

**AT LARGE****Military Rule in Burma**

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For a half century, the impoverished people of Burma (also known as Myanmar) have lived under a brutal military dictatorship. Although Burma has not seen mass starvation as in the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea, unrelenting wars are raging against numerous ethnic groups seeking autonomy.

Until recently the military, headed by Gen. Than Shwe, constituted the State Peace and Development Council: a junta that promoted its version of peace and development by imprisoning democracy advocates in the cities, impeding provision of humanitarian aid in the delta, and killing guerrillas and civilians alike in the more distant eastern hills. Oppression has led to poverty for the Burmese people.

However, not everyone is poor. As in most dictatorships, members of the regime and their families and friends have profited abundantly from political power. U.S. and European sanctions provide their only impediment to fiscal success.

Those sanctions, unfortunately, do nothing to promote democracy or improve the condition of the Burmese people, and serve merely to bother the ruling elite. With China, India, and other Asian states active in the Burmese markets, there has been no lack of opportunity for Shwe & Co. to travel and spend their ill-gotten gains.

Nevertheless, Shwe's regime desires recognition and money from the West. So last year Shwe proclaimed the end of military rule. Numerous military officers resigned from the army. An election was held and Burma launched a charm offensive overseas. Domestic democracy activists hoped the process would be a harbinger of change. Foreign human rights activists hoped the process would spark the start of reform.

It did nothing. The regime had learned from 1990, when it foolishly allowed a free election and the overwhelming majority backed Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of a revered general who helped win Burma's independence after World War II. The regime had to void the election, arrest Suu Kyi and suppress her party, resulting in domestic bloodshed and international obloquy.

So this time the junta decided to enforce "disciplined democracy." After the SPDC wrote a

new constitution and drafted new election rules to ensure its supremacy, the military chose as president former General Thein Sein. Human Rights Watch called Sein "a ruthless loyalist with a well-established past in command positions during some of Burma's darker and most corrupt periods." Four years ago he was prime minister when protestors were murdered on the streets.

The military also guaranteed itself numerous legislative seats, barred its most dangerous opponents (including now-Nobel Laureate Suu Kyi) from running, prohibited campaign criticism of itself, and placed the vote count in its own hands. Surprise, surprise, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (the SPDC's captive political organization filled with former military officers) won an overwhelming victory last November.

Since then the government has jailed democracy activists in the cities, controlled access to the rural areas, and killed guerrillas and civilians in the more distant eastern hills. More than 100,000 Burmese have been forced over the border into Thailand and millions have been displaced within their own country. The verdant eastern Burmese landscape has been sown with land mines, resulting in debilitating human injuries and costly livestock deaths. I have met many children orphaned by the ruling junta's policy of oppression, and their stories are devastating.

Though 110 political prisoners have been released, several others have been newly arrested and an estimated 2100 languish in prison (twice the number from just four years ago). Suu Kyi was freed from house arrest after the election and a government minister met with her last week, but she is barred from participating in politics, her party remains banned, and many of her associates remain in prison. Moreover, the government has not so subtly threatened her with violence ("chaos and riots") if she travels outside of Rangoon. In May 2003 a military-inspired mob killed more than 70 of her supporters and nearly murdered her.

When thousands of Buddhist monks helped lead a series of peaceful anti-government protests dubbed "The Saffron Revolution" in 2007, the Burmese government responded with shameful brutality. Demonstrators were shot, activists were imprisoned. Even the monks, though revered in Burmese society, were beaten and detained. The movement of monks is now restricted and their sermons are censored.

The old SPDC agreed to ceasefires with some ethnic groups, but launched a new offensive against the Karen people shortly after last November's election. Earlier this year the new "civilian" government launched similar attacks against the Shan in the north, pushing refugees into China.

In January Burma underwent its Universal Periodic Review by the Human Rights Council. Filled with repressive regimes, the HRC is a pretty forgiving body. And the Burmese military performed remarkably well in its review, claiming that it ran free elections, censored no media, held no political prisoners, and fought no ethnic groups. David Scott Mathieson of Human Rights Watch called it "a Monty Python-like defense whose central comedic device was total denial."

The people responsible for Burma's success have simply changed out of uniforms and put

on suits. Nothing else has changed. General-President Thein Sein's new agenda of "national reconciliation" is another way of saying "military domination." Distressed at the lack of reform, two senior diplomats at Burma's embassy in Washington defected last month.

Unfortunately, there is little the international community can do. The U.S. and Europe have applied sanctions, but with little effect. Few nations formally defend the Burmese junta, but its neighbors benefit from trade in teak and other resources. China seeks a geopolitical edge, with India in close pursuit. The ASEAN member-states dream of better times in Rangoon but do nothing; in fact, Burma is scheduled to take over chairmanship of that organization in 2014.

The elections were seen as a possible opening for increased Western engagement. So far, however, the regime has rejected any substantive reforms, including the single step which would best signify change: releasing all political prisoners. Perhaps change will come after Than Shwe dies, though for 50 years every dictator has been followed by another dictator. Sadly, the Burmese Gorbachev has yet to emerge.

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