Western Pragmatism Trumps Human Security Concerns in Myanmar

By Pavin Chachavalpongpun

For decades, the West was content to make Myanmar a whipping boy over human rights abuses and other human security concerns, because unlike in other regions of the world, the West had few core national interests at stake in Myanmar. With the country now seemingly on a path toward democracy and reform, the West has ditched its idealism and adopted a pragmatic approach that focuses on Myanmar’s state security and its own business interests, argues Pavin Chachavalpongpun.

MYANMAR HAS FOR DECADES been placed under a harsh spotlight not only for its long night of military rule but also for its notorious human rights record. This appalling situation was one of the main reasons behind stringent international sanctions. Now that Myanmar has embarked on a series of political reforms, Western nations seem to be satisfied with the commitment of Myanmar’s leaders to the ongoing democratization process. Yet this optimism has so far not improved the terrible human rights violations inside the country. Ranging from the state’s use of violence against certain ethnic minorities to the continued brutal attacks against the Rohingya Muslims at the hands of radical Buddhists, Myanmar’s human security situation is in crisis.

In the case of Myanmar, it seems clear that the discourse on “security” has long been dominated and manipulated by the state. In other words, what is considered supreme in the realm of security has been the nation, or more importantly, the state. National security has been prioritized at the expense of the security of the people. This allowed state authorities to legitimize their actions even as they implemented repressive policies against their own people. The discourse on security is never people-centric. Owing to the overwhelming emphasis on national security, the notion of human security has been downplayed in the consciousness of the state.

In addition, the real focus of Western advocacy has not been on human security either, despite engaging rhetoric about promoting human rights. In reality, the West’s campaign to strengthen human security has remained superficial and self-serving. As far as the interests of the West are concerned, “security” in the Myanmar context is also broadly defined as the well-being of the state.

In this essay I discuss reasons behind the crisis of human security in Myanmar. Through the current remarkable political transition, what seems stagnant has been improvement in the human security situation.

Arguably, human security in Myanmar is caught between the domestic “security” discourse and Western advocacy. Whereas the state continues to define and redefine “security” to fulfill its own political agendas, Western human rights advocacy has been held hostage by the West’s own strategic imperatives in the country. In supporting democracy and human rights, Western governments have worked closely with the democratic icon, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as the voice of the voiceless in Myanmar. They have exploited Suu Kyi’s recognized status to legitimize their previous policies toward the military junta, their current policies toward the government of President Thein Sein, and to cover up their pretense of defending human rights in Myanmar. But Suu Kyi herself has shown little interest in raising the issue of human security either, as demonstrated, for example, in her silence regarding the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. As a result, human security issues in Myanmar have been left unattended, both by the state authorities and outside powers.

HUMAN SECURITY IN MYANMAR

In the aftermath of the 2010 general election in Myanmar, when the dictator General Ne Win seized control of the country, the old elite in the
army voluntarily stepped down from power for the first time since 1962, paving the way for a series of political reforms. One of the most striking was the release of Suu Kyi from house arrest; she had been detained in her own residence for 14 out of the previous 20 years. What followed seemed proof that Myanmar might be on the right track in terms of improving the human rights situation. In a broad sense the improvements have been striking: A large number of political prisoners have been released; media restrictions have been eased; widespread Internet usage has been allowed; independent newspapers have licenses to operate legally; and official censorship, while still in place, has become less compelling.

These upbeat developments effectively legitimized the Thein Sein regime and made possible the removal of sanctions imposed on Myanmar by Western governments. On Sept. 5, 2012, the government formed a new National Human Rights Commission composed of 15 former ambassadors, academics and civil servants to assure the world that the mission to safeguard human rights would continue.

But the sense of optimism about human rights improvements has largely been confined within the inner circles of the Myanmar elite and Western powers. In reality, the seemingly improved human rights situation has little to do with the grave condition of human security. Many cases have been reported involving state violence against ethnic minorities following the breakdown of ceasefire agreements between various insurgent groups and the government. The military has been accused of abusing civilians in conflict areas, including forced labor, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, the use of “human shields” and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Human Rights Watch’s World Report 2012: Burma succinctly summarizes key events in the past year:

Human security has been a relatively alien concept in Myanmar, where the security of the nation-state has long been paramount. The making of the “security” discourse in Myanmar is arbitrary because it has been shaped and reshaped according to the changing interests of the Myanmar elite. The state has thus become the equivalent of the nation. Hence, the security of the nation is equal to regime security. Brendan Howe and Suyoun Jang explain this through the actor-centric security paradigm. In this paradigm, security is an essential component of absolute sovereignty and the cornerstone of national interest. It places the security of the nation-state at the center of analysis.

From this viewpoint, the state is forever preoccupied with the need to protect national sovereignty and territorial integrity from foreign and domestic enemies, at the same time as it defends itself from all kinds of threats to its interests. Externally, wars are unavoidable. Internally, political stability and social order is imperative. The priority has been to ensure security, with the military being assigned a primary role in safeguarding the nation-state.

In Myanmar’s case, a number of factors are responsible for such state-centric security. Breast memories of being colonized by the British, a long period of divisive civil war following independence during the Cold War and an unending number of ethnic insurgencies have led the state — and the army — to become the most important institution capable of defending the country. This explains why military rule in Myanmar endured so long, effectively because the junta claimed to protect national security; of course, what exactly they protected remained obscure.

**Western Advocacy: Self-Serving?**

Maung Zarni offers a useful framework for exploring the relationship between human security in Myanmar and Western advocacy. He argues that there are three “security” discourses.
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mar is a testament to the ineffectiveness of the new approach by the West.

This ineffectiveness is partly sustained by the ambiguous position of Suu Kyi. She has remained largely silent regarding the deteriorating human rights situation. She has made no official statement condemning the massacre of the Rohingya Muslims and failed to exercise her moral authority to engage the West in putting pressure on the government about the tragedy.

While visiting Tokyo in April 2013, Suu Kyi made a controversial speech in which she recognized the role of the military in political reform and said, “I seek to establish a society where the military and civilian populations are two sides of the same coin, all working toward the security and freedom of our country.” Yet she did not elaborate on how her work with the military would enhance the level of human security. Ironically, while she met with some of Myanmar’s migrants, a number of Rohingya Muslims were barred from seeing her.

To be fair, the mood of reconciliation in Myanmar set the stage for compromise between Suu Kyi and her political opponents, and it is possible that while Suu Kyi is planning her return to politics, possibly to contest the upcoming presidential election in 2015, she is obliged to reposition herself as an acceptable figure among her enemies.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of this essay is not to investigate the issue of human security as an “independent study” from significant factors inside and outside Myanmar. Instead, it attempts to frame the issue of human security within the two realities that have been responsible for the worsening situation over the years, namely the state-centric view of security and self-serving Western advocacy.

The Myanmar elite have long exploited the discourse of “security” to fulfill their own political agendas. Mainly, such discourse has been used as a shield against enemies of the state; in other words, as protection for the security of the regime at the same time they propagated the importance of national security. This narrow and arbitrary view of “security” ignored the well-being of the people. To make the situation worse, the state was supposed to act as the provider of security to the public but was now blamed for committing violence against the people.

At the same time, Western governments could afford to isolate Myanmar where few strategic interests were at stake. In the process, they campaigned for the protection of human rights in the country, yet, the campaign proved to be rhetorical and bound too tightly with Suu Kyi, who had her own political agenda. Strong sanctions were imposed but they failed to produce the desired result.

When Myanmar decided to flirt with democracy, the shift in the West’s approach was made. But this time, it is based on active pragmatism. In particular, the US pragmatism seems to have downgraded its previous liberal humanism and emphasis on human rights protection, no matter how superficial that emphasis might have been. Security and commercial interests now dominate policy in the West. This explains why there have been few interventions from the outside world on issues like ethnic conflict, communal violence and the appalling condition of economic, health and environmental security.