

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

According to a conventional view, civil society cannot exist under authoritarian rule since a dictatorial system suppresses all independent associations and restricts public participation. In line with this view, the authoritarian rule in Burma, which started in 1962, should have destroyed the whole structure of civil society in the country. David Steinberg (1999:8) argues that 'civil society died under the Burma Socialist Program party (BSPP); perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered'. However, within a few weeks of the pro-democracy nation-wide uprising in 1988, hundreds of civil society organizations emerged. Most of these organizations were neither political nor economic in nature. For instance, many housewives took to the streets with banners 'Association of Housewives'. Similarly, many associations emerged with the names of respective townships and villages. Why did these groups emerge in such a short time if civil society had been murdered under the authoritarian rule? There must have been some forces of civil society even under the authoritarian rule of Burma, and these forces sprung up to challenge the regime at a favorable time. Although the 1988 uprising was crushed by the military, there is evidence that many civil societies existed under the Socialist authoritarian rule. That's why, this thesis aim to study how civil society organizations exist and work under the authoritarian rule.

This research is an empirical study of the space of civil society organizations under the current authoritarian government of Burma and how they contribute to democratization. Furthermore, this study tries to examine the difficulties and opportunities in the activities of civil society organizations in Burma.

## **Statement of the Problem**

In Burma, it has become increasingly difficult to identify public space because of the state's intervention into every aspect of people's lives. However, with the emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Burma, some public space for civil society organizations in an authoritarian context appears. By doing campaign, providing training, educating people and supporting social welfare for communities, NGOs are able to develop and strengthen the space for civil society. By creating larger public space, civil society organizations could lead to a process of democratization, such as empowerment of the people, participation of people, building trust among people, expression of people and different coping strategies and mechanisms of people to deal with dysfunctional government institutions.

However, many observers and political activists of Burma dismiss the role of civil society organizations by pointing out the government's tight authoritarian rules and regulations. Most international literature on Burma focuses primarily on the conflicts between the government and oppositional groups, ethnic conflicts, lack of freedom of associations and freedom of expression and human rights violations of the government.

Although it is impossible to ignore the problems of the government's suppression of the public, there has been an emergence of international NGOs (INGOs), local NGOs (LNGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) under the authoritarian rule of the Burmese government. Within the current political climate, re-emergent civil society organizations can represent an important vehicle for long-term, 'bottom-up' democratization in Burma. So it becomes necessary to understand the space of civil society organizations under the authoritarian rule by posing the following questions. What are the activities of NGOs operating in Burma? How do they exit, survive and grow? How do they help the emergence of civil society? Are they paving a way to democratization of the country? What are the difficulties and opportunities of NGOs in Burma?

So, in this study, the activities of civil society organizations (CSOs) related to

a particular social and political context will be examined first and then the study will analyze whether CSOs are paving the way to the democratization of the country. In addition, there is also a need to analyze how much space for democratization are created by CSOs in Burma.

### **Topic of the Thesis**

This is the empirical study of the space of civil society organizations in Burma. In this study, NGOs will be viewed as part of civil society since they are organized for social action, community development, livelihood improvement and empowerment of people. The main research question in this study is: How can civil society organizations create democratic space under the authoritarian regime? Democratic space is defined as a free operational environment for organizations which are working for democratic foundations such as human rights, people empowerment, peace, negotiation and reconciliation, etc.

In order to answer the research question, the study will focus on the activities of civil society organizations under authoritarian rule of Burma. The study will review the activities of the civil society organizations, their strategies, difficulties, opportunities, accountability and contribution to the society. Then the study will analyze how they are paving the way to democratization in Burma. It also looks at the changes and development in the state-society relationship that would impact on socio-economic situation of the country.

While focusing on these issues, the thesis will also analyze the possibilities of democratization by civil society and how civil society can be strengthened under the authoritarian rule of the Burmese government. To do so, the study will look at the relationship between state and civil society organizations such as NGOs and student groups. It will also identify various approaches, strategies and ideologies of selected organizations. It will examine strengths and weaknesses of the organizations and analyze the limitation of Burmese democracy and available space for CSOs to fostering democratization process in Burma.

### **Theoretical perspective of civil society and democracy**

There are different meanings of civil society. The general meaning reflects the changes in social, economic, political, and intellectual areas. The definition of civil society is changing with the development of the market economy, the institution of private property, the appearance of an urban culture, the failure of the authoritarian system, the rise of democratic movements, the decentralization of state power and the imposition of the rule of law.

According to Diamond, civil society is 'the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, and autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules' (1994: 6). So, it is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state. Whyte (2004) from the London School of Economics Centre, defines civil society as,

"The arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movement, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups" (see more details in <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS> ).

Farrington (1993:208) quoted Gramscian's concept to consider civil society as the arena, separate from state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested, implying that civil society contains a wide range of different organizations and ideologies which both challenge and uphold the existing order. This thesis will follow the concept of Whyte from the London School of Economic's definition of civil society, which defines non-governmental organizations, community groups and social movement as parts of civil society and Gramsci articulated the idea that civil society can resist state power and can be used as a tool for understanding social movements and as a new form of political praxis.

### **Civil society, NGOs and the role of CSOs in fostering democracy**

Civil society has been regarded as an element of the democratic process although its meaning remains unclear. Baker (1997: 3) argues that civil society plays an element of the democratic process, both as a counterweight to state power and as a means to greater democratic legitimacy and effectiveness. Cohen and Arato (1992: ix), for example, argued that civil society plays an important role in democratization and consider social movements as core actors of civil society. According to them, civil society represents a key feature of a vital, modern society and an important form of citizen participation in public life.

In terms of NGO as part of civil society organizations, there are two broad perceptions about the political role of NGOs as a dynamic element of civil society. The first type is that NGOs can be viewed as agents for 'democratization' and the main component of a thriving civil society. Tandon (1994:44) defines NGOs as 'public institutions of civil society, engaged in the process of strengthening civil society in its relationship vis-à-vis the state and the ruling elite. For the second type, NGOs are increasingly seen as a mechanism of grassroots organizations for solving economic and social problems. This view comes from considering the socio-economic roles of NGOs as a political role by which poverty is seen as a political condition. Farrington (1993:6), for example, argues that as NGOs have a strong commitment to poverty alleviation in rural areas, they actively support the establishment of grassroots organizations through which peasants can express views on their needs. In this thesis, the Shalom Foundation is the second type of NGO since it tries to solve the socio economic problems of grassroots level through political dialogues while the 88 generation should be considered as a social movement supporting the democratization process of the country.

### **Burmese CSOs and its role in democratization process**

There are different types of CSOs in Burma. They are mainly

- International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Save the



Children and World Vision,

- Local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) such as Shalom Foundation,
- Community-based organizations (CBOs) that cover a range of local functions such as organizing funerals and festivals,
- Charity organizations such as Malon Rice Donation Association,
- Business associations such as Mandalay Merchant Association,
- Professional associations such as Myanmar Medical Association,
- Social movement organizations such as the 88 Generation Students and religious organizations such as All Burma Monk Association.

However, there is no independent trade union, student union and free women organizations in the country. Nevertheless, different varieties of CSOs still exist and operate under the authoritarian regime. The study will focus on two types of CSOs, local NGO and social movement organization, since they are the most active organization and have the most contact with people in the country. The reason to choose local NGOs is that they have increased dramatically in the last decade and have expanded in terms of geography, funding and activities. Other CSOs did not increase as much as LNGOs in recent years. The study did not choose INGOs because they are from different countries, have less contact with local people and there is a smaller number than LNGOs. The study also did not choose CBOs, charity groups and business associations since they have less effect on society. Social movement organizations are studied because they are very popular in the country, many people know and participate with the organizations, and they are the only type of civil society organizations in Burma that challenge state power directly.

### **Research Questions**

How do civil society organizations create democratic space under the authoritarian regime?

### **Objectives of the study**

- 1) To describe state-civil society relations in the context of social definition in Burma
- 2) To identify various approaches; strategies and ideologies of particular organizations.
- 3) To assess democratic implications of CSOs actions.

### **Analytical Framework**

The analysis was structured by theoretical foundation of democracy and the democratic role of civil society as mention in theory part of the thesis. The study analyzed the strategies of civil society organizations in their democratic activities, negotiated public space for people participation. Then it also analyzed the way the government systematically control on the activities of civil society organizations. It analyzed the strength of the government, limitation of Burmese democracy and the possible democratic space in Burma in order to examine the limited political opportunities for democratization process. In addition, it analyzes how NGOs have tried to create and expand the public space through humanitarian approach and democratize such space through its political dialogue and democratic values. In terms of examining social movements, it analyzes such movements in order to understand how they challenge and resist the state power and the prospects and limitations of such movement in supporting democratization in Burma. Finally it scrutinizes two selected civil society organizations in terms of how they try to create democratic space in the country. In the analysis, social movements will be recognized as democratic actions since social movements in Burma ask for human rights and democracy. In addition, conflict resolution, trust building, and negotiations will be recognized as democratic actions since ethnic conflicts pro-long the military dictatorship in Burma.

## **Research Methodology**

This thesis was conducted by using both documentary and field research. It examined written documents and carried out a field research in Yangon. Regarding documentary research, the thesis examined both published and unpublished documents in relation to the situations of civil society organizations in Burma. As no research has studied the role of NGOs in the democratization process in Burma, the study tried to fill this gap by concentrating on how NGOs work and their intervention role in democratization process. The study used both published and unpublished reports from NGOs and the governmental organizations. Related data was drawn from various organizations such as DFID, ICG and United Nation agencies in Yangon.

In terms of field research, the study uses a case study of two civil society organizations, the 88 Generation Student and the Shalom Foundation, in order to examine how civil society organizations create democratic space under the authoritarian regime. The research was carried out by using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with student leaders, monks and key person such as directors, coordinators, and trainers from NGO organizations that have projects in Yangon. There were altogether twenty eight interviewees and they were selected by their popularity, status in the organizations, and their involvement in social movements.

The justification of the selected case study comes from their democratic roles and activities of such organizations. The author chose the 88 Generation Students and Shalom Foundation because both organizations link with the democratization process in the country in different ways. Firstly, the 88 Generation Students is the most well-known organization and initiated the biggest social movement that emerged in Burmese politics since the 1988 democracy uprising. This organization is a network of former students who took part in 1988 democracy uprising. Its character and activities can be categorized as a democratic organization. Their members have tried to mobilize people to stand up for their human rights and democracy. Its activities raise fundamental issues of democratic politics, such as the issues of rights and



freedom, the accountability of the government on economic crisis, and aim to challenge the power of authoritarian government. Its campaigns range from signature campaigns for the release of political prisoners to organizing protests against the government, and it aims to bring about democratic change in the country.

Secondly, the Shalom Foundation is one of the biggest local NGOs in terms of funding and the amount of projects doing all over Burma. It has been using around \$300,000 per year, appointed 21 permanent workers along with 20 volunteers and working in 7 states and divisions out of 14 states and divisions in Burma. It focuses on peacemaking, conflict resolution, mediation, dialogue and reconciliation among ethnic minority people and Burmans (the ethnic majority population in the country), as well as building trust and networking among different religious groups in ethnic areas. Ethnic conflicts are one of the major problems which hinder the appearance of democratization in Burma. Shalom Foundation also supports the process of building a stable and just society based on understanding, trust and respect of diverse religions, culture, customs and traditions, which is the main component of democratic values. Based on the character and activities of Shalom Foundation, it can be categorized as an organization which fosters democratization in Burma, not in the sense of resisting state power but in the sense of supporting democratic values and solving ethnic conflict which is one of the main problems for democratization in the country.

In Burma, there is only one social movement organization and there are three registered local NGOs which work on democratization. They are Metta Foundation, Shalom Foundation and Capacity Building Initiative (CBI). Metta Foundation is also giving training for conflict resolution, and leadership skills in ethnic areas. CBI provides a forum for all local NGOs to network, share information and discuss NGO problems and provide leadership training in Yangon.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues were carefully considered to conduct research in Burma due to the sensitive political situation. The standard ethical consideration of conducting

research with human subjects was informed consent. In addition, since this research deals with personal experience, voluntary participation and confidentiality was emphasized. Written informed consent was collected in order to secure high anonymity. The study is still risky for the author's safety and so the author did not mention the names of people that the author met.

### **Scope and Limitation of the study**

Given the fact of the political situation in Burma, the study used anonymous interviews in many situations to minimize the tension between interviewers and interviewees. In the study, some people from NGOs were reluctant to give information since they want to keep low profile of their projects and don't want to be noticed by the government. The author took a lot of risks to personal communication with the 88 Generation Students who are fugitives and watched by the government. The author managed to interview with some students who were now in prison for their leading role in democratic movements.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is the first time study on the 88 Generation Students and Shalom Foundation as civil society organizations which search for democratic space under the authoritarian government. It is also the first time to identify and analyze the democratic space in Burma. The findings of the study contributed to the understanding of the extent of democratic space in the country and strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of civil society organizations inside Burma. Recommendations made in this study were useful in strengthening and promoting the space and capacity of civil society organizations which is important for understanding democratization in Burma.