

Opinion Myanmar



White House photo
Ang San Suu Kyi.

Staying true to the principle of human rights for all

Inter Pares responds to Canadian Friends of Burma's Tin Maung Htoo.

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Almost one year ago, Tin Maung Htoo and I were in near-daily contact working on an event for the 20th anniversary of Canadian Friends of Burma.

I work on our Burma program at Inter Pares, a small Canadian social justice organization, and Tin Maung Htoo was the executive director of CFOB. The event, which included Aung San Suu Kyi's first video conference in Canada, recognized the many impressive Canadian contributors to the organization's history and raised awareness about Burma.

It was a success, like most of the collaborations between CFOB and Inter Pares over the past 21 years.

Almost one week ago, however, I was saddened to read an *Embassy* article by Tin Maung Htoo titled "Why I think Inter Pares was wrong on Burma." 2012 was a big year for Burma, and unfortunately a difficult year for the relationship between Inter Pares and Tin Maung Htoo.

Last June, violence erupted in Arakan State in Western Burma, home to Buddhist Arakanese and Muslim Rohingyas. In a country where information has been controlled for 50 years and media remains censored, ethnic and religious tensions are easily fanned.

Violence in June, July, and again in October left at least 160 people dead, hundreds more maimed, and more than 100,000 people displaced with limited access to aid—the vast majority of whom are Rohingya.

Most Rohingyas were born in Burma, but existing government policy treats them as illegal immigrants: they are denied citizenship and face severe restrictions on movement, education, marriage, and religious practice. According to the UN, the Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

During the weeks of unrest, we were shocked to see Tin Maung Htoo circulating biased and inflammatory materials. He disseminated information that included blanket characterizations of Muslims or Rohingyas as jihadists; materials which blamed not individual perpetrators, but whole communities for violent acts.

CFOB founders, board, and allies raised repeated concerns about the executive director's actions, to no avail. A crisis of CFOB's governance ensued and we lost confidence that our two organizations shared common principles. We felt compelled to suspend our funding.

For us, the principle of promoting human rights for all, particularly the most vulnerable, is paramount.

Most issues related to Rohingyas are highly contentious. Unfortunately this is just one

example of the complexities an emerging democracy will have to address.

Burma's rulers are well-practiced in the art of generating nationalism through identifying a common enemy. Decades of living under a repressive regime which has so thoroughly promoted mistrust and discrimination cannot quickly be washed away.

Home to dozens of ethnic and religious minorities, Burma has always had two struggles: the democracy movement and the human rights movement. The two have often collaborated, but their priorities are different. The hope and progress we see today in Burma is tied to the democracy movement.

The struggle for minority rights and self-determination within a federal system has, in contrast, made little progress.

There are legitimate fears these aspirations will be forgotten in the celebration of a "new Burma".

Of particular note, 2012 was a year of debilitating war in Kachin State. More than 100,000 people have fled their homes. On Christmas Eve, there was a dramatic escalation of military operations against the predominantly Christian Kachin.

Despite presidential declarations of a ceasefire, government troops used helicopter gunships and fighter jets, and possibly cluster munitions and chemical weapons.

But there is hope. I replenish my hope when I travel to the region for about two months each year. I travelled to Thailand, Burma, and China last November and met with our partners. I sat with Karen, Arakan, and Burman health workers talking about trainings they had given on emergency obstetric care, and the collaborative space they were creating to detail dreams for national health policy.

I spoke with Shan farmers who had just lost their land—confiscated by the government to be leased to a gas and oil corporation—and were strategizing with other farmers. I learned from a young Kachin woman about the systems they had established to feed displaced people living in nearby camps.

I listened to our partners, and shared strategies and stories from similar struggles in other parts of the world. These exchanges, the stories they share, are what feed our work.

For more than 20 years, Canada has been providing, through Inter Pares, financial and technical support to Burma's emerging civil society. We work with over 50 community organizations from Burma that provide health care, document human rights abuses, train new leaders, produce news in local languages, and provide food and shelter to people displaced by conflict.

One of the most important aspects of my job is listening to our colleagues in Burma, and doing everything I can to support their aspirations for a democratic and peaceful country. Collaboration like this demands a common set of principles, wherein moral integrity is critical.

Being an ally when we see injustice comes with the responsibility to reject all oppression; otherwise, how can we maintain hope for the respect of human rights for all?

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