

“Why is Yangon New Transport System still facing problems?”

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Public transport is one of the most important public services for the people living in lower middle income countries such as Myanmar¹. It is especially true for the people living in big cities because of the cost, safety and convenience. In Yangon where motorcycles are not officially allowed to use for transportation, it is even more important for most of the people living in the city.

Out of 7 million populations in Yangon, over 2.8 million rely on public transport systems² and they mainly use bus service although there are people who use urban railway system and other means of transport such as private taxis. Therefore, whenever talking about transport system in Yangon, people tend to discuss on bus service because it is the ones that has major impact on their day-to-day life.

Public transport in Yangon before 2017 was dominated by bus network of Yangon Motor Vehicles Supervisory Committee (colloquially referred to as Ma Hta Tha). This bus network was composed of 7800 registered private owned buses with over 300 bus lines. There were a lot of complaints on behaviors of bus conductors, drivers and operators, but people did not have much choice for their transportation and Ma Hta Tha had become a bitter ally for them.

Although the previous government tried to improve the bus service of Yangon, they did not have much success and could only initiate small scale reforms such as implementation of Yangon's first bus rapid transit system (BRT). When NLD Government came into power in 2016, one of the priorities of Yangon Region Government was to reform bus service. Because of it, Yangon government initiated the reform process by introducing Yangon Bus Service (YBS) during the first year of their term.

Initially, people saw this effort as a ray of hope to ease their day-to-day transport problem and the plan received significant public support. However, the launch day saw a number of problems and inconvenient which made the people confused and left stranded on the road for a long time. Ever after more than one month, people still faces certain issues in using the bus service in their day-to-day routine. So, why did the new service face the turbulent start and why are people still facing the issues? We can summarize the causes into three main causes as followed.

Many people saw this reform as a rush decision by the Yangon government to please their supporters. Reforming the whole bus service of Yangon was a tremendous work and needed a lot of time for planning and preparation. However, Yangon government would like to show their commitment on NLD 2015 Election Campaign Slogan “Vote for Change” by trying to make changes that had direct impact on people’s life within a short time. Therefore, the government initiated the process without proper planning and preparation. On the launch day, there were about 3700 registered buses in YBS and only 60% of them could run on the road³ because the remaining were not ready to run as YBS buses. The government planned to buy more buses for the service but it would take some months to get them and integrated into the system. Moreover, the government accessed lowly on the actual demand and did not have back-up plan to compensate the situation. Therefore, they relied on old buses of Ma Hta Tha and private charity cars to fill the gaps in first week. Moreover, the drivers and conductors were not

¹ <http://data.worldbank.org/country/myanmar>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yangon_Bus_Service

³ <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/business/24595-yangon-govt-promises-ybs-improvements.html>

provided adequate orientation/training for the change and they still act like their former self as in working with Ma Hta Tha.

Yangon government did not consider the experts' opinions/suggestions and the reform was solely the idea of the government. In 2014, JICA produced a master plan called "the Project for Comprehensive Urban Transport Plan of the Greater Yangon"⁴ which outlined how the bus service in Yangon should reform. That plan was produced in consultation with many stakeholders including government officials and private sector. That plan was submitted to the previous government which led to introducing Yangon BRT. New Yangon government inherited the plan and worked with JICA on the reform initially. However, when the reform was launched, Yangon government only implemented their own plan without integrating the master plan. At first, the government claimed that the reform was done with the coordination of JICA but it was discarded after JICA said that YBS reform was not their suggestion.

General public opinion and participation in formulating YBS reform was close to none. When formulating the reform, there were no proper public consultation and awareness about it. The government only met with certain stakeholders such as officials from Ma Hta Tha, private companies, etc. and plan for the reform. People only knew that the reform was coming but they did not know exactly about it. The bus routes were drawn based on the suggestion of Ma Hta Tha Officials without taking the public opinion. The issues faced by the people on the launch day such as inconvenient routes were the result of these lacks of consultation. The government only tried to ask for public participation in solving the issues rather than inviting the public for drawing reform plan.

Because of these reasons, many people in Yangon still face challenges in using YBS even after one month of the launch. Yangon government could have avoided most of these issues if they handled above mentioned causes correctly. Now that, the reform process has started, there are a few things Yangon government can do to improve the process in additional to the already planned ones such as introducing the smart card payment, changing the old buses with the new ones. The bus drivers, conductors and operators should be given sufficient orientation or capacity building to deliver the better service. Bus routes should be regular evaluated and change if it is needed. General public opinions should be collected regularly on how the bus drivers, conductors and operators should be trained, most appropriate bus routes, bus fares, etc. For the long term, the government should drop off the control of YBS, draw concrete rules and regulation, and allow private companies to run bus services because fair competition is the best way to get better service with reasonable price and people ultimately know what is best for them.

⁴ https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2014/140828_01.html