

# Why I think Inter Pares was wrong on Burma

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I am making this clarification in response to some misunderstandings and accusations put together by some elements, especially those who are close to, or under the influence of, Inter Pares, with which the Canadian Friends of Burma and myself have a beleaguered relationship over communal conflicts in Burma since last year.

I passionately support fundamental rights and freedoms of all human beings, and hold in high value the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And it is my understanding that the international solidarity campaign started in the early 1990s is the one in response to the call and needs of the Burmese people who have been struggling for freedom and democracy in their homeland.

In other words, it is my belief that the international solidarity campaign was intended to be, and should continue as, an extension of the Burmese people's needs and aspirations.

Applying the liberties of a free and democratic society, I presented my personal points of view and shared information in an attempt to balance what I perceived to be some unfair and imbalanced reports disseminated on some media and social media websites regarding the conflicts occurred in Burma's Arakan State. Since I released my personal points of view, some people including Inter Pares made judgments on my stand, which resulted in confusion among Burma supporters in Canada and elsewhere.

In my perspective, Burma is a country with diversity in culture, ethnicity and religion. The majority of the Burmese

population is tolerant of such differences. For example, churches and mosques are everywhere in Burma, even at the centers of major cities. The communal conflicts that broke out in Arakan State run counter to such tolerance and are beyond my comprehension due to the back-and-forth of accusations.

I tried to stay personally neutral to the best of my abilities, given my role in a campaign and advocacy group. However, I had a hard time keeping my personal views silent due to what I perceived to be unbalanced reports and fabricated information disseminated by some elements, portraying one side of the conflict as "racists" and "oppressors."

Using social media, I presented some facts and evidence in order for my colleagues and friends to see an alternative to what I perceived to be unbalanced and fabricated information on the ground. I am simply taking up my liberty and freedom of expression

afforded to me in a democratic country so as to speak my mind and consciousness.

In essence, I support the position of Burmese democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. That is, the importance of the rule of law and the pursuit of a review process for the country's citizenship law in order to address the plight of the stateless people in the western part of Burma.

However, as a note of caution, what we need to keep in mind in the pursuit of this solu-

tion is that there is no country on earth with a perfect immigration law that fully embraces the international norms and standards set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the case of Burma, the stipulation of Article 15 of the declaration, "everyone has the right to a nationality", is a challenging one.

Note that ethnic nationality status and citizenship status is different in Burma, and "nationality" refers specifically to Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Bama, Rakhine, and Shan persons/groups.

Burma's laws do not interface perfectly with the Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and I am of the opinion that due to the sensitive situation in Burma, it is unhelpful to insist from abroad that this declaration be instituted in Burma until the Burmese have themselves addressed their domestic laws.

In that regards, I am personally concerned with some interest groups, including Inter

Pares, trying to impose their ideal immigration reform upon Burma by uncompromisingly taking up this contentious issue without carefully considering the consequences for Burma's delicate transition process.

Given the issue in question, prominent Burmese activists, including the executive director of the United States Campaign for Burma, were either forced to resign or made silent for fear of losing funding from their donor organizations.



Aung San Suu Kyi on Nov. 19, 2012.

White House Photo

Therefore, CFOB and myself are not alone in this trouble, and we are of course not immune from this kind of pressure as well.

Ultimately, immigration reform in Burma is indeed the issue of a sovereign state, and Burmese people deeply perceive it as a national issue, which needs to be resolved locally. Because sentiments are so high amongst Burmese on this issue and because the country is in such a delicate transition, there are serious potential backfires if the immigration law reform is not carefully sorted out and handled.

Therefore, I did not want the international campaign groups to cross this extremely sensitive line, especially when the democratic transition in Burma is in its embryonic stage and the ongoing reform process still a long way from fruition.

In the case of this specific issue, I think a greater sensitivity to the desires of most Burmese is needed and the international campaign groups should adopt a less hasty approach.

In conclusion, we might have differences in our opinion but when it comes to freedom, democracy and human rights, we have a common goal. However, I think the means to the ends of this shared goal need to be reconsidered so as to avoid upsetting the majority of Burmese population at a moment of high emotion and delicate political transition.

Ultimately, I hope we can work out our differences and continue to work for a free and democratic Burma.

*Tin Maung Htoo is a board member of the Canadian Friends of Burma. A full version of this piece appeared in Mizzima News, a news agency in Myanmar.*