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Conference Paper

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Differences in Transitional Process between South Africa and Burma

Transition is not a moment; it is an ongoing process that needs a constant support to achieve its goal. This and many other topics related to the challenges and the threats of democratic transitions under the main theme “Societies in Transition” were discussed during the 17th Annual Forum 2000 Conference, which pursues the legacy of the former Czech President, Václav Havel. A great discussion was dedicated to the transitional processes of countries such as South Africa and Burma. Although these two countries share a similar unfortunate history of injustice and oppression, their transitional processes are in many ways different.

South Africa’s transitional process as a result of its citizen’s dissatisfaction with the apartheid system; the segregation system based on the color of one’s skin. *“Solve your challenge of feeling interior, if you stand up and fight for your rights we have nothing to lose but our chains”* was a slogan that inspired Jay Naidoo, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, and thousands of others to stand up against this apartheid system and the National Party that was enforcing it. After years of struggles, the negotiation to give an end to the apartheid system was achieved.

The fall of the apartheid system was led by the establishment of a fair constitution, strong institutions, independent judicial system, separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches, independent media and strong civil society organizations. Now, South Africa is on its road to satisfactory governance although it still faces many challenges such as the education crises; a huge proportion of students leave the schooling carriers without proper skills, and with the unlikely chances to get a convenient job in their life time. Then the rising of corruption crises; the kind that steals resources meant to meet the needs of the poor. Another challenge that South Africa faces, together with the rest of the world, is the interaction between multiethnic communities. South Africa is one of the most culturally diverse nations and its future success will be determined by their ability to manage and continue managing this diversity.

In contrast to South Africa, Burma’s transitional process began with the military regime accepting the reform. Their reasons for doing so were: uncomfortable alliance with China, the economic bankruptcy, international pressure, and domestic pressure. However, according to Igor Blažević, Head Teacher of Burma Educational Initiatives, *“it is very dangerous to talk about transition in Burma because when you say transition somewhere in your mind you think transition into democracy. Burma is not going in the*

direction of democracy ... Burma is changing from authoritarian system into something else but what this else is, we do not know because it is still undecided.” Due to its parliamentary composition where the majority is constituted of former military regime and the rest is the opposition, the transition can lead to a weak democracy, a semi-authoritarian regime or it can be a genocide type of bloodshed that can give rise to a new form of dictatorship.

Burma’s change depends on the negotiation between the leaders, opposition and the ethnic groups; although each opponent wants a different system. The former regime leaders want the authoritarian system, whereas the ethnic groups want the federal system and the opposition wants the democratic system. They cannot defeat each other so it is in their interest to find a negotiated transition, otherwise Burma’s future is compromised. Burma also faces many other challenges such as: total absence of the rule of law, conflicts between ethnic groups, natural resource extraction, cultural heritage destruction, unfair constitution, alarming education system, and poor infrastructure. These challenges are hard to overcome because of Burma’s infirm opposition, weak institutions and constitution, lousy judicial system, depended media, and fragile civil society organizations.

Although South Africa and Burma share a similar lamentable past, according to Igor Blažević their transformation has taken different paths due to three factors. First, in South Africa in the particular moment when the change happened the opposition had a much stronger unity of the purpose than the political opponents of the regime in Burma have. In South Africa the regime was forced into sincere negotiation and acceptance of the need to undertake a fundamental change. The Burmese political opponents do not agree on what they want to achieve and this is giving the government the opportunity to play with one opponent against the other, to quote some and suppress the other. Second, the South African key political players had the will to change the problematic apartheid constitution, whereas this is nonexistent on the side of the Burma’s government to undertake such changes. The Burmese constitution fundamental rights are put under brackets and if the military thinks that these rights are threatening the unity and solidarity of the country, these fundamental human rights are denied. And the third factor is the geopolitical system. For South Africa, the reform happened at the end of cold war which means that Russia was not capable anymore to support the communist agenda and the West felt much stronger; they were ready to pressure the authoritarian government to change. Burma

is currently not standing geopolitically in that position because it is the middle of competing forces that will not pressure it in order to have its collaboration. These factors are blocking Burma from moving forward.

In conclusion, transitions are a never ending process. Both South Africa and Burma are still on a transitional journey which expectantly gives them enough time to learn from their mistakes and develop themselves in the countries they are expected to be; the countries of hope and freedom.

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