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Panel: What Matters Now: Social Change in the World

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SOCIAL CHANGE: THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

Kyaw Win

Whenever I think of social change, a monumental date appears in my mind. November 9, 1989. This is the most significant date in my life and for our country and (I believe) for the whole world too. This historic date marked the fall of the Berlin Wall. This meant not only the end of the Soviet Empire and Cold War, but also the birth of a new global thinking. Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning Harvard economist remarked about this event as follows:

“There is a lovely story in Sanskrit about a frog that is born in a well and stays in the well and lives its entire life in the well. Therefore, it has a worldview that consists of the well. That was what the world was like for many people on the planet before the fall of the wall. When it fell, it was like the frog in the well was suddenly able to communicate with frogs in all the other wells.”

When I think about my past life, I am that frog in Amartya Sen’s story. Throughout my life I was kept in the dark well of my country’s political background. To understand the whole story, I need to explain a brief history of my country, Burma, (now, Myanmar). On January 4, 1948, Burma regained her independence from the British Colonial rule. But as soon as we declared our independence, a civil war, based on ideological conflicts, broke out in our country. Under the pressure of civil war, we lost individual freedom, civil society, economic growth and even democratic political life. The Burmese civilian government, inevitably drawn into the civil war, had to rely on the army, and Burmese military became a strong political force.

In 1962, the military took over and ended parliamentary rule. This event ushered in the disastrous era of the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” a euphemism for military dictatorship. Throughout the military reign, the main opposition group was CPB, Communist Party of Burma, the veteran political party founded in 1939 by Aung San, our national hero. The political influence of CPB was very great since colonial days, and the party continued to attract Burmese young people, especially university students until nearly 1990.

When the military took over, I was only a ten year-old child, but I was strongly interested in Marxism through reading novels by left-wing Burmese writers such as Dagon

Taya, Bamaw Tin Aung, Mya Than Tint as well as others. During my university days, I was recruited by an underground unit of CPB and I became one of its members. At that time, Marx was a towering genius for me and the Marxist explanation of how society works came as a thrilling revelation. I believed Marxism was the only ideological weapon for our liberation movement.

However, when I was thrown in prison for the first time in 1976, I realized first-hand the importance of human rights and began to be suspicious of one of Marx's key doctrines. Marx had said that human rights were the prevarication of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, this suspicion could not dilute my belief in Marxism so that I became a communist insurgent when I was released in 1979.

Ironically, my faith in Marxism grew weaker and weaker during my so-called revolutionary days under the flag of communist party. I wanted freedom but was handed another dictatorship. I hoped for the development of our society, but witnessed such great disruption in people's lives that I began to think Marxism was a system for making people equally poor. I could not believe in a violent revolution that means a quest for liberation through death. I wanted to search for practical solutions for my country.

Fortunately, my insurgent days lasted no more than five years. In 1982 I was arrested in a battlefield near the Chinese border and was detained for about four years, enough time to contemplate my experiences. This time my interest went beyond Marxism, and I looked for alternative ideas. While we were wrestling in a civil war, the world had changed dramatically. Both Soviet Union and China had already lost their ideological grip. The cold war was near to end. Marxism was moribund. Most of the world's nations, including our neighboring countries, were redirecting themselves toward democratic, consensual, free-market-oriented governance and away from authoritarian rule with centrally planned economic systems.

During the 1988 democratic uprising, known as "Tetra Eight Movement" (so known because of the four "8" in 8/8/1988), I profoundly realized the true desire of our people. They no longer liked socialism or communism, or any kind of dictatorship. Their destination was to build a democratic society with free-market economy. In fact, this destination was the goal of 1988 movement as well.

After this historic moment, I was imprisoned again. During my imprisonment, the Berlin Wall fell down and the Cold War came to an end. I saw twilight in the dark. The old

era died and a new one was born. The Cold War had been a struggle between two systems, capitalism and communism, and with the fall of the wall there was only one system left. This system was capitalism, otherwise known as the democratic free-market system and the mission of our 1988 movement.

On November 9, 1989 the fall of Berlin Wall unleashed the forces that ultimately liberated all the captive peoples from communist ideology. I was among those captive peoples. The Berlin Wall was a way of preventing a kind of global view of our future. We could not think globally about the world when it was there. We could not think about the world as a whole. When the wall disappeared, our ideologically isolated eggshell broke, freeing our thinking and our future.

Reference---*The World Is Flat* by Thomas Friedman

The Argumentative Indian by Amartya Sen