



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 87 | December 14, 2010

Time to Think Anew and Act Anew on Myanmar (Burma)

BY FRANKLIN (PANCHO) HUDDLE AND DONALD JAMESON

Myanmar (Burma) is in the news again—thanks to Wikileaks, the recent release from house arrest of Nobel Peace Prize opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi and fallout from the November 7 controlled election billed as a step in moving toward nominal civilian rule. Much of this coverage has a *déjà vu* quality. Even the Wikileaks cables from the US Embassy in Rangoon closely resemble the analyses of the political situation that we, the authors, were sending to Washington following the last election in 1990.

Unfortunately, US policy toward Burma has also remained largely the same for twenty years, consisting basically of strongly worded demands that the junta make major moves toward democratization and respect for human rights, including the release of more than 2000 political prisoners now languishing in prison under harsh conditions. Our vehicles for bringing the generals to heel have consisted mainly of public castigation and an increasingly tight array of economic sanctions designed to isolate the ruling military junta and force their compliance.

Although sanctions have made life even more difficult for an already impoverished populace, including the drying up of jobs in a once thriving garment industry, they have had minimal impact on the behavior of the generals, who continue to stubbornly reject any outside interference in Burma's domestic affairs. In doing this, they are fortified by a deeply ingrained belief in their role as the vanguard of Burma's independence movement and defenders of the nation in the face of domestic insurgents—who in the early years following the nation's tumultuous birth in 1948 reached the outskirts of Rangoon—as well as foreign enemies, who have in some cases provided assistance to insurgent groups. The ruling generals also take comfort in a self-sufficient agricultural base and abundant natural resources, ranging from natural gas to gems. These conditions, along with a largely passive and deeply Buddhist population inured to austerity, render them virtually immune to external pressuring, other than perhaps the threat of outright military invasion by a great power.

Beyond this, neighboring Asian countries, including China and India, maintain friendly ties with Burma both because of its strategic location and because of its evident, largely untapped natural wealth. Meanwhile, Burma's partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also have normal ties with the generals even though they make episodic calls for improvement in human rights and progress toward democracy, designed largely to deflect pressure on themselves from Western governments. Thus, American efforts to isolate Burma are out of step with most other countries in the region, which are skeptical that sanctions can be effective, hesitant to engage in anything resembling interference in the internal affairs of a fellow ASEAN member and wary that similar tactics could be used against some of them. In general, they favor a policy of “constructive engagement” aimed at encouraging gradual progress on human rights and

Franklin (Pancho) Huddle, former US Chargé d'Affaires to Burma (1990-1994), and **Donald Jameson**, former US Acting Deputy Chief of Mission to Burma (1990-1993), call for a renewal of US engagement with Burma, noting that “Some ASEAN members have even dubbed the confrontational US approach on Burma as ‘destructive engagement.’”



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democracy, a road that several of them, like Indonesia and Thailand, have followed themselves. Some ASEAN members have even dubbed the confrontational US approach on Burma as “destructive engagement.”

Rather than addressing the Burma problem in a pragmatic, incremental way as countries in the region favor, US policy seems driven largely by domestic political considerations, including pressures from human rights activists, some members of Congress and the media, which often highlights the strong views of these critics, that at rock bottom amount to an unvarnished call for regime change. This environment makes it difficult for US policy makers to deal with Burma in a nuanced manner and leads to a marginalization of US influence.

In recognition of these realities, the Obama administration, after an extensive policy review, decided late last year to change tack and attempt to open a limited dialogue with the generals in Burma. However, this well-thought-out limited opening had to be carefully balanced with assurances to domestic constituencies that it did not imply any loosening of sanctions until there was clear progress on the human rights and democracy fronts. Not surprisingly, this approach was not met with great enthusiasm by the Burmese generals, who have shown little willingness to discuss key issues of concern to the United States. Bolstered by cordial relations with China, India and ASEAN, they have little reason to respond positively to such limited US overtures. Even their decision to release Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest was based on their own political roadmap and no doubt they will not hesitate to put her back under some sort of detention should she take actions that they perceive as threatening their control.

Further, it is apparent to most observers that the US approach on Burma contrasts significantly with its stance toward countries in which it has major interests, such as China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam among others, where human rights abuses are also widespread. To these observers and Burma’s neighbors in Asia, US policy toward Burma smacks of hypocrisy, with the United States picking on a weak and isolated Burma while carrying out normal relations with other countries that have similar records. Two former US ambassadors to Burma have stated this succinctly: “In dealing with Burma the US can enjoy the luxury of its principles” and “Everybody needs a cat to kick and Burma fulfills this role admirably.”

In light of all this, US policy toward Burma over the past two decades can only be described as ineffective. Whatever the steps toward liberalization taken by Burma’s ruling generals in recent years—such as the recent elections and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi—these mincing steps have taken place on their own terms and at their own pace, not as a response to admonitions by the United States and other Western countries. Meanwhile, the Burmese people have been pawns in a political game that has little relevance to their everyday struggle for survival.

Perhaps it is time now, as Burma transitions to at least the trappings of civilian rule, to seriously try a different approach where the United States attempts to further its goals in Burma through “smart power.” This would include engaging in an effort to open up the country to increased outside influence that may enable nascent civil society groups now germinating to take root with the assistance and example of Western governments and NGOs. One thing many closed-off regimes fear most is hordes of Western assistance providers and tourists bringing in new ideas and values. This approach has been taken in dealing with other authoritarian regimes such as China and might be equally effective in Burma. Unless a serious try is made we will never know.