be taken against teachers if they teach tuition classes. However, it is not fair to only take action against teachers without amending the grade-based pass-fail examination system - the root cause of the tuition culture. For the first time, senior lecturers are allowed to attend PhD courses, after decades of being banned from their right to educational development and life long learning. However, there is no support for them to boost their skills to enable them to study for a PhD degree. Anyone who is qualified to study for a PhD degree should have the right to do so.

Even though the 100-day plan stated that projects would be set up after carrying out reviews and analysis of technical and vocational training, I have not heard of any such projects. On July 15, I saw a statement saying, "The State Counsellor has instructed that vocational education be enhanced so that it is prioritized as first-class education." I am glad to see Daw Aung San Suu Kyi giving advice to promote the standard of vocational skills. Nevertheless, it is not appropriate to infer that other types of education are second-class or third-class, while vocational education is recognized as first-class. All educational fields should be valued equally. Even though vocational education is included in the objectives of education, it is not the first priority. It is only one component. Every component should be equal. In education, we should consider to balance the four pillars of education - learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together (Ref: Rethinking Education, UNESCO 2015).

Other plans like assessing the teaching ability of teachers are not something that can be carried out in the short-term. It will take a huge amount of energy and commitment to improve the quality of education over the long term. I overheard that a meeting to implement Alternative Education was held in Naypyitaw recently. I still do not know what will be implemented and in which ways.

The education system desired by ethnic armed revolutionary groups

The NLD's education policy and NLD government's performance within 100 days are different from the education system that indigenous people want. The indigenous communities want an education system that accords with their desire for self-determination. They want to study their own culture, local wisdom and history, with the right of curriculum freedom. They want to advance their education with their own talent and creativity.

When the stakeholders discuss establishing a democratic federal union in order to achieve sustainable peace, I would like to present the following suggestions so that the education policies desired by indigenous communities can be discussed, whether in the main meeting of the union peace conference or in the parallel CSO forum.

1. There is a possibility to reform the education system if the peace talks with ethnic armed revolutionary groups are successful. An education policy was drawn up after ethnic armed revolutionary groups collaboratively formed the Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center (ENAC) and drafted policies. ENAC's education policy is based on a democratic federal union. It is directed towards an education system whereby respective States and Regions have self-determination, and central control is reduced. The policy guarantees freedom of curriculum, freedom of language, and freedom of association. If a democratic federal union can be

established when the peace talks are successful, a democratic education system, involving self-determination, can be established as well.

2. The second possibility for reform involves the schools which have developed outside of the central government's management. These include the schools opened by the Kachin education department of Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen education department of the Karen National Union, the Mon education department of the New Mon State Party, and the Karenni education department of the Karenni National Progressive Party, the community schools at the Thai-Shan border, the schools opened by Christian churches, the schools in refugee and IDP camps, the Burmese migrant workers' schools in Thailand, etc. Totally, there are about 1,000 schools and hundreds of thousands of students. These are schools run independently from successive central governments' management or support. These schools appoint native teachers and teach based on locally contextualized curriculums and languages of native indigenous children. They also teach quality education. The graduate students from those schools can attend international universities. They are also leading in community work. By officially recognizing the existence of these schools, the schools will have the right to self-determination. Coordination between one school and another, and one region to another, regarding curriculum issues and student transfer issues, will enable a democratic education system to be implemented.
3. The third expectation is that education reform can become possible if the Myanmar government follows and implements the Education for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), decided at the World Education Forum held in Korea in May 2015. The decisions of the World Education Forum included: to implement a basic education system, with at least 9 academic years of compulsory education; to carry out inclusive education; to practice equity so that every child can access qualified education; to practice lifelong learning; to use from 15 percent to 20 percent of the national budget for education expenses. This is identical to the demands of NNER and students.
4. The fourth expectation is that if the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, 2008 can be implemented, the indigenous people who co-exist in Myanmar will have the rights to establish schools, to practice their local curriculum and to study in their mother tongue.

Conclusion

If the above suggestions could be considered, the ethnic nationalities (the indigenous communities) would be satisfied, and would continue walking along the path to peace. The ethnic education organizations, Ba Ka Tha students and NNER – who have consistently been advocating for the rights of indigenous people – would greatly welcome this.

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