

The US-led Burma Charge

By Min Zin

With the apparent military success of the US-led invasion of Iraq, international politics has fundamentally changed. The US has firmly established its global hegemony. It has no rival. Like it or not, the US now has a strong message it can deliver to any state in the world: "You're next."

No pressing crisis in the world today can be effectively resolved without the active involvement of the US, unless the concerned parties have both the will and capacity to settle their differences.

Burma is one case where such will is lacking.

The recent physical assault on opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters by "government affiliated thugs," and the crackdown that followed, have proven that the regime is determined to squash increasing support for the National League for Democracy (NLD).

There was vehement international condemnation of the attack and the detention of Suu Kyi, and US officials led the charge. The US State Department clearly stated that they are focused on more than just the release of Suu Kyi—whose detention they called "outrageous," "shameful" and "unacceptable." One US diplomat told the *Washington Post* that the US has broader concerns about "the overall circumstances in Burma."

But so far, official US policy still rests on the hope of resuming political dialogue in Burma by applying punitive measures and supporting the diplomatic efforts of UN Special Envoy to Burma Razali Ismail, the primary liaison between the government and opposition, who secured Suu Kyi's release in 2002.

The US began ratcheting up the pressure on the regime even before the events of Black Friday. In mid-May, President Bush extended the US' ban on investment in Burma for another year. The US also reacted swiftly to the detention of Suu Kyi. On July 16, the US House of Representatives voted near-unanimously to ban imports from Burma, which will cost the regime an estimated US \$356 million annually. The "Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act," also includes a freeze on all the junta's US assets and a visa ban covering the generals, their families, and cronies. The bill's final version is expected to be signed by President George W Bush within days.

And the regime can expect tougher criteria to be imposed when it comes time to review its anti-narcotics efforts in September. Failing to gain certification as a partner in the international war on drugs yet again will lead to another year without increased US foreign aid.

Some of Washington's topflight politicians and commentators are pushing even further. They say, "It is time for regime change in Burma."

A month before the May 30 violence, US Secretary of State Colin Powell offered clear and strong responses to questions about Burma from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Powell said that in addition to unilateral efforts, he would work with US allies in Asean to apply pressure to the Burmese junta. He specifically mentioned a kind of pressure "that might change the nature of this regime or the regime itself." Such strong words.

The rhetoric of "regime change" carries a scary weight these days, whether or not it implies military intervention.

But, is regime change realistic in the case of Burma?

Many proponents of regime change in Burma say the window of opportunity for political reconciliation is closed. Eschewing dialogue, they say its time for the ruling generals to go.

There is some truth in what they say, but their goal is unrealistic.

The US has no compelling strategic interest when it comes to Burma. And China cannot allow a radical power shift to take place on its southern flank. All things considered, "regime change" will remain just rhetoric.

However, the chance of political reform under the current military leadership—particularly Sr. Gen. Than Shwe—appears very thin. Expecting the same leader who provoked and accelerated the conflict in the first place to sit at the negotiating table seems foolhardy.

Than Shwe's perception of the domestic crisis and the resulting international pressure remains the same as in 1988. He holds dear the regime's "People Desires," specifically the one that reads "crush internal and external enemies."

"He doesn't feel like it's expensive to crack down on the opposition," says veteran politician living in Rangoon.

Than Shwe also deceives and divides the international community by dangling progress but delivering nothing. Even his staunch defenders, such as Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammed, in addition to leaders from Japan, Australia and even China, appear to be fed up with Than Shwe's manipulation, according to well-informed observers.

In fact, the whole reconciliation process seems to be designed to delay international pressure. The regime promises progress but delivers nothing. Instead of sitting down with the opposition, they clip the wings of Suu Kyi and crack down on her party. They have no political will when it comes to participating in real dialogue.

Burma is a failed state; one on the brink of total collapse. But Than Shwe and his clique have never personally felt the threat of imminent demise. Unless Than Shwe changes his approach to the country's political crisis, the protracted conflict in Burma will drag on.

The US should start forming an international coalition to address Burma's chronic political crisis. Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), plus China and Japan, must be persuaded to join with the US in demanding change. The massive migration caused by Burma's collapsing economy, as well as the social effects of its complicity in the drug trade, make the country a real threat to regional stability.

If there is no possibility of genuine dialogue under Than Shwe's leadership the reconciliation process appears to be ruined. If it is, the US and its regional allies must be prepared to seek new options.

Raising the Burma issue in the UN Security Council is a worthwhile first step. It would help the major powers in the world to sort out more effective actions to facilitate political progress in Burma. Of course, any measure would have to first be approved by China, who has been reticent about criticizing its neighbor. However, Senator Mitch McConnell's recent comments underscore the need to pursue discussion and international action in spite of China's potential objections. "I don't care if China vetoes [a resolution]. [This issue] needs to be discussed by the Security Council, and debated by the most important countries in the world."

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