WHY MYANMAR?

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Prospect Burma
Education for Democratic Future
Chairman’s introduction

Myanmar has been much in the public eye in recent weeks. We have all been shocked by the scenes of killing and destruction in Rakhine State, and the desperate plight of hundreds of thousands of new Rohingya refugees.

Some of our supporters have asked if, in these circumstances, it is still right to carry on providing scholarships to Myanmar students. Let me answer with a categoric yes. Not only do these young people need our help more than ever, but withdrawing our support just as the country faces a serious crisis would, I believe, be both wrong and counter-productive. Wrong because we would be letting down a new generation keen to widen their horizons through international exposure. And self-defeating in that it is only through such international exposure that we can equip the new generation with the awareness and skills needed to tackle the root causes that lie behind this latest and most severe outbreak of violence in Rakhine State.

Prospect Burma is a non-political charity which, for nearly thirty years, has over a thousand people from Myanmar acquire a university education abroad. We have awarded these scholarships on the basis of need, regardless of religion, gender or ethnic origin. If anything, our scholarships have disproportionately helped those from the remoter outlying areas of Myanmar. As earlier newsletters have recorded, some of our returning alumni have been active in analyzing the causes of conflict around Myanmar and in promoting realistic solutions to these problems. It is people like them who offer the best hope for a more equitable future for all of Myanmar’s inhabitants. Let us by all means voice our concerns – but let us not cut off the vitally needed means by which longer-term solutions might yet be found. Robert Gordon

Burma watch - a time of crises

After several years of optimism about political reform, the past few months have revived many concerns about the nature of change in the country. Hopes of a better future still remain. But, during a time of uncertain transition, the scale of recent challenges has raised serious questions about the ability of the National League for Democracy-led government to manage multiple crises while implementing essential reforms that would be taxing in any country in the world. International opinion has been shocked. Many of the present difficulties, however, are long-standing and integral to the failures of the modern-day state.

The main point of concern in the international community has been the humanitarian emergency in the Rakhine State borderlands. Following attacks by a new Islamist force in August, a severe response by the national armed forces – known as the Tatmadaw – witnessed over 400,000 local peoples, mostly Muslims who identify as “Rohingya”, flee across the border into Bangladesh in fear of their lives. In contrast, both Buddhist nationalists and many Tatmadaw officers consider the Muslim population in the frontier-region as “Bengalis” – and hence not entitled to full citizenship in Myanmar at all.

The Rakhine State, however, is not only the scene of violence in the country at present. Over 100,000 civilians remain displaced in the Kachin and northern Shan States, where fighting has continued this year between the Tatmadaw and allied Kachin, Kokang, Shan and Ta’ang forces. Meanwhile, despite the spread of ethnic ceasefires in southeast Myanmar, no progress has been made on the resettlement of Karen, Karenni and Mon refugees who live in camps around the Thailand border.

For their part, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD officials insist that efforts towards achieving nationwide peace and reform remain on track. More social and economic reforms are in the pipeline, while a second 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference was held in May that was attended by representatives of most nationality groups in the country. Tangible evidence, however, of political progress is slow, and NLD supporters argue that it will take the lifetime of the present parliament (i.e. until 2020) to really begin to deliver on peace and reform programmes.

The coming months will be critical. The difficulty for the NLD is that many citizens – as well as international diplomats – do not believe that the party is fully in control of government. Rather, the present administration is considered a “hybrid” between the NLD and the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw controls three ministries and 25 cent of all seats in parliament. Because of this, democracy supporters allege that military hardliners and Buddhist nationalists are using the present crises to promote their own interests while undermining the NLD’s efforts to support peace and amend the 2008 constitution.

A difficult crossroads has now been reached. After decades of military rule, a democratically-elected government still promises the best opportunity for inclusive peace and national reform. But as long as the current crises continue, there are always worries that the country could slip back into its military-dominated past. In the meantime, it is vital that initiatives to strengthen educational opportunity and inter-ethnic understanding still continue.
Nowai Linn was born in 1992 in Namhsan Township, Shan State in northern Myanmar. She is of Ta’ang (Palaung) ethnicity, a group that has experienced ongoing human rights violations including widespread land confiscation.

She completed a Master’s degree in Communications Arts from Bangkok University this year with support from Prospect Burma. Following graduation, Nowai returned to Myanmar and told us of her ambitious plans for the future:

“I am dedicated to developing communication in promoting public awareness campaign, entertainment-education projects, and advocacy strategies ... I am determined to take my role as a communication specialist, with a focus on every aspect of community development on Myanmar’s road to democracy, in which I believe vertical and horizontal communication in politics, media and civic are called for in community building and civic engagement.”

Genette Dagtoglou is one of Prospect Burma’s longest-standing supporters, who has seen many young Burmese students through their difficult studies. Genette got involved in Myanmar in the mid-1990s. She was distributing books to children in Myanmar, and heard about Prospect Burma. ‘Prospect Burma found me a student – Dr Sasa (AKA Taing San) – who was studying medicine in Armenia,’ she says. ‘At the time he was living in poverty, just getting a bit of rice from Indian students in exchange for washing their clothes. Prospect Burma awarded him a scholarship, and then matched me with him as his sponsor.

‘He had two wonderful qualities – he is a great communicator, and communicated his gratitude nonstop. He started emailing me and that began a wonderful correspondence between the two of us. I carried on supporting him through Prospect Burma for five or six years. As soon as he graduated he started teaching primary healthcare to villagers in Chin state. He now runs his own charity, Health and Hope, which does this and has had tremendous success.’ Through Prospect Burma, Genette also supported Dr Sasa’s brother and two cousins to get their medical degrees.

The value of Prospect Burma’s work is simple to Genette. ‘Education is key,’ she says. ‘Education is the key to progress, and English Language is the lock that fits that key. You cannot get anywhere these days without English!’

Genette’s support of the students she sponsored has blossomed into some beautiful friendships. ‘I’m still in touch with the students I have sponsored and it’s wonderful to hear how they are doing,’ she says. ‘I would enormously encourage people who are thinking of becoming Adopt A Scholarship sponsors because the need is so great, and Prospect Burma is such a reliable organisation which keeps track of its students very well. It also has a really good record of its students going back to Burma – they don’t go and find jobs in other, richer countries.

‘We tell the students again and again how proud we are of them, and that they have given us so much by being so successful.’

If you would like to discuss supporting a scholar with Prospect Burma, contact Helena at helena@prospectburma.org

Freedom of speech - Using your voice online in Myanmar

With the introduction of cheap smart phones, internet access is rapidly spreading throughout Myanmar. However, after many years of severely curtailed individual expression, freedom of speech online in the country is still restricted, with a number of arrests for defamation online taking place in the last year. Prospect Burma alumni, including Pwint Htun (story overleaf), are at the forefront of IT developments.

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* https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/myanmarw
As a Prospect Burma Alumus and as a Burmese-American executive in technology and innovation, I have been contributing towards the mobile connectivity revolution in my homeland since 2012.

“As recently as 2012, Myanmar was isolated and the third least connected country in the world. Rapid adoption of mobile phone technology over the past five years has dramatically changed the landscape. Today, mobile coverage in Myanmar reaches over 90 percent of the population with 54 million mobile connections for a population of nearly the same number. Teledensity (the amount of telephone connections in any given area) has surpassed 104% and is one of the fastest growing markets in the world. More than 83 percent of households in Myanmar have mobile phones. More than half of all adults have smartphones because it is possible to purchase a no-brand smartphone for less than $23. Even in the most remote areas, alternative energy sources is making it possible for people to access electricity. Villagers can use inexpensive solar panels to charge mobile phones; so a 35-watt solar panel costs less than $28 and can power two light bulbs and a mobile phone.”

According to Pwint, this dramatic uptake of mobile technology in the country, over a short period of time, is helping make great changes. Not least, access for people from remote rural areas is creating greater opportunities than ever before.

“Digital financial services could transform the lives of poor and marginalized peoples in Myanmar, providing a path out of poverty. Digital financial tools would allow them not only to securely hold money, make deposits and withdrawals and save, but also to connect to markets, create income-generating opportunities and transmit and receive funds from family members working abroad and to create a safety net.

“Myanmar is the poorest country in Southeast Asia with the most underdeveloped financial system in the region. Approximately 37.5 percent of the population lives below the global poverty threshold of $1.90 per day. Inaccessible financial structures have kept people—especially rural
entrepreneurial and occupational skills building delivered through smartphones to foster SMEs across the rural and urban population.

“As the telecommunications revolution, social networks and mobile financial services have proven, connectivity and mobile financial services are like glue that brings people together. Connecting an entire nation – both urban and rural areas - digitally and financially is a nation-building effort. People anywhere in the country are now connected with each other through voice, data and financially.  It is now as effortless to talk, text with or to transfer money to a farmer in remote village in Irrawaddy, as to internally displaced persons in Kachin State, or to a business person in Mandalay. This new connectivity can lead to enormous opportunities to, for example, equalize educational and income opportunities for those living in rural areas. It can help bring about social transformation, and raise health awareness.

“Technology can be a driving force for change in education if only searchable, culturally relevant content in Myanmar’s languages are created.  Overdrive, Kindle, Audible and the Great Courses apps have allowed ebooks and audiobooks to reach anyone around the world.  Apps such as Voice Dream allows any written text to be converted to speech allowing accessibility for visually impaired and dyslexic learners. Technology like every tool is double-edged.  If used properly, every smartphone can be a library and a source of knowledge connecting user with limitless educational resources.”

Pwint remains pragmatic about what the country needs for sustained change, and believes that ongoing investment in skills - such as the work PB does - is vital.

“Between the mid-1990s and 2011, less than 1 percent of the GDP of Myanmar was invested in health and education combined. While Myanmar may have received much donor generosity and attention from the world in the past year, my country’s most precious resource – human resources - has been left far behind for decades. I would like to appeal to donors to please invest in developing human resources of my homeland.   Investing in human resources takes time, and those investments do pay off.

“If Prospect Burma hadn’t invested in me back in mid-90’s, I wouldn’t have been able to contribute to telecommunications deregulation, building up technology and digital financial services, that have brought change for people of my homeland.”

The development of technology is not only affecting businesses and workers, it can drastically alter access to education too.

“The average level of schooling that children reach in Myanmar is around year five. There is an opportunity to create a Myanmar language continuing education portal app for children who had to drop out of school for economic reasons. Smartphones can be used to target these children to continue to pursue education through self-paced learning; if ministry of education were to allow those dropped out of school to take self-paced learning through education app and youtube videos, and take standardized exams at a later time.

“In many developing countries, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play an important role in development. They contribute to a large part of output, employment, and growth. There is also an opportunity to create online educational portal for vocational education training,
Richard Cockett is an author, and editor for The Economist. His most recent book, “Blood, dreams and gold: the changing face of Burma” was released in 2015 and provides a comprehensive overview of the struggles that the country has faced over the last half a century. We asked Richard why he thinks that education is so important to Myanmar.

The long and difficult path to education reform

The heady days of November 2015, when Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy won a landslide election victory, seem a long way off. Nobody said that ruling a country that had become as poor, dilapidated and divided as Burma had done under decades of military rule was going to be easy. Even so, the intervening years have been extraordinarily tough. The romance of Suu Kyi’s release from house arrest and her swift rise to power captivated the world’s media, but now Burma grabs the headlines only for the wrong reasons. The Rohingya crisis is currently consuming the Western coverage of Burma, with many people turning on Suu Kyi and the government for doing too little to help the Rohingya.

“Starved of funding and systematically gutted under the military regimes, by 2015 the system had all but collapsed”

It is right to focus on the wretched plight of the Rohingya, but there is also a risk that the rest of the country will be forgotten about. Burma remains as vulnerable and poor as it was when the NLD took over. Despite the many disappointments, of failing to achieve a nationwide peace deal with the armed ethnic groups, for instance, or failing to prevent an escalation of the Rohingya crisis, the government and its foreign supporters have to plough on with the hard and unforgiving work of rebuilding an entire country from the bottom up. The roads are still terrible, the trains sporadic and electricity intermittent, but above all, as Ms Suu Kyi has always argued, it is the education system that is most in need of repair.

Before the generals took over in the early 1960s, Burma had some of the best schools, and certainly the best University (of Rangoon) in the region. However, starved of funding and systematically gutted under the military regimes, by 2015 the system had all but collapsed. Many Burmese families heroically saved all the little money that they could to hire private tutors for their children, but this seldom amounted to much.

So the launch of the National Education Strategic Plan in April of this year was very welcome. It is an attempt to lay down a long-term plan to turn the whole sector around, and found a modern education system. There was some criticism that the government had not consulted widely enough on the plan, especially with the ethnic minority groups, but by and large most people will support it. Funding will remain difficult as the country’s finances remain fragile, but the principal aim of the reforms should be endorsed, namely to abandon the rote learning that prevailed under the military.

The new system wants to move to “outcomes based learning”, where children are encouraged to explore their own ways to learn or solve problems, rather than just sitting passively in class copying down what the teacher says. I have met many Burmese who believe that rote learning was encouraged by the military so that children would not question authority – especially their own authority – in later life, and I am sure they were right. Democracy begins in the classroom. If Burma is really to change for the better over time, education reform is fundamental. But we have to be in it for the long haul.

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No one is better placed to answer the question “Why Myanmar?” than our students. We asked a selection to tell us why they think now is a vital time for Myanmar, and why education is the key to making lasting change happen.

“I come from a rural area with no government school and grew up without any help from government to gain primary education. My parents are also poor and they are not able to support my higher education... But now my dream has come true by the support of PB scholarship so I could finish my study from an International University as I had dreamed. And now I am working with the local community-based organization in Mon State and I could help them in changing education system in Myanmar today. For this reason, Prospect Burma is very important for Myanmar.”

Mi Zin Mar Win graduated with a BA in Education and Psychology from the Asia Pacific International University this summer.

“Education is the best medicine to cure many diseases such as hatred, radicalisation, unnecessary poor situation, under-development... Education drives every country’s improvement both physically and mentally. That is why PB, which helps scholarships for education, will be the key important drive for better development of Myanmar/Burma.”

Min Min is a current PB scholar, studying Politics at York University, UK.

“To me, that seems the most important part of education: to help people to make the best decisions. If our young people are taught to make the best possible decisions then we can say that education has succeeded in Myanmar” Kyi, student report 2015

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“Education is the strongest weapon for any change”

Peter is a current Prospect Burma scholar, studying Social Work at Martin Luther Christian University, India.
Adopt a scholar and become part of their story

Sign up to our Adopt a Scholarship scheme, and change the life of a Burmese scholar forever.

If you choose to adopt a scholar, you will support a student throughout a year of study, but your generosity will have a much wider-reaching impact. Your support will provide vital funds, to enable Prospect Burma to continue our work. Each Adopt a Scholarship package includes details of your “adoption”, information about the scholarship, the field of study, the scholarship’s duration, and the university it is attached to. Your name will be assigned to the scholarship and you will receive an annual report on the progress of your student. If you are interested in a particular area of expertise, or country of study, we are able to tailor your Adopt a Scholarship package accordingly. To discuss AAS contact Helena by emailing helena@prospectburma.org

Your legacy - a gift to Myanmar

“When my children were born, I felt the time was right to write my Will. It was very important to me to leave a legacy to Prospect Burma. Being the Executive Director of PB is not just a job, it is vital work that I want to ensure will continue. Leaving a legacy is my contribution to Myanmar’s future.”

Hannah Marcazzo, PB Executive Director

Leave a legacy to Prospect Burma, and ensure a brighter future for generations of young Burmese people.

Higher education is a life changing process for any young person, and even more so for someone from Myanmar where access to education is such a challenge. Your legacy will help us to support many more students, and make a huge and positive impact to their future and to Myanmar. Leaving any type of gift, large or small, will have a truly lasting impact on Myanmar for many years to come. To request a legacy pack please email helena@prospectburma.org

Fundraise for us

Put your passion and hobbies to good use, and raise money for Prospect Burma at the same time. There are loads of ways you can fundraise for us, from holding a supper club, a bake sale, or taking on that challenge you’ve always wanted to try. To request a fundraising pack for more ideas and tips, email helena@prospectburma.org

Get in touch!

Our team are waiting to hear from you. If you are interested in receiving further information about any of the above, or have another fundraising idea that you would like to discuss with us, simply write to us at the address below.

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