**T he70th Karen Martyr’s Day Essay Competition**

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The history of the Karen Revolution is an important piece of our history that we as Karen should know and strive to pass it onto future generations. When we either talk about or write about Karen people and their freedom movement, it is especially crucial that we know why the Karen revolution began in the first place. This will help us pass down truths and knowledge that we have the very responsibility to share with future generations to come.

We can trace back and learn about the birth of the Karen revolution after the end of World War II when England declared and gave full authority to the Burmese government to rule the country democratically. However the Burmese military regime showed no interest in giving up their hegemony and continued their mission to oppress and persecute ethnic minorities who are natives to the country.

For this very reason, a prominent ethnic group that is large in number gathered among themselves to talk about ways to advocate for their people so that there is equality among the different ethnic groups in Burma, and eventually gain independence to rule their own territory. During that time, president Saw Ba Oo Gyi and other Karen leaders met up to discuss their plans and objectives for their people for self-governance. Unsurprisingly, their requests were immediately rejected by the Burmese military government. As the ruling government had shown no interest in behaving diplomatically, this left the Karen people with only one option: to pick up arms and revolt. In order for the Karen people to successfully accomplish their mission to gain independence, there are three potential options in which we can approach.

Armed struggle

Political dialogue and a negotiated settlement with the Burmese government; and

International intervention and arrangement on the Karen people’s behalf

The first approach - armed struggle

When we look back to the birth of the Karen revolution and how president Saw Ba Oo Gyi other notable leaders mention that in order to achieve our goals, we must pick up arms and have the Karen people become recognized armed group. The vision is that when we pick up arms and defend our people collectively, we will undoubtedly achieve our goal. Most people will think that how we defend our people and land is by only picking up arms and patrolling our areas. We rarely think about other ways in which we can defend our people and country against our enemy. However, as mentioned by Saw Ba Oo Gyi, armed struggle is not the only way for us to defend our people against our enemy and reach our goal. We can fight our enemy through education, our carefully-thought out plan, and through various political strategies. These are a few of the strategies when President Saw Ba Oo gyi had envisioned when he talked about defending our people from the enemy. However a majority of us do not fully understand this approach and think that the only way to win against our enemy is to physically pick up arms to defend, and attack when necessary. For this reason, we see that a big aspect of our revolution is via the armed struggle. When looking back to the Karen revolution from 1949 till 2020, the first approach of armed struggle has not always been the smoothest. For over 70 years of revolution through armed struggle, many lives including children, women and girls, the elderly, soldiers, and many faultless citizens have died and sacrificed their lives for the cause that is freedom. However, the 70 years of armed struggle have brought no peace nor improvements; if anything has worsened over the years.

Why do I say that our armed struggle has seen no improvements? The reason being is because under the Karen revolution, there are more multiple armed groups with varying strategies and intent. Because of differences in leadership and opinions that clash, we see divisiveness where each group goes their own way. And at the end, we see that Karen armed groups collaborate with the Burma army, the very group that they fight against and claim to protect their people from. And unfortunately, this leads to Karen armed group having to fight against another Karen armed group. Because of the lack of cohesiveness, how can we win against our enemy through armed struggle? Some will argue that because of our armed groups, our revolution is able to withstand struggles and stand until today. Although I can agree partly to this statement, I would argue that it will be hard to win against our enemy solely through armed struggle. Because of different Karen armed groups attacking one another and siding with different leads, it is hard to bring everyone on the same page, even if they claim that they are fighting for the same cause.

For various reasons such as the ones mentioned above, many Karen leaders and civilians feel exhausted and discouraged as there is hardly any progress for over 70 years. There are even cases where parents and grandparents who don’t encourage their children to take part in the Karen revolution because of the lack of progress for decades after decades. The Karen soldiers take a big source of encouragement from the everyday civilians who support their work. If parents and grandparents don’t encourage or even discourage the coming generations from participating in the Karen effort, the future of the Karen revolution will not live to see its success. The first approach being armed struggle has brought a lot of pain and discouragement to the Karen people, both soldiers and civilians alike.

However, we also recognize and acknowledge that it is hard for Karen people to revolt without actually having organized armed groups. I say this because the Burmese army and government will not easily accept any diplomatic requests. This is evident when president Saw Ba Oo Gyi peacefully presented his request to the Burmese government but was denied and told that the only way for them to get autonomy for Karen people is to pick up arms and fight for it. Since then, the Karen people have been fighting via armed struggle for over 70 years but have yet to reach our final goal.

The second approach - Political dialogue and a negotiated settlement with the Burmese government

When we look at the second approach, we will realize that the beginnings of the Karen struggle started with Karen leaders peacefully negotiating with the Burmese government after the British gave control over to them. However, the Burmese quickly denied president Saw Ba Oo Gyi’s request and during the process even killed innocent Karen civilians. This eventually led the Karen revolution against the Burmese military. As demonstrated by history, I will say that it is naive to believe that the Burmese government will take pity and give us what we want through peaceful negotiation. In the year 2005, president Bo Mya along with other Karen leaders met with Burmese Government to negotiate treaties but was also quickly and unsurprisingly denied. This event led to another war between the Karens and the Burmese. As shown by the Burmese military on multiple occasions, we can confidently say that the Burmese government has no interest in making peace and would rather use their power to further oppress the Karen. The Burmese have played dirty and have no problem lying to the Karen people again and again.

So when we compare and look at modern-day peace talks between the Karen and the Burmese government, I see no benefits whatsoever for the Karen effort and struggle, especially to the everyday civilians. The military dictators we are dealing with will say one thing and do another, and the Karen have fallen victims to their dirty scheme time and time again. It is impossible for us to make amends and approach the political process in a diplomatic way when the other sides have no interest in making compromises. While the Karen are interested in talking about peace and stopping attacks against the Karen civilians, the Burmese are interested in the business aspect and building roads and dams to benefit off of the Karen territory. Additionally, the general of the Burmese military Min Aung Hlaing has stated that there should only be one armed group within the country, which of course refers to his own Military dictatorship. This is one of the many ways in which the Burmese military seeks to suppress and control the Karen armed groups.

It is very unlikely that the Burmese Military will ever agree to our negotiations, let alone take pity on the Karen people, and give us full autonomy over our land. President Saw Ba Oo Gyi began with peaceful negotiations, followed by other Karen leaders who took this same approach but were denied again and again. Throughout the many years of the Karen revolution, we have heard the well known phrase that goes along the lines of “if not for the Karen people to surrender and go to Rangoon for the necks to be chopped off, the Karen revolution must see an end. Our revolution against the Burmese dictatorship requires both fighting as well as participating in political talks. However, we must always keep in mind that the enemy we are dealing with cannot be easily trusted and do not have our best interest. They may be Buddhist but have no problem killing Buddhist monks.

President Saw Mutu Say Poe has expressed that even though our revolution has surpassed 60 years of fighting, we have no progress and improvement and therefore the best bet is to negotiate with the National Ceasefire with the Burma army in order to avoid any more bloodshed and lives lost. Some improvements that came out of the Peace talks have resulted in civilians able to go to commute more freely, however if we pay attention we will know that this approach is rather more deadly than the first approach that is armed struggle. From the peace talks,we should pay attention to how much progress there has been, if the Burma army is keeping their promise and if there are any changes in the political realm of things. When we compare the Burma army side, we will see that there is a whole ton of benefit that they gain from these peace negotiations. Since then they’ve been able to better quip their military stations and support their soldiers with better resources. Additionally, the Burma army have been able to brag to the world that they are serious about peace within the country and have been successful in deceiving the international community to support them financially for these so called peace negotiations. These are a few examples of how the dictatorship has benefited off of these negotiations when most of the time their president doesn’t even bother to be part of the process.

On the Karen side however, we will see that only the top leaders have been able to participate in this process instead of sending representatives because they are that serious about making amends. And every time the Karen leaders make a request during the meetings, the usual response they get would be that the Burmese representatives will have to pass it on to the higher-ups in order to make any decisions. This is a wake-up call to the Karen people that the Burmese army is nowhere serious about negotiating or making peace with the Karen. The peace talks have been an exhausting process however there is hardly any improvement, if anything we can even say that the situation is rather getting worse. Our leaders have wrestled with the Karen revolution with armed struggle and negotiations simultaneously but have seen no fruition whatsoever. However, the good news is that there is one that approach left; one that we have not really utilized for our fight for freedom and autonomy.

The third approach - International intervention and arrangement on the Karen people’s behalf

The third approach is a strategy that I see is least utilized but am hopeful that it might be the best bet to help us make political amends with the Burma military because it will be globally recognized by human rights organizations. The Burma army has been able to get support from the international community and is able to have a strong military up until today. If the different Karen groups are able to look past their differences and collaborate with the international community and communicate with them to stop supporting the Burma military, I strongly believe that this will put pressure on the Burma army. This is not a new strategy as we have seen that it was modelled by the Rohingya community. Although there is no denying that the Rohingya have struggled terribly under the Burma military, the Karen have struggled under military oppression for far longer. However, because the Rohingya are able to unite collectively, they were able to get the international attention and aid for their struggle. As a result, the international community was able to pressure the Burma military and keep watch on their behaviours.

Our Karen people have been oppressed and persecuted for years after years under the Burma dictatorship but the military have faced no consequences or sanctions from the international community. We can say that this is because there is a lack of unity and collectivism from the Karen side when it comes to seeking international help.

However, we can be encouraged that the Karen will one day gain equality and self-governance. The Karen community is spread out throughout the world with many young Karen people receiving better access and opportunities to explore different career options in health, politics, different army groups, etc. This as a whole is a very beneficial asset to the Karen community to further achieve the fight for self-governance. Now more than ever, the Karen are enlightened and are actively engaging and educating the international world about the Karen struggle.

Compared to the past, it used to be that the international community had zero knowledge of the Karen struggle because of the lack of unity and various viewpoints that stopped people from speaking out. As an example, we will see that last year the Karen community in the U.S gathered in front of the White House with the hopes to share about the Karen struggle, while at the same time the KNU leaders met with the Burma army to talk about the so called “peace-talk”. This imbalance caused the international army to be suspicious of the Karen struggle and disregard it as a whole. To stop any confusion on where we stand or cause the international community to misunderstand us, I believe having strong leadership is the most important thing that we can do. Unfortunately, when we look at our current leaders, it would not be an understatement to say that they lack boldness and authority compared to the Karen leaders in the past. The reason I say this is because although the Karen leaders would meet again and again with the Burma army, there is a lack of accountability and transparency from the way they communicate with civilians. As a civilian myself, I feel that the leaders show no interest in what the rest of us think and rather make important decisions among the few people that are in power.

Going back to the main purpose of this essay, it is crucial that we analyse and reflect on the ways that will bring us the most good while costing us the least harm. This is not us criticizing our leaders or disregarding the tireless efforts that they have put in for our Karen struggle. The hope is that the younger generation will be aware and knowledgeable about their Karen history and one day assist in any way that they can.

Everyone who has been directly and indirectly part of the Karen revolution are in some way exhausted and discouraged by this strenuous struggle to the point where many don’t encourage their children to be involved in this work. This leads to not many young Karen are passionate in the Karen struggle, whether it’s armed struggle, peace negotiations or actively engaging with the international community to increase awareness. Simply put, there are not many young people who are fully committed in the Karen struggle. We have many bright and talented Karen young people who are more than capable to take up leadership roles. We will often hear feedback that the current leaders are quickly aging and about time they pass on the responsibility to the younger generation. However, the problem is that there are no young people to take up leadership which then causes the older ones to continue the fight despite being burnt out from the process.

Sooner than later, the leadership roles of the Karen struggle will one day be the responsibility of the younger generation. Our very own late President Saw Ba Oo Gyi demonstrated this by studying abroad to gain knowledge and experience and came back to fight for the Karen cause at the expense of his own life. For this very reason, I am hopeful that one day the young Karen people that have opportunities for learning return and advocate for their people, there is no doubt that we will achieve self-governance. Even the Burmese government says that if one day all Karen persons recognize themselves and their identity, there will be no need for fighting. This is something that I believe is true, yet far reaching as there are many misunderstandings even within the Karen community. However, we should not be discouraged but hopeful in the future generations and at the same time recognize the ways in which our enemy have tactfully divided our people.

The third approach is the best way in which we can use to help us reach our final goal that is full autonomy and self-governance over our land and people. If all Karen return to Kawthoolei with one heart and one mind to collaborate with the greater Karen community to share knowledge, build institutions, support our soldiers while practicing accountability and transparency, I have no doubt that we achieve our goal of self-governance and freely express ourselves in a way that is true and authentic. Additionally, it is also important to have Karen who will write about our own history and pass knowledge not just to the younger generations but to the international community so that we will be recognized as a people with its own identity. The Karen struggle is not the responsibility of one single person, but one that the entire Karen community must bear. Wherever we may be, may we all strive to do our best to be united and work collectively to achieve our self-governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to end by saying that we should not be discouraged or disheartened. There are Karen communities spread out throughout the world that have shown love and compassion for our country and people and demonstrated that they have not forgotten about the Karen people despite living thousands of miles away. I believe that the Karen people will one day achieve freedom and full equality. I also believe and am very hopeful that young Karen people will take part and wrestle for the Karen struggle. If all Karen people can see eye to eye on these three approaches and work collectively, the Karen people will reach their goal.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Karen Organization of America for creating this competition and giving young people the platform to share their perspectives on the Karen struggle. I hope that this competition will continue on for the years to come and one day give the opportunities for different perspectives to be expressed in the Karen language so that young people in Kawthoolei and the refugee camps will have the opportunity to share their perspectives and showcase their capabilities.