

## **Saboi Jum – A Man of Peace**

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In the history of every country, some people make a difference at a critical time. Rev. Saboi Jum is one of them. He never attained political power or state offices, but his was the soft power of conviction, faith and a deep love for his fellow human beings. As leader of the Kachin Baptist Church he wielded great influence in the Kachin community in the north of Burma at a time when it was literally cut off from the rest of the world and in the middle of a bloody war with military dictators. He was the voice of the Kachin people within Burma, while his friend Brang Seng and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) challenged the regime from outside. He became one of the architects of the ceasefire agreements in 1994, the result of which has saved many lives even if it has failed to improve the living conditions of the Kachin people as much as Saboi had hoped.

Saboi's role has to be seen in its historic context. Kachin State is the most northern part of Myanmar. It was formed after the Burmese government, under Aung San, reached the Panglong Agreement with the Shan, Kachin, and Chin peoples in 1947. The agreement accepted "full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas" and envisioned the creation of a Kachin State by the Constituent Assembly. It was officially formed in 1948. The vast mountainous hinterlands are predominantly Kachin inhabited, whereas the more densely populated railway corridor and southern valleys are mostly Shan and Bamar (Burmese). Historically, the Kachin are Christian, while Shan and Bamar are Buddhists. For Saboi, as for most Kachins, the freedom of religion was an important part of life. He went to B.Th Burma Divinity School, Insein, Yangon (1954- 1959) and studied at Overseas Missionary Study Center, USA as well as Winnipeg Theological Seminary, Canada (1987– 1988) and became a Baptist minister. He also holds a Honorary Doctor degree from Philadelphia Biblical University, USA.

In 1961, Prime Minister U Nu declared Buddhism the state religion and the following year the Military seized power under General Ne Win, who unilaterally abrogated the Union of Burma constitution negotiated with Aung San. The Kachins rebelled against the ensuing cultural, political and economic repression and formed the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) under the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), which kept control over most of the Northern region bordering China; aside from the major towns and railway corridor, this part of Kachin State has been virtually independent from the mid-1960s through 1994.

While Saboi Jum was Director of the Christian Education Department of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), whose General Secretary he later became, he worked closely in Myitkyina with the charismatic Maran Brang Seng, who was headmaster and principal of Myitkyina Baptist School and five years his senior. However, as living conditions deteriorated, Brang Seng went underground and joined the KIO whose leader he became in 1975. The KIO established an effective administration in the Northern territories, but land-locked and isolated, Brang Seng also sought international recognition for the Kachin

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demands of autonomy within a federal Union of Burma. He had met with Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Enlai in 1967 seeking Chinese support for the KIO, but later steered his organization toward the pro-Western National Democratic Front (NDF), an alliance of ethnic rebels along the Thai-Burma border. The ethnic rebel groups had set up their headquarters in Mannerplaw, a jungle camp not far from Mae Hong Song in Thailand.

Far from being a sectarian secessionist, Brang Seng was a leader with a broad vision. He wanted to preserve the Union of Burma by setting up a democratic federal state, in which the ethnic minorities would coexist as equals with the Burman majority and were free to practice their religions, languages and customs. He wished to learn from other countries. I remember one occasion when discussing federalism with the KIO chairman in his extremely simple hut in Mannerplaw, he took a copy of the German Constitution out of a box in the corner of his room and asked me questions on how to apply these principles to a future Constitution for Burma. While Brang Seng believed that the Generals in Rangoon would only change under pressure from outside, which justified armed resistance, he was also aware of the need to mobilize the Kachin people inside Burma. The close cooperation between Brang Seng as KIO chairman and Saboi Jum, then General Secretary of the KGB, allowed the two leaders to build a strong movement for democratic change in Burma. One lesson I learned from them was that you have to stand up for your convictions and rally support sometimes in different functions when you believe that the world needs to change.

With the end of the Cold War, international support for insurgent groups in Burma disappeared. The Communist Party of Burma had collapsed, and Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism was abandoned by the new military rulers after 1988. Armed resistance to the Burmese military occupation became increasingly difficult. Brang Seng realized the need to find a peaceful settlement for the political conflict that would, he hoped, ultimately realize a federal state in a democratic Burma. Who could have been a better bridge for dialogue than Saboi Jum, a man of faith and religious convictions who was trusted by all Kachins and had an international network of support through his church? For the next five years, Reverend Saboi Jum, together with his brother Khun Myat, a businessman, and Duwa La Wawm, former ambassador to Israel, ceaselessly negotiated with the Burmese generals as middlemen for the KIO. The KIO wanted to negotiate a ceasefire first and then go step by step to find a political solution. But the NDF and the leaders of other ethnic groups wanted to find a political solution first and then agree on a ceasefire. When this strategy failed to gain support from other organisations in the NDF, the KIO signed a separate cease-fire in February 1994. This subsequently led to a rift between the KIO and its allies and the KIO's ejection from the NDF, but it set a precedent which was soon followed by other groups.

Saboi Jum wanted to set an example. He was acutely aware of the suffering the long civil war had caused for the Kachin people. Families were torn apart, soldiers were killed, civilians mutilated, children suffering from malnutrition, and over 6% of the population was internally displaced (IDP). He sincerely hoped that the ceasefire would allow a new beginning for the development of economic prosperity in Kachinland. However, the results were mixed. Fighting stopped and the number of casualties dropped, even if accidents of confrontation continued. After the ceasefire, China forced 20 000 refugees living at

the other side of the border back into Kachin State, thereby accentuating the problems of internally displaced people. The KIO started a resettlement program for which Saboi had hoped to obtain international assistance. In vain. The world did not consider northern Burma to have strategic value. Nevertheless, the conditions for working in Kachin State improved. Communication opened up, traveling became easier, and tourists arrived. What was once an isolated region of an isolated country became accessible for the outside world. NGOs, most prominently Metta Development Foundation, of which Saboi was Chairman for some time, were able to come in and work at a grassroots level and build a civil society that was to be the backbone of a future democracy.

I met Saboi for the first time in Mytkyina in 1994 when I was part of a delegation of European friends who came to witness the ceasefire progress. I was impressed by his warm and human nature, his commitment to peace and his strategic vision for the betterment of the Kachin people. He had organized visits in remote villages where hundreds of people came out to celebrate the first foreigners in half a century. Hope and enthusiasm were tangible wherever we went. It was from Saboi's house in Mytkyina that I spoke by telephone for the last time with Brang Seng, who had been hospitalized in Kunming (China) after a stroke; he died shortly afterwards. He asked me to help Saboi in his efforts to build peace and to transform Burma into a federal democratic state. I have tried my best to honour this trust.

Saboi invited me back several times, especially to the huge KGB celebration in Mandalay in 1996 for the translation of the Bible into Jigphaw language. It was impressive to see how he was able to engage with Gen. Khin Nyunt and the other generals while at the same time pushing forward the interests of the Kachin people. It taught me an important lesson. As many Western human rights activists, I had a tendency to take the moral high road: I would despise the generals and avoid them. On the few occasions I met them, I would ask them to release Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. How stupid! Saboi taught me that when you need to clean out the staples, you will get your hands dirty. Compromises are never fully satisfactory. Saboi was attacked by many for being willing to exchange with military leaders. But his heart remained pure, his vision clear: he had to deal with realities as they were in Burma.

The most difficult question was how to revive the economy in this least developed part of this least developed country. Saboi frequently sought my advice as an economist. Unfortunately, I was skeptical as to how far the improvements could go. The Burmese economy was severely distorted by military rule and Ne Win's previous "scrambled egg between socialism and Buddhism". Markets were places for barter, but money did not function as a store of value and banks were dysfunctional. Inflation was high and foreign exchange was unavailable to ordinary businesses. Setting up businesses, which could have made a difference for the Kachin people, was dependent on military authorization, which meant that the main source of income for Kachin society was the more or less illegal exploitation of natural resources. This was not an environment which would allow ordinary Kachin people to prosper. Instead, Burmese army commanders took advantage of the new accessibility of the North to grab economic privileges for themselves. My advice was to work for a full democratic transformation of Myanmar, for it was impossible to do so only in one part of the country. Not surprisingly, the situation deteriorated in the

following years. The ceasefire had not helped to usher in democracy and human rights for ethnic minorities.

Sadly, Saboi Jum, the honest broker between two worlds, was accused by both sides of working for the other. He preached patience, transparency and sincerity and, in 2000, he set up Nyein (Shalom) Foundation, which still continues his work. But when armed struggle resurged in 2010, Saboi recognized a new approach was needed: "It is useless to make another ceasefire agreement because we have already done it in 1994. The next step is for political dialogue", he said in 2012. Today, in 2016, with the new government formed by the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the time is finally ripe for the big transformation. This is the moment to seize the opportunity to establish basic individual rights of freedom of expression, of freedom of worship, educational pluralism, safe property claims, a stable currency and a federal structure of the state that allows the peripheral territories to develop their own economic strength. Persistence is one thing that Saboi taught us, but timing the advance is another prerequisite for success.

I have fond memories of Saboi Jum. I saw him as a loving father, an engaged churchman, a political mediator, and a visionary for peace. No doubt, he found the strength to withstand adversities through his faith. In the late 1990s, he came with his wife to visit Paris and spoke to the members of the *Association France-Birmanie*, an NGO supporting the democracy movements in Burma. It was a rare moment to meet the man from the Kachin Hills in the vibrant city of history. He was eager to learn and apply his new learnings to his own world at home. A lovely moment, and I am grateful for it.