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By Dr. S.Chandrasekharan.

“What we demanded in 1988 was democracy and the downfall of dictatorship. Today the domination of the dictatorship largely remains and the democracy we have got is half real and half sham.”

This was mentioned recently at the time of commemorating the 30th anniversary of the pro democracy “8888” movement- (August 8, 1988) by one of the representatives of the 8888 movement who took an active part in the protests.

With no strong reason, (were they afraid of the Army?) none of the activists of the 8888 movement have found their due place with the advent of democracy. When they were ready to work for the LDP of Suu Kyi they were largely ignored and in their desperation have started a political party of their own to contest the elections in 2020. It may be too late and the public by and large may have forgotten the sacrifices they made in 1988. Yet I would say, that they should be credited for achieving a semblance of democracy today compared to what happened to the students in the Tien Anmen protests for democracy ten months later in China. The protests in Tien anmen were suppressed with tanks and many of the leaders found the easy way out to get green cards in US and prosper. It was not so with the activists of 8888. They suffered and continue to suffer. But they have returned to Myanmar to make a difference!

It all started with a protest march from the University campus on that fateful day. Soon the protestors were joined by people from all walks of life from monks to students to families. The protests spread all over Myanmar and were finally put down by September 18 when the government in a dispensation called State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took over and continued the suppression. It should have been aptly named SLOSC !(State law and order Supression Council)

The Government of the day claimed that only 350 persons had died in the protests. I recall that firing on the unarmed crowds in Sule

Pagoda itself would have taken many hundreds of lives in that one incident. The number of dead should be in thousands if not more. There is enough literature in the public domain now of the gory details of the protests and the brutal response of the Armed Forces.

Many of the students escaped to the border mostly to Thailand and a few to other countries. They threw away their future, all for the cause of democracy. They did not get either the required help from the ethnic insurgent units and suffered more. On their return after many years they were not to be given enough political space either by the leaders who in the first instance should have been grateful to those activists who suffered, all for the cause of democracy.

In Irrawady News, Kyaw Zwa Moe has given a poignant account recently of what these revolutionaries expected and what they have obtained at the end of the day. This was in reference to the 30th anniversary of the movement.

The protesting students expected that

- * the military would finally return to the barracks
- * an elected civilian government which will transform the battered economy into a prosperous democracy.
- * all ethnic people would experience autonomy and equality
- * The civil wars would end.

What has resulted is that except for an elected civilian government in position none of their expectations have been fulfilled. The problem lies not with the elected government but with the 2008 Constitution that gives the Army unquestionable say in the administration of the Army, border, ethnic insurgent operations and even local government.

The Army Chief claimed in the recent 3rd Panglong Conference that it is the Army that represents the 52 million people of Myanmar and not anyone else. The Army's role is only to protect the people and not represent them in the Parliament or elsewhere.

Kyaw Zwa Mow has described the relationship aptly between the Army and the Government as a "forced marriage" according to the 2008 Constitution and so long as that Constitution remains with Army's vested interests, democracy as mentioned by a representative of the 8888 movement will continue to be half sham and half real.

The Government, as I see is like a caged Tiger. For once, it outwitted the Generals by creating the post of a Counsellor thus negating the very purpose of keeping Suu Kyi out in the new Constitution. As recently as last month, the Government despite strong protests from the

Army and Army-sponsored USDP agreed for an international Commission on the Rohingya issue and indeed the international team has already had a meeting with Suu Kyi. Barring such few examples, the Government except on economic matters has very little say in running the country.

On the 30th year of commemoration of the student's movement, celebrations were held in Yangon and many other towns in Myanmar on a very modest scale. All one could say is that it could have been better. The students' sacrifices for democracy with their lives, well being and future have not been in vain and but for them, Myanmar is not what it would have been today otherwise.

Though not related, there was another anniversary that has gained international attention. Last week also marked another anniversary and that is the coordinated attacks of the ARSA on some of Government posts resulting in loss of life to innocent civilians and Security personnel. It is understood that the Government which has accepted an investigation of the Rohingya incidents by the Commission has also requested them to enquire into the attacks on the police posts and households of other Myanmar citizens.

With a semblance of peace returning and a mutual agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh for return of the refugees in place, it looks that the ARSA would strike again. It is said that the RAB personnel of Bangladesh raided a gun factory in Kalarmar Chhara near Cox Bazar Bangladesh recently and recovered large quantities of guns and other war like materials. It is claimed but not confirmed yet that the gun factory was the source of weapons for the attack by ARSA across the border last August.

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