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June 06, 2023 Global New Light of Myanmar 86

By U AC



Q: A bit about yourself pls.

I am Khaldon Azhari. I am a journalist based now in Japan. I represent some Arabic media and Pan Orient News. The latter is also my company, set up in America, with a branch in Japan. I cover mainly East Asia countries and their issues. I am also a chemical engineer but I like to work in the media. It is my passion and my direction.

Q: This being the first time in Myanmar, how was your impression prior to this visit? Before I get here, the impression was, the same as in the news headlines. Myanmar seems to have some issues, first with the (illegal Bangladeshi immigrants) people, then with the sanctions and finally the attacks by the Myanmar military. So, it is rather not positive news, especially when it comes to the clashes with the Muslim people. The initial impression was that there was a religious cleansing as it was projected mainly in the digital media. There was also news about a military coup that toppled a democratically elected government in Myanmar. With all these going around, it is rare to find any positive or nice news about Myanmar. There was also ASEAN expression of concerns about Myanmar and Japan condemning this or that. It is mostly negative in the last few years. I personally do not believe any place is 100 per cent negative. There is always a background to each issue and each story. This year, I put myself to explore the countries that have issues with the UN and that include Myanmar and I am so glad that I started here.

Q: What actually was the objective of this trip? The objective of this trip was to see firsthand the situation and to see the daily life of the people in Myanmar, not necessarily the political issues or policies and how the society is working out. The first thing to know about a country is to see the people going about their normal lives. I have an extremely good feeling about my first impression of the country. It is very smooth, peaceful and normal. I do not feel I am in any special situation or environment. It looks very much like people are going on about their daily lives, I noticed especially families on the motorcycles. It is very nice to see, even though it looks dangerous for riders. Anyway, the impression is very good and it looks much like a traditional society. I may be very conservative but I like the traditional society.

Q: What were your unique experiences during this trip? So far my trip is not finished yet. I visited some resorts. I feel that the nature factor is very beautiful in this country. I see trees everywhere. Life goes very smoothly here. I do not feel stressed out at all. There is a very relaxing ambience everywhere. Unlike living in a big city such as Tokyo, it is not stressful here. I do not mean any positive or negative about that. Just the lifestyle. So far I do not have any reasons to leave Myanmar soon. I would rather stay longer to explore the country more.

There was one incident that I like to mention. As we were coming down from Nay Pyi Taw City to the airport, our car got a tyre puncture. The two people who were just passersby on the road stopped their makeshift vehicle and helped us change the tyre. That was amazing. They just did it and left. They did not expect anything and did it enthusiastically. I felt this represents the nature of the feelings of the people and they like to help each other without expecting anything in return. It was a very special experience.

I also met some ministers here. I have firsthand experience with their explanations of the current situation and these sounded very reasonable to me.

Q: As a correspondent, what would you say are the most common misconceptions about Myanmar? I wanted to tell you what happened to me when I told some of my close friends and family members that I was going to Myanmar. They all expressed immediate concerns and feared that I was endangering my life. It was not like I might be robbed or lions might attack me in the jungle. It is an expression of the life-threatening atmosphere in Myanmar. Of course, I personally do not think so because every time there is media hype about something, we know that is not exactly the case. They actually told me it was dangerous and that I might be killed because I was a Muslim.

I do not think there is anywhere in the world where you might be killed because you belong to a particular religion. I was really surprised at how much these people have these negative images of Myanmar embedded in their minds. It's unbelievable.

Yes, there might be clashes somewhere for whatever reason, but it does not mean that the whole country is in a danger zone for people belonging to certain religions. I know that without any evidence, this kind of conception is wrong. This is hype, propaganda or fake news. I know that for a fact. But I wanted to experience myself and I have zero concern about my safety from this kind of threat. So far it is absolutely the opposite of the outside world's conceptions. Actually, I feel too safe here.

Q: Why do you think this type of misconception happens? Obviously because of what happened during the Rohingya problem. There was a lot of reporting about it in an exaggerated way. It was reported as if there was a religious cleansing, based on your ID. 'Show me your id. If you are a Muslim, you are killed on the spot.' That was the conception.

I remembered I saw a video once, that claimed somebody is burning a Muslim kid alive. I went on to check the authenticity of the video and we realized it was absolutely edited. I then realized somebody was trying to ignite confrontation. Maybe there were some clashes, of course, it happened everywhere. I do not want to say anything about it because I was not there. I was not following these news stories. I have no real opinion about it.

The way they projected the event as religious cleansing, I felt it was not correct. I know there are many Muslims living normally in Myanmar. There are many mosques there. And I am doing Friday prayers after a couple of hours. If there is cleansing, it should have been done long ago. And the mosques would not be here in the first place.

I saw on some reports that there was an ethnic problem. It happened everywhere. I would like to cover more on the issue. As a journalist, you have to find the truth and report the truth. We report - you decide. We are not part of any party, basically.

Q: What approach should Myanmar take to address these? The approach is very clear. Just open it up. Let the international media come and see firsthand the situation and report on it. Because second hand reporting from people who are going with too many religious feelings or from people with half information are very dangerous. If I go there, I would interview people, and I will see what is happening on the ground. Yes, there might be tragedies. But our mission is to find out why these tragedies took place and if it is just disputed between ethnic people, it happened all over the history of mankind.

The first thing for the Myanmar government, is to open up for foreign media, especially from the countries related to the issue, i.e., Muslim countries. Invite journalists, representatives and mediation parties from these countries, to come and see, talk to both sides and let's solve the problem. If it is a complicated ethnic problem, as I read, then Myanmar should show that we are trying to solve it.

I heard from the Minister for International Cooperation that they are starting to have the returnees back to Myanmar. That is a very good action to solve the problem. If the government allows the stakeholders to come here and participate in the negotiations and help at least, that would be very helpful to show the good intentions and the fact that we are not what you say.

Q: How about immediate steps? Of course, I am not in a position to tell the Myanmar government what to do. But if I were in such a position, I would send missions to all Islamic countries. And I would invite immediately some representatives from these countries, and I explain to them on the ground what happened and I would allow the free exchange of opinions. I will let them take photos and interview anyone they want. Total openness. That will help to restore trust immediately, which is the first ingredient to have a new start. Myanmar has a good potential to have good relations with countries all over the world, including Muslim countries and especially Arab countries. The best way is to talk to each other. Human exchanges are very crucial at this point. Instead of letting the parties who have nothing to do with the conflict report about it, we can set the narrative.

Q: What would u say to those who said the Myanmar government is killing Muslims across the country?? I think this is absolutely not true. I could not say anything to them because I do not think they are going to be listening to me. It seems they are going on with their agenda regardless of the facts. I seriously do not believe Myanmar has any interest in killing Muslims. Absolutely not. Yes, there might be some issues in the Bengali India. I heard that they came from Bangladesh a long time ago and settled. They came from British India to participate in farming. So there is the historical background. And it is normal to have clashed with the locals. It's human nature actually. We cannot avoid that. If Myanmar wanted to kill these people, they would not let them come in, in the first place.

Myanmar people did not come from some other place and settled here. They are the original people, unlike Israel, e.g., I think this kind of media propaganda or social media spreading of fake news, you have to see who is behind it. Any videos of any attack can be created in any studio across the world. I can be in a studio in New York and present as if I am in Myanmar. The government here, should also chase to some extent, those who are behind these fake media stories and try to establish facts and show this is not what is going on.

Of course, I cannot say something happened or nothing happened, but it does not make sense that the government is killing people that easily. It seems to me that a problem suddenly broke out somewhere and it developed. Maybe it surprised everybody so no appropriate steps were taken to solve it on the spot. Then it escalated and outside forces ignited the escalation to a whole new level.

I think we need to talk to the right people and show that the country is normal like any other country. That problem is a problem yet it is not like what the outside world thinks, basically. I like to go to that area and explore myself in the future.

Q: In terms of responding to international propaganda or fake news, so far Myanmar has been on the defensive side. Why would you not recommend being defensive regardless of the time? Because you are dealing with adversaries who are going to attack regardless of whether you are right or wrong. But as they say in soccer or football, the best way for defence is attack. But in Myanmar's case, the best way for the attack is to attack. You need to attack and the case; you need to go forward very aggressively and you have to set up immediate goals and prevent them powerfully.

I think you need to take steps every day, e.g., if there is a G7 meeting these are unfair, you need to send a pre-emptive message to G7. If there are sanctions and you think these are unfair, you send them a message, instead of waiting until they send messages of condemnation. We should act proactively instead of just reacting to negatives from others.

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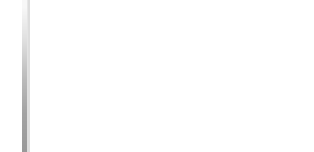
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7 June 2023

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