

GENDERLAB TALK SERIES # 1: SUMMARY NOTE

PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY AND FEDERALISM

28 April, 2023**Gender and Federalism in Myanmar**

photo source: GSCN Facebook

Reflecting on the different political systems and federal arrangements is useful to achieve a country's collective goals. In the process of Myanmar's transition to federalism, Professor Ardeth Maung Thawngmung of the Political Science Department at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, stressed that all models of democracy and federalism are helpful, but they should not be imposed without taking into account the unique features and requirements of a country. Every country needs to adapt or change strategies in response to a changing situation to ensure inclusivity and good governance.

The speaker outlined her presentation with the principles of democracy and federalism, the ways in which these ideologies differ and complement one another in different countries to ensure that the audience understood the fundamentals of both "democracy" and "federalism". In addition to theoretical concepts, she also presented regional and global research findings particularly discussing comparisons between and among different countries while reflecting on the situation in Myanmar.

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Principles of Democracy and Federalism

The speaker discussed the core of democracy: human rights and civil liberties based on the rule of the people. Laws are consistent and applicable to all citizens. Democratic form of government recognizes equality which emanates from the right to suffrage. It will allow diverse standpoints, healthy oppositions, recognition of multiple political parties and the conduct of regular transparent elections. However, the speaker said that since this political system is based on the rule of the people, minority groups particularly the ethnic groups may not be adequately represented and their rights may be overlooked by the rule of the majority. This is the drawback of this system.

The different definitions of democracy were discussed, from the basic definition of competitive elections to the systems used by different countries which are referred to as “semi-democracy”, “quasi-democracy”, “illiberal democracy”, and “Asian-style democracy”. The minimum level of definition in illiberal democracy includes competitiveness which means multiparty, free and fair elections and rules by the people, by the majority of the people. Whereas, liberal democracy ensures a rule of law (not by whims of individuals), freedom of speech/assembly; freedom of media, individual rights, check and balance of power (executive, judiciary, legislature); inclusivity and tolerance for diversity (women, ethnic and religious minorities); equality of rights; and peaceful transition of power. Thus, when a democratic system is to be established, the variations of democracy is critical and must be properly defined including the election process, check-and-balance pillars, power sharing between the elected and appointed officials, and the political parties. It must be noted that political parties in Myanmar are largely based on ethnicity, while in the US, they are based on ideologies such as Democratic and Republican.

The speaker explained the essence of division of power in federal systems. The central/federal government and regional/local governments have separate spheres of authority as well as shared sovereignty/power. Both levels of the government have a degree of autonomy and decision-making power over issues that directly affect their respective jurisdictions. She stressed that Federal systems allocate powers between the central and regional governments through a written constitution or legal framework.

In Federalism, some powers are exclusive to the central government, some are reserved for the regional governments, while others are shared or concurrent. In this situation, decisions should be taken in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, which states that authority should be exercised by the appropriate level of government in order to protect and recognize the rights of the minority groups. In a federal system, cooperation, collaboration, and coordination between and among the central and regional governments are essential. Inter-governmental relations help to address shared challenges, resolve conflicts, and promote unity while respecting regional diversity. She explained that unlike democracy, federalism can protect the rights of minority groups by allowing regional governments to exercise power and make decisions that are suitable to their particular needs and aspirations. She underscored that Federal systems would enable policy experimentation and flexibility at the regional level. This will also grant different regions to modify policies in light of their own situations and try innovative tangible solutions to address local issues. Other regions could learn from their experiences and may use these as basis for policy formulation in the future.

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Principles of Democracy and Federalism

Follow-up dialogue with participants



WHAT IS THE LANGUAGE ISSUE ON FEDERALISM IN MYANMAR?

The follow-up dialogue with the participants is focused on the issues and challenges in creating the best federalism model for Myanmar. Which language policy would be effective and practical? The speaker explained the significance of language in federalism, citing its impact on identity, representation and effective governance. Moreover, in the context of federalism, language is important when it comes to cultural identity; representation and participation; government accessibility, legal and administrative frameworks, communication and unification. Language is closely tied to culture and identity. In diverse federal systems, different regions may have distinct linguistic communities with their own cultural heritage. It is important to acknowledge and protect linguistic diversity to promote social cohesiveness, cultural pride, and a sense of belonging among distinct communities. Language is equally crucial for status and economic values. We can have more employment opportunities if we are aware of it.

Participants have discussed how Myanmar can implement a language policy and a communication medium. Federal countries have adopted several strategies and systems that have worked for them while maintaining linguistic diversity. For example, only English language is used in the United States. In Canada, there are two official languages which are French and English. Another example is Indonesia where around 40% of the population speaks Javanese. However, they do not recognize it as an official language. They speak Bahasa, which is known as a trade language by everyone in the region, including Malaysia.

Since the official language is derived from a common language rather than one specific ethnic group, using that language may reduce conflict between and among ethnic groups. India and Singapore people speak different languages. In India, English is widely used as a common language, although ethnic or official languages are also used at the regional and state levels. Nigeria also employs the same system.



She also explained the three models on language use utilizing a neutral language, multiple languages as the official language, or using just one language. In Myanmar, the people have to think and discuss of the right model that will suit their situation.

Though it is easy to say it is done, it is very expensive and a difficult task. It requires a lot of resources to implement each policy change. In Myanmar, practical issues must be considered and be addressed. While the establishment of an official language is a positive step towards language survival, there are other factors to consider, such as the population size of the people who speak that language. From her personal experience: "For example, in Chin, there are approximately 54 languages.

I learned the dialect of one group when I was young. But even in the area within 10 miles, I speak that language but no one understood it." The importance of other factors in language use had been discussed, including the role of "family" in linguistic capability since families are the ones who first introduce language to the people; the need for enough resources for literature; the role of non-state actors, faith-based organizations, and non-profit organizations in language acquisition, like starting summer language schools. The use of technology, including social media has also been discussed in relation to language proficiency. Some critics said that using Facebook is already a Burmanization because it uses the Burmese language. However, some claim that additional languages are also being used. The speaker concluded that the people themselves must discuss and decide the best language model in view of the pros and cons of having a one language or a multi-language policy in the context of Myanmar. Personal and practical issues as well as resources must be considered should policy changes are to be implemented.

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WHICH FEDERALISM MODEL IS SUITABLE FOR MYANMAR?

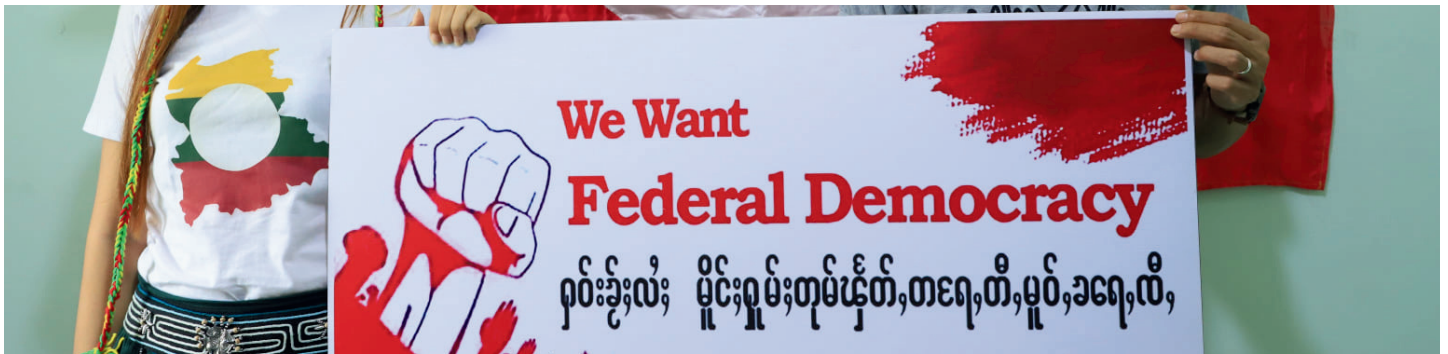
Instead of relying on one specific model, it was recommended to learn from various models based on the context of Myanmar. It was also encouraged to learn from its neighboring countries. To study India's model of self-autonomy and China's self-autonomous model with a more centralized power. It may be useful to study Indonesia's model as well.

In addition, there was a discussion on two models: the symmetrical model, in which every state has the same power, while in asymmetrical model, every state has a different power sharing. Participants also argued whether Myanmar's federalism should be based on ethnicity or not. The speaker's response is that negotiation, context, and history should all be taken into consideration. Moreover, it is necessary to take into account the requirements of a minority within a minority.

HOW FEDERAL ARMY HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED AROUND THE WORLD?

All federal countries have a single national army under the federal army, although state or regional governments oversee the national guard and police in the absence of an army. There must be a clear division of work between these two entities. The role of the national army is to protect the nation from foreign invasion. The national guard and the police are responsible for law enforcement and order. They are responsible in maintaining political stability.

photo source: GSCN Facebook



DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH FEDERALISM IN OUR COUNTRY?

It was said that it would depend on the negotiation process and political will of the leaders. The 2008 constitution, which was drafted ten years ago, provided the state very little power sharing. For example, the federal government even appointed the chief minister of the state.

THE STATE CONSTITUTION HAS BEEN DRAFTED AND DEVELOPED IN DIFFERENT STATES. WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

The speaker, who was able to participate in a review process in one of these constitutions, reminded that while the state constitution is more directly related to the people, the link between the federal and state constitutions must be aligned to ensure the division of powers between the state and the federal levels.