

The National Interest *online*

Talk to Burma

by Doug Bandow

08.17.2009

The trial of Nobel laureate and Burmese democracy advocate Aung San Suu Kyi concluded as expected: with an extension of her term of house arrest. Unexpected was the visit to Burma (or Myanmar) by Senator Jim Webb, which resulted in meetings with Ms. Suu Kyi and military junta leader General Than Shwe, and the release of imprisoned American John Yettaw. The Obama administration should follow up on the small diplomatic opening that has resulted.

Senator Webb's unofficial venture has been compared to President Bill Clinton's trip to North Korea, and both countries are humanitarian tragedies. But the United States has diplomatic relations with Burma, which poses no security threat to America. As a result, Burma has never been—and is never likely to be—high on Washington's agenda.

Nevertheless, Webb has created an opportunity for the administration to press the Burmese junta to improve, even if modestly, its treatment of the Burmese people.

The Burmese military junta, which styles itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), is one of the worst governments on earth, having for decades promoted war and prevented development as a matter of state policy. The regime continues to imprison Ms. Suu Kyi, the most important opposition symbol in the country, as well as more than two thousand other people for opposing the regime. With elections of sorts scheduled next year—her party won the last free poll, in 1990, which then was voided by the military—the regime would have found another excuse to keep Ms. Suu Kyi imprisoned had Yettaw, who was originally sentenced to seven years in prison, not made his unexpected appearance at the home of Ms. Suu Kyi, who has spent fourteen of the last twenty years under arrest.

The poll will be a farce without her participation. (The regime's handwritten constitution also bars her candidacy because she married a foreign citizen.) But that is the junta's intent: to produce a pliant assembly which creates only the veneer of democracy for international purposes.

Ms. Suu Kyi's heroic struggle has received the most international attention, but the regime's depredations are not limited to the suppression of democracy. The junta also continues its brutal war in the east against multiple ethnic groups, such as the Karen and Shan, which have long sought autonomy from the central government. Although the SPDC has reached peace agreements with some peoples, it is the peace of the graveyard, resulting from the regime's growing military superiority.

Thousands of people have died. Civilians have been murdered, raped and conscripted as porters by the Burmese military. The army routinely destroys villages and sows the conquered territory with land mines to prevent rebuilding. Millions of people have been displaced within Burma and hundreds of thousands of refugees have been driven across the border into Thailand by the conflict. Children and young adults have spent their entire lives in camps, with no hope of ever living a normal life.

No one disputes the desirability of dramatic reform in Burma. But Washington has been attempting to pressure the junta for years, without effect. America's options are limited. The United States and European Union already apply economic sanctions against Burma, including controls targeted

against regime elites and cronies. The lack of international unanimity has robbed them of maximum impact. Unfortunately, China has exhibited no similar scruples, both blocking (along with Russia) UN sanctions and becoming the junta's strongest backer. India, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and other nations in the region also invest in and trade with Burma.

Neither the regime's botched response to Cyclone Nargis last year nor its brutal suppression of widespread demonstrations in 2007 increased international support for tighter economic controls. So any attempt to expand general sanctions is likely to fail and, even if successful, would hurt Burma's vulnerable people more than regime elites.

Instead, the United States and Europe should press India, the ASEAN states, Japan, and South Korea to adopt limited sanctions targeted against junta leaders and their economic allies. Policy change is more likely if regime leaders pay a higher price for their repressive policies.

Moreover, Washington should engage Beijing over the issue, indicating that promoting political reform in Burma would enhance China's international reputation and claim to global leadership. The Obama administration should assure the Chinese government that Washington would not take geopolitical advantage if Beijing's efforts result in a transformation of the junta—there would be no U.S. military installations in Burma under any circumstances.

At the same time the United States, along with its Asian and European friends, should offer a positive package of economic and diplomatic benefits should the Burmese junta improve human rights and open Burmese society. In fact, in June, Kurt Campbell, the assistant secretary of state for East Asia, stated that the Obama administration is "prepared to reach out" to Burma.

Washington's expectations should be limited: the regime is not likely to yield power irrespective of the inducements offered. However, the junta might decide that the benefits from more limited reform are worth the risk of change. Admittedly, a number of human rights advocates view such an offer as appeasement or worse. However, the present course has failed for years to help the Burmese people.

In contrast, limited engagement might lead to an improvement in human rights. For instance, the regime's response to Cyclone Nargis, though initially criminally callous, improved over time, leading the International Crisis Group (ICG) to conclude that "it is possible to work with the military regime on humanitarian issues." That same ICG report further added, "By and large, the authorities are making efforts to facilitate aid, including allowing a substantial role for civil society." Frank Smithuis of Doctors Without Borders told the *New York Times*: "You can work here very well." Indeed, "the military at times has actually been quite helpful to us."

In some international situations, such as Burma, there is no good answer. And good intentions are not enough.

The present U.S. policy of isolating Burma has failed. While Washington should continue to highlight the SPDC's brutal repression and work with other states to win greater backing for punitive measures, the administration also should develop a positive package to reward the regime for liberalizing Burmese society. Admittedly, the chances of success are slim, but that still would be improved odds over the likelihood of Washington's current strategy working.

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P.O. Box 9001, Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9662

The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
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