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Doug Bandow: Obama's visit to Burma should nudge reform there

By: Doug Bandow – November 16th, 2012

Still, the government continues to reform. Before Aung San Suu Kyi visited the U.S. in September, the regime freed 514 prisoners, about 80 of them political. At the same time, Naypyidaw replaced a repressive junta-era press agency.

The government has also announced plans to inaugurate an independent monetary policy. Moreover, the Thein Sein administration is pushing a new investment code. Energy investment is exploding this year, as the authorities auction off oil- and gas-exploration permits.

Meanwhile, Naypyidaw has begun to distance itself from China, its neighbor and long-time benefactor. A desire to achieve some geopolitical balance - Thein Sein visited China before going to the U.S. in September - may have encouraged the military regime to reach out to the West.

Past reforms should be rewarded and future changes should be encouraged. That means lifting economic sanctions in order to encourage further democratization.

For instance, Burmese imports are still banned. Derek Mitchell, America's ambassador to Burma, expressed Washington's commitment to work with the new government in easing U.S. rules "even if fully extracting ourselves from the Byzantine array of restrictions imposed over the years may take some time." In fact, while visiting America Suu Kyi called for lifting all restrictions now: "There are very many other ways in which the United States can help us to achieve our democratic ends."

President Obama's trip is another reward. Malinowski worries that the presidential visit is premature: "It would not be a good thing if the president leaves Burma and there are still political prisoners there." In contrast, Gordon Hein of the Asia Foundation approved: "If one waited until every major issue was successfully resolved that would be a long wait for any country." Since such a visit will be seen as validating the regime, Washington should insist on a promise of additional reforms - perhaps the release of all political prisoners - as a *quid pro quo*.

The transformation of Burma remains a long, difficult process. However, much has changed. "We are not yet at the end of our struggle," Suu Kyi observed, "but we are getting there."

Two years ago few people, in or out of Burma, predicted genuine reform. Today almost everyone expects it. The ultimate objective must be to let the Burmese people take charge of their own destiny.