



CENTER OF NATIONS SLOVAKIA

ANALYSES

Center of Nations Slovakia

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March 2008

CARROT, STICK OR DIALOGUE? REVIEWING THE TOOLBOX FOR BURMA

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THE
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To preclude any expectations possibly raised by the title: This article does not claim to know the final answer. Rather, it tries to analyse Burma's situation in the global community, which is presently marked by a deadlock – a deadlock that seems to suit the junta as the foreign powers' inability or unwillingness to act comes at the perfect time for the Generals. And that, after all, for almost two decades.

Consensus on the Burma¹ situation seems even rare when we go to the more general question as to whether anything should be done at all. Several key players demand non-interference, yet on less public stages do not appear to restrict their influence in Burma. Burma is first and foremost a land in deep trouble. Looking at the indicators, one has to wonder how the ruling clique manages to continue profiting from a country that is continuously shaken by crises. How can Burma, despite its obvious weakness and dependency, flirt with strong powers competing in the region and keep international pressure at bay until public interest disappears into oblivion? What therefore can international stakeholders do to help the Burmese population? And lastly: are there any lessons to be learned from the crackdown on peaceful protests in 2007?

Before embarking on these questions, it might be useful to take a look at the problem from a global perspective. Regarding the situation as of early 2007, the picture is strangely dissonant: on the one hand, the standpoints of many powerful players suggest that the Burmese situation does not merit further attention. On the other hand, when the issue was brought to the UN Security Council on January 12, China and Russia together vetoed a draft resolution that had called on Burma to release all political prisoners, begin widespread dialogue and end its military attacks and human rights abuses against ethnic minorities. This was the first use of multiple vetoes in eight years. The issue, thus, cannot be one of only marginal or regional interest.

Burma is one of the world's most evident cases of approaching humanitarian crisis, regime brutality, and the violation of human rights. For a long time already, its regime can exist despite its weaknesses and operate amid opposing external forces. It even plays an active role in keeping the leeway open by making deals with regional and global powers, balancing their influence by avoiding exclusive alliances and playing competitors off against each other. When international demands for democracy or human rights are paired with pressure, Burma habitually responds with symbolic signs of goodwill, like the burning of opium fields or the drafting of a constitution.

Looking at the heavily propagated "Roadmap to Democracy", one might be reminded of the ancient paradox of Zeno of Elea about the race between Achilles

and the tortoise, the latter one having a head start. While the Greek hero is significantly faster than the tortoise, he never manages to catch up. Whenever Achilles crosses the distance between himself and the tortoise, the tortoise is ahead again – he is never able to reach his opponent and always lags behind. The apparent flaw in the logic points to an interesting problem of mathematics: every distance can be split into an infinite number of fractions, which again can be split, and so forth. The Greek hero would lose himself in smaller and smaller fractions of the way and never reached his goal.

It seems that the Burmese regime is successfully following a similar strategy of putting a goal out of reach by stretching the way to this goal into an unlimited number of subsections; the regime thus avoids accusations of being stagnant. Burma definitely does not have much wealth or power, yet it has sufficient cards to play as trumps: the card of admitting UN representatives for a visit and setting the date, the card of granting them the right to talk with the oppositional leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the card of appointing a liaison officer to produce a dialogue between her and the government, the card of releasing political prisoners, of the national convention, of finalizing a constitution, of holding a referendum, of setting a date for new multi-party elections, which already took place in 1990. As lame as the tortoise might be, Achilles will never catch up, sorting out all the cards.

When searching for analyses of the situation in Burma, you will find that sources are rare. But what's worse, European media are often alarmingly indiscriminate in reporting information from official Burmese news media, without actually considering other sources. Either an inhuman regime is still appreciated as a guarantor of stability and professionalism or studying the reports² of NGOs is simply too much effort for the journalists.

In describing the situation in Burma one is tempted to use superlatives: "Burma is ruled by one of the world's worst regimes, a military dictatorship which is guilty of every possible human rights violation", as Christian Solidarity Worldwide summarizes it. The Burmese regime is accountable for the elimination of free press and political opposition, torture in prisons, forced labor, child labor, the use of child soldiers, armed conflicts against civilians, raising even the suspicion of genocide, and draining the budget from welfare to warfare, from health and education to the armed forces, thus causing the rapid dissemination of malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS. The infrastructure is blatantly underdeveloped, the private sector has to cope with bribery and frequent power drop-outs. Though there are some achievements such as the availability of technology in some places, most of the Burmese

¹ also known as *Myanmar*. The EU uses the term *Burma/Myanmar*.

² good starting points are www.altsean.org or www.burmalibrary.org.

population suffers from poverty, debt, and an overall feeling of hopelessness. Forty percent of Burmese children are malnourished, and 10% of newborn babies don't survive the first five years of life³. There is a big difference between towns and rural areas, which explains why tourists and foreign correspondents rarely see the real picture.

Burma is a land of numerous minorities that do not share a common history of stable statehood and often do not even speak a common language. Therefore, the European experience of transition from communism cannot easily be translated to the Burmese case, let alone issues like civil war, landmines, diseases, and an age-long history as an army camp.

Since 1987, Burma has borne the status of a Least Developed Country (LDC). Neither could an incentive in the form of ASEAN membership ten years later nor the tireless work of NGOs spur a change in governance. It is obvious that the strength of the Burmese regime cannot be understood without looking at China, and then Russia, India, and the ASEAN. The latter is an important source of technology (together with Japan) and education. In the twelve years from 1988 until 2000, Burmese universities were open for only 2.5 years⁴. Southeast Asia furthermore serves as a symbolic shelter for Burmese leaders, where they believe their families are safe. Home is where you trust the surgeons – and for the Burmese Generals this remarkably happens not to be China. However, what China could be worried more about is the influence of ASEAN on Burma, as much as ASEAN is worried about the influence of China. China is not only influential, it also opens a vision for Burma by its own example: being well respected and flattered by the West for its successful economy despite the disrespect for human rights and civil liberties.

Speaking frankly, the member states of ASEAN have no reason to change anything in Burma, apart from doing a favor to the West. Refugees do not pose more problems even to Thailand than can be outweighed by the benefit of cheap labor. Only a crisis caused by drugs and disease could change the mind of Thailand and become a bargaining chip between ASEAN and the EU.

USING SANCTIONS ON BURMA

Sanctions are no doubt one of the strongest tools available to promote changes in Burma. The question remains however, as to how to use them and whom they will affect. There are two main positions, both striving for democratic change in Burma, but oddly going

³ see the above mentioned sources and reports by UNICEF

⁴ ACHILLES J.: Das Bildungswesen in Birma/Myanmar – Erfahrungen zum Engagement im Bildungsbereich. in: Armut im Land der goldenen Pagoden, Asienhaus, 2005

opposite ways. The first one believes that sanctions would weaken the regime and cause an inner process that leads to a change of policy, a national uprising or a coup among the middle army ranks. Defenders of this position admit that isolation also harms or might harm the population and constrains the development of an educated and prosperous middle class that would be useful for effecting change and subsequently running Burma in a transitional state. Nevertheless, they believe that a comparably short period of suffering is acceptable, if it – and only it – can bring sustainable change. The other main position holds that the regime can only be overcome by penetrating and influencing society through close interaction, for example through economic channels – if business encourages an opening with the West, and the population gets actual incentives (e.g., increased purchasing power) to promote change. It is certainly not reasonable to assume that business relations with Burma will automatically bring a benefit for the population, especially when they live in rural areas or even in regions of armed conflict. Some authors estimate that almost 50% of the state budget goes to the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese army, while only a single-digit percentage is used for healthcare and education. The development of the Burmese economy over the last decade has been limited to a small part of the population, often associated with the military.

The international community needs to keep in mind that endorsing sanctions does not mean excluding dialogue. Or, to put it the other way round: promoting dialogue does not imply giving up sanctions. But dialogue on its own is not enough. It can too easily be misused by the regime to stall for time, make a show of goodwill and divert attention. Before commencing any dialogue, the following must be set: benchmarks, incremental steps with a verifiable timeline, and the circumstances under which the dialogue will be considered as having failed.

Dialogue and cooperation must as well be safeguarded from being misused for propaganda purposes, as happened with a German foundation⁵. This organization was not only praised by the government's media for allegedly taking its side, but its leading delegate, according to Western media, even downplayed the severity of the crackdown in 2007. This case warns against trusting an inhuman regime when it comes to the public exploitation of well-intentioned collaboration and also reminds to carefully choose parameters like time and staff.

According to some authors, abandoning sanctions could be feasible if the emerging openness would be used to support the Burmese middle class and the private sector to develop a counterweight to the ruling clique and to foster a capacity for transition. But this hope is based on

⁵ Spiegel Online, October 9, 2007 about the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, on www.spiegel.de

two arguable assumptions. First, that foreign investors can be instructed by their governments as to where and under which conditions to invest and, second that the private sector in Burma is distinct from the regime. This policy of keeping doors open through business cooperation did not work well when foreign investors like Total, Chevron, Siemens⁶, and numerous Japanese corporations expanded their influence in Burma without even bothering to set a course for the protection of human rights or later even issue a statement about the crackdown.⁷

Given that the EU endorsed extensive sanctions against the regime only after the protests in 2007, it cannot be said that sanctions have already proved ineffective. Targeted sanctions are a strong and also a new tool to spur change in Burma. Even though other countries will continue doing business with the regime, the EU should confirm its image as a community of values – or risk both its credibility and cohesion.

In short: Sanctions yes, and targeted on the core business of the Burmese junta. But to avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater, we have to make sure that the suffering population is affected as little as possible. There's a common understanding that humanitarian aid in particular should not be restricted. It has been pointed out⁸ that humanitarian aid presents an opportunity to promote dialogue and foster the seeds of civil society inside Burma – though this engagement has to be monitored very carefully not to let the aid be channelled into wrong hands and not to give the regime an incentive to withdraw from its duties of providing for the population. It seems reasonable to demand that the authorities cover some costs for every project.

In all these activities, international stakeholders must keep an eye on the USDA⁹, a Burmese GONGO¹⁰ that has reportedly been involved¹¹ in the attempted assassination of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2003 and can increasingly be found wherever foreign organizations are seeking civil society actors. This constitutes a dangerous step towards totalitarianism in Burma.

⁶ others are still checking the market, like Bosch during the "Saffron Revolution"; according to the regime's English mouthpiece *The Myanmar Times*, www.mmtimes.com/no388/bo03.htm

⁷ for more information about the lawsuits against the oil companies Unocal (now part of Chevron) and Total for having used the service of the Burmese army, see Earth Rights International, www.earthrights.org/legal

⁸ LORCH J.: Der Rückzug des UN Global Fund aus Burma. in: Armut im Land der goldenen Pagoden. op. cit.

⁹ *Union Solidarity and Development Association*

¹⁰ *Government-operated non-governmental organization* - state-run but pretending to be a NGO

¹¹ The USDA itself denied any involvement. See information from Altsean, op. cit.

AFTER THE "SAFFRON REVOLUTION"

In September 2007, tens of thousands took to the streets of Rangoon and other towns to protest against the government, giving rise to cautious optimism. The processions of monks followed by a reckless crackdown evoked a huge echo in the world media and forced foreign governments to take a clear stance in public on the Burmese regime. But the protests before the monks' appearance as well as the police raids and measures after the "Saffron Revolution" for the most part went unnoticed. While the protests in 1988 were not witnessed by foreign media as they were not present in the country, the regime now had its hands full in trying to confiscate all the cameras, identify clandestine correspondents, and cut Internet connections. Still in mid-February 2008, Burmese authorities were busy admonishing publicists and limiting news Web sites to the censored content of their print issues.

According to the Thailand-based *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners* the number of political prisoners climbed up to over 1,864. The UN Special Representative Ibrahim Gambari remains engaged inside Burma and in the region. The Council of the EU on February 18, 2008 confirmed that the full participation of the opposition and ethnic groups constitute a condition for national reconciliation and stability and is calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners.

Looking at the past protests and their ongoing suppression, what observations can be made that might affect decisions on Burma?

1. There cannot be any doubt about the level of violence the regime can use to suppress public opinion, opposition forces, and press freedom. This is a setback in the hope that change could somehow grow inside Burmese society and then well up into the streets to force the rulers to resign, similarly to what brought the fall of communism in Europe. The regime reacted in a routine manner, reminding us of the war against civilians in Burmese border areas. The regime did not hold back at all, even though among the targets were monks.

2. The demand for dialogue between the regime and the opposition – mainly the NLD¹² – now appears in a different light. After 2007, finally, a dialogue is indeed taking place, but it is not as meaningful as it should be and it is carefully isolated by the regime from the "real" politics, being apparently degraded to a simple show.

3. The crackdown does not bring any new answers to the question of whether to support or reject sanctions. Burma now is back on the agenda and the world is forced to consider the atrocities that have been well documented already before the protests. Political

¹² *National League for Democracy*, main winner of the Burmese elections in 1990

prisoners have been witnessed in Burma for decades, as do torture and violence against peaceful demonstrators. Now, the cameras were confiscated, the monks derobed, and most of our TV stations spread the news that calm was restored. Do we need moving color images in order to feel worried? It might not be too exaggerated to say that the “Saffron Revolution” brought more news about our own societies than about the Burmese regime.

SOME IDEAS ON HOW TO TACKLE THE SITUATION IN BURMA

To state it at the outset, the one thing that will not help Burma and the region is to wait, simply observing and commenting, for the Burmese regime to effect the change to democracy and respect of human rights. Further initiatives by the UN Security Council, however, are doomed to fail as long as China and Russia are resolved to oppose them. Gambari’s mission remains essential given that the UN is not able to agree on any binding resolution.

1. One of the strongest tools of the EU is to uphold targeted sanctions. These sanctions must be extended, however, to also ban investments in the gas and oil sectors.

2. There is still some scope to resume talks on diplomatic level with China, Russia, India and the member states of ASEAN. In talks with ASEAN, the problem of Burmese refugees must also be addressed. If the West is serious about helping Burma, this is an excellent starting point.

3. Humanitarian aid must still be provided where possible. This can be used as a means to strengthen Burmese civil society, but GONGOs need to be avoided and the nature of any collaboration with the regime must be transparent.

4. Experience¹³ in other countries ruled by authoritarian regimes shows that dialogue is a good investment into peaceful change. As argued earlier, a dialogue is only desirable if meaningful and benchmarked and safeguarded from being misused.

The question is justified as to which benchmarks are reasonable and which are not. The regime’s so-called “Roadmap to Democracy” doesn’t seem to be, since it doesn’t constitute any binding and near time frame and, what’s worse, already in its very first implementation negates its proclaimed goal. The Burmese opposition with good reason is seeking the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, a highly symbolic figure and also a guarantor of ethnic integration in times of transition, without whom any ambitious plans of democratization would be at stake.

¹³ see KIVIMÄKI T.: European Policies vis-à-vis the ‘Burma/Myanmar Issue’: An Analysis of Arguments for Two Main Strategy Alternatives. In: Dialogue + Cooperation, 1/2007; publication of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

If the EU wants to follow the opposition’s example to choose a similar touchstone, it should add freedom of the press, including the possibility of foreign journalists investigating inside the country. Looking at the present situation in Burma compared to September 2007, the importance of a free press seems paramount. Both worldwide public attention and the grounds on which foreign stakeholders can take action depend on such freedom.

As mentioned earlier, humanitarian aid to Burmese (of all ethnic groups) needn’t be limited to the territory of Burma. More than a million refugees and migrant workers are forced to live outside the country, often deprived of citizen rights and the targets of severe human rights abuses. Providing assistance is not merely a moral imperative, it also can be used as leverage in the long run. No one else can better “smuggle” Western values right into the heart of Burma than the Burmese population living abroad. Refugees and migrants develop strong emotional bonds to places where they received help. And Burmese in particular place great importance on socializing and sharing ideas by word of mouth. Think of the Burmese tea-room culture (the 1988 uprising started with a tea-room discussion), the importance of comedy shows to convey political criticism in times of censorship, and the art of talking about politics between the lines in a society that is littered with police informers.

Lastly, Europe can also help with that which is desperately lacking inside Burma and what at present is provided mainly in Southeast Asia: with higher education. While the government keeps Burma’s universities closed to restrict education to members of the armed forces, a new generation influenced by European ideas would be helpful in a future Burma, however the regime’s course ultimately develops. Ideas get carried into the country in undetectable streams of culture. This is Europe’s soft power – comparable to what the USA does by means of Hollywood: It was the new Rambo movie by which young Burmese in Rangoon reportedly first learned about the atrocities committed in the border areas. But there must be other approaches than those of Rambo.

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Christoph Amthor has studied in Germany and England and since completion mainly worked in journalism. Already during his studies, he put a focus on activities for human rights and started to take interest in issues of Southeast Asia. He worked as editor at Radio Slovakia International and left to co-found and establish the nonprofit organization Burma Center Prague. As part of these activities, he's developing and managing projects and writing articles on Burma. Also, he's doing research on Burmese migrants for his PhD project in the field of media studies at the University of Bayreuth.

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