

The Irrawaddy, July 2003

Learning in a Democracy

Burma's long-term prospects for a successful transition to democracy will depend more on educational change than "regime change."

By Dr Thein Lwin

With the dialogue between the ruling regime and the democratic opposition once again deadlocked, many people are thinking that Burma is due for an Iraq-style "regime change." Regardless of the manner in which political change comes to the country, however, the initial period of reconstruction following the establishment of democracy will be especially challenging for educators. The success of Burma's efforts to reestablish itself as a democratic nation will depend largely on its capacity to introduce sweeping educational reforms—from the classroom to the state level.

Developing students' ability to think critically should become one of the major goals of education in a newly democratized Burma. At present, schools in Burma rely entirely on teacher-centered methodologies and encourage rote learning, whereby students' participation in the classroom is largely passive. As Burma emerges as a democracy, however, young people will need to learn how to participate as active citizens in an open society. Critical thinking is a paramount skill in a democratic society. It begins with information and ends in decision-making and is possible for people of all ages. Methods of critical thinking should be designed to help students think reflectively, listen attentively and learn to understand the logic of arguments so they can debate confidently and become independent lifelong learners. Such methods can be used in all grades and subjects with existing curricula. Thus, students can take ownership of their personal learning.

"Changes in the way we approach education will be required in order to build a multi-ethnic civil society"

Changes in the way we approach education will also be required in order to build a multi-ethnic civil society. Recent studies conducted along the Thai-Burma border show major disparities between the regime's prescribed curricula and those used in ethnic nationality areas, where armed opposition groups run their own schools. On the one hand, the regime's curricula promote the supremacy of the Burmese language and culture; on the other, the school curricula in the ethnic nationality areas encourage excessive nationalism, which can lead to xenophobia.

History syllabi used in Mon and Shan schools reflect the nationalist ideas of ethnic opposition group leaders. Schools in Karenni camps, for instance, teach world history, but avoid Burmese history. The Burmese regime is even more blatant in its attempts to politicize this particular subject. In 2001, the regime's textbook committee published a history textbook for the lower-secondary level that received widespread condemnation from Thai and Burmese scholars for its negative stereotyping of Thai people. (At the time, the regime was embroiled in a border conflict with Thailand.) The textbook also

vilified ethnic opposition groups.

Recent political developments among ethnic opposition groups have sought to encourage national reconciliation and the building of a multi-ethnic, pluralistic society. Such moves should include the abandonment of nationalist biases in the classroom in favor of curricula that reflect the multicultural reality of Burmese society. At the same time, pupils should receive an education that is broad and balanced; that promotes their spiritual, moral, cultural and physical development; and that prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life in a multicultural society. Furthermore, an appropriate language policy should be considered. More research is needed in this area and international examples should be looked at. For example, the three-language policy of the Indian school system should be considered.

However, curriculum development alone cannot solve the educational problems in ethnic nationality areas, because the majority of children in these areas receive no formal education at all. Teachers are not properly trained, and consequently the quality of teaching is poor. Attendance is low, with just ten percent of Karenni children and 20 percent of Karen children attending classes, while the drop-out rate is high, with just one percent of primary-school students completing their secondary education. Shan children are among the most vulnerable and have a high level of illiteracy. Thus educational reform should focus on quantitative as well as qualitative changes. We need more schools and more properly trained teachers.

Even as we recognize the immense importance of change, however, we must also consider the subjective and objective realities of the process of change. "A subjective manner of educational change implies that proposals for change are defined according to one person's or one group's situation, and may not reflect the reality of others," writes Michael G Fullan in *The New Meaning of Education Change*. He adds that learners must be cautious of innovation and reform, not because of the ill-intentions of education reformers, but because the prescribed solutions may be wrong, impossible to implement and could create adverse side effects. "The purpose of acknowledging the objective reality of change," Fullan writes, "lies in the recognition that there are new policies and programs, and that they may be more or less specific in terms of what they imply for changes in materials, teaching practices, and beliefs." We also have to consider the realities of the status quo, and the question of values among individuals and groups. We therefore need a powerful, usable strategy to generate a powerful, recognizable change in education.

[Dr Thein Lwin is the principal of Teachers Training for Burmese based in Chiang Mai.](#)