**THE KAREN STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY**

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**Introduction**

In this essay, I will take as my starting point for the three basic strategies of President Ba U Gyi to explain how we can truly achieve freedom and autonomy. The situation that we have faced today is complicated, and over 70 years we have not yet achieved independence and the true freedom that the people want. What are the reasons for this? What kind of challenges hinder our path to freedom? Because the theme of this topic is quite large, I will limit the issues by looking only at the potential possibilities of each strategy that may be realistic for achieving freedom. This should be done by discussing and outlining each strategy based on my own opinions and arguments.

**Main section**

**Ba U Gyi’s three strategies for achieving successful freedom and autonomy.**

The Karen’s conflict has been considered one of the world's longest civil wars. The conflict has been going on so long, and it is still going on. From bloody wars where tens of thousands of lives are lost, several forced to flee, many have become displaced and homeless. The conflict has not yet resolved, we have not gained independence, freedom or autonomy until now. The only thing we have come to a new modern world is a dominant capitalist perspective. It has shaped and affected this conflict in different ways where temporary peace negotiations take place while occupations and corruption take place in parallel. In addition to all these, we live today in the social media world where all information, news and rumors spread like wildfire. It also has advantages and disadvantages for the conflict we are facing. In addition to the complicated and unresolved conflict, we need to stay focused and deal with new structural changes in a modern world. The question is which strategy is the most realistic to achieve freedom and independence based on Ba U Gyi's three basic strategies? 2

**Strategy 1: Armed solution**

Using this strategy to achieve peace and freedom does not seem relevant to the generation we live today. I argue that "war" is problematic because it is both the term for a phenomenon that can suddenly occur and a means someone can use. An armed struggle can be almost compared to a landslide because it occurs abruptly and affects many people. Unlike natural disasters, war is also something we can start or avoid. War can consequently be both part of the problem and the solution depending on the situation and the perspectives people have. Armed struggle costs lives, resources, and it brings destruction and violates the rights of people. Let's say we choose this strategy, but then the following question is whether we have everything we need? Do we have a strong military power? Could it be possible to get more support from other ethnic groups in Myanmar? Have these ethnic groups seen armed struggle as a potential solution? How can we prepare ourselves in the best possible way to reach the goal? What would happen if we lose? Would we end up in an even worse situation than where we are now? What would the future hold for Kawthoolei? How would the future be like for children and young people for generations to come? The civilians are the biggest victims of today's armed conflicts. Because of war and brutality, children and young people are more vulnerable. Based on the current situation, I would argue that this solution is not realistic, and no party will gain anything. If I say anything positive about such a solution, it would be that we first and foremost have a strong army and full support from several different ethnic groups in Myanmar, and funding must be in place. Furthermore, we should have everything we need. Moreover, we can say that war is not always negative. It can give us experience and increase knowledge about why war have happened. It teaches us about how to handle conflicts in other ways and change our perspective on conflict management. Even if these are the reasons that can be positive to introduce armed struggle, we can say that KNU has already been in several armed conflict for a long time. Both parties should therefore have already learned from the experiences of such a struggle. What kind of benefits do we get from it?

2**. International intervention or scheme for the Karen people**

There are many ways a conflict can be resolved. All actions by the parties or by any third parties may have an impact, either directly or indirectly on how the conflict develops and ends. I believe that we can achieve our goal to a certain extent by letting the outsiders to contribute to the conflict in different ways. Since the UN cannot directly intervene in such a conflict, we should perhaps think about other ways to gain empathy from the outside world. We live in a modern world characterized by social media. Perhaps, would it be possible to highlight more of the challenges and conflicts we are facing today so that more and more people are aware of the issue? Could it be a solution for Karen organizations around the world to focus on cooperating more closely so that their voices can be heard. Then the international organizations will pay more attention about the situation and what happening today in Myanmar. The countries which cooperate with the Burmese government can contribute to the peace process by sanctioning the government and ending their cooperation with the country. It can be either by ending economic cooperation, humanitarian work and political cooperation. Another important point is that the international researchers should do more research about the situation in Myanmar. The first reason for this is because the work of researchers is recognized worldwide. They have a greater opportunity to increase people's knowledge of the situation they are researching. They can more easily influence the outside world to realize the truth of a matter. In this way, I believe that we can achieve a certain degree of international empathy and support in different ways. Again, it is easier to say than to do. In order for researchers to be able to enter the country to research the situation, it requires that they should be permitted to interview those who they want. It requires the Myanmar government not to decide what to research, who to interview. If the freedom of research is restricted by the government, we would never get a significant truth about the case being researched. It can be a challenge for researchers. Other ways to get international support is to work closely between KNU and Karen organizations around the world. It requires that the collaboration should be based on a common goal, trust and respect. It is important not to misunderstand each other. As I mentioned in the introduction, we are fully influenced by the modern world. Social media can both create closer collaboration between different groups in Karen. At the same time, it can create major complications due to news that are published and shared between us. As a result, I will 4 summarize that close cooperation between groups, common goals, respect, trust and understanding are required to achieve this goal.

**3. Political dialogue for a negotiated settlement with the Burmese government**

Based on all three strategies, I would argue that this strategy will be the most realistic solution based on the current situation. One argument for this is because peace processes often aims to rebuild the country, the state apparatus and the economy. Building a state often involves in changing or drafting a new constitution, planning and administering elections, and changing the judiciary and the security sector, including defense, police and intelligence services. Having a political dialogue for peace negotiations may be the most affordable solution for all parties, but the question is how should this be done? How should such a process take place? Based on what we have experienced, KNU has several peace negotiations with the Burmese government. We have never achieved these negotiations. This strategy is a realistic way to achieve freedom and independence, yet it can be challenging if only one party follows the rules. To achieve the goal, I argue that both parties should relate to the original theme / case that is about freedom and independence. The main topic should be the main focus before they possibly discuss economic development or various business services. In order to carry out such a negotiation, it is important that both parties are willing to find a solution that is acceptable for both parties, and both parties can agree. If one of the parties is not willing to find the solution from the problem of other party, it is also impossible to solve the problem. It is important that both parties are solution oriented in the sense that they must be willing to compromise in order to find a durable solution. Both parties must be willing to compromise to solve the conflict and set up the common goal. I believe that one must be able to provide for both parties to realize the need for them to put aside their prehistory and pride and rather be solution-oriented in order to find a solution that both parties can accept. If we take the current peace negotiations between the Myanmar government and KNU as a starting point, we see that several rules are being broken. While the negotiations are ongoing, we also see that other types of activities take place in the same time before the they have reached a final agreement. We see that the Burmese army send more troops into the Karen state, building roads, schools, economic cooperation with other countries into the Karen state, etc. How do these activities affect the ongoing peace talks? What is the result of such a method of peace 5 negotiations? The civilians still do not get peace, and some may temporarily experience a fruit of ceasefire. But many people are afraid of the Burmese military when they cross the military roads. They face challenges such as their own welfare and prosperity, and the state is occupied in the way that the party enters the state and build villages, schools and temples that are totally against the Karen people. The only positive side of such a negotiation are less civilians lose their lives, and they are temporarily allowed to grow food to meet their basic needs without being disturbed. We can say that this peace negotiation doesn’t lead us to our original goal, namely durable solution and true freedom. It is an easy to make a theory about peace processes, but in practice it can be different from what is written on paper. Of course, it is understandable that theory and reality do not always correspond to each other. We may have created perfect strategies, ideas and structures on how we will conduct a political dialogue. But when we first start, we face challenges, and the other party can influence our original plan in different ways through different methods that we may not be able to be aware of. In this way, our plan will automatically change in relation to our original ideas and strategies. How can we prevent such a situation? What can we as a people, a group and an organization do in the face of various challenges? A way to reach a successful peace agreement, it is important that both parties adhere to the agreement. No one breaks the rules. Both parties have a clear definition of the common conflict that both want to resolve. It is also important that both have a common definition of what freedom and lasting peace are. In addition, trust and loyalty should be key to the peace talks. Even if both parties meet these requirements, it is important that we as a Karen people have some clear rules for ourselves before we enter into such a peace agreement. For the best result and close cooperation, I would argue that it requires not to be naïve. We must focus on our goal, goal-oriented, faithful and loyal to our people. Strong ability for critical thinking and systematic work are very important so that we won’t be easily manipulated, influenced or brainwashed by the other party.

**Conclusion**

After discussing all the strategies, I would like to conclude that all three strategies are important and necessary to achieve our goal and get freedom and autonomy. I do not support armed struggle, but I believe that it is necessary to have a military to defend the state and the people while peace talks are taking place. Starting a political dialogue will be weaker without a strong army that can defend us. The military is in many ways necessary so that the other party does not offend and provoke us as they have done to us since we started our struggle. It is important to get support from the international communities so that more people keep an eye on the conflict and injustices that takes place. It is more important for KNU and Karen organizations around the world to work closely through common goals, understanding, trust and mutual respect. Last but not least, political dialogue is one of the most important strategies for achieving the goal in a peaceful way. But only if both parties follow the rules. Only if Karen's leaders are purposeful and faithful to their people. To work systematically is to have the ability to assess risks and to think critically. Our knowledge should be a priority, and it should be our tools to be able to achieve our goal.