

After the Whirlwind: Post-Nargis Burma, the 2010 Elections and Prospects for Reform

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These are tough times for the people of Burma. They have endured decades of economic mismanagement, low living standards and brutal political oppression under an incompetent and negligent military that shows no signs of relinquishing its grip on power. Indeed, as the country approaches elections in 2010, the regime has cracked down on those it targets as opponents, imposing prison terms of up to 65 years on relief workers, comedians, writers, intellectuals, monks and others engaged in peaceful demonstrations or relief activities. No challenges to the junta are allowed and even local disaster relief workers are subject to arrest for embarrassing the regime. Those who joined peaceful demonstrations in the Saffron Revolution of 2007, or tried to help the survivors of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, have been singled out by the military junta for sentences that in many cases ensure the imprisoned will die behind bars. Moreover, political prisoners have been sent away to remote prisons where it is difficult for relatives to visit or to monitor their condition. Although the junta released

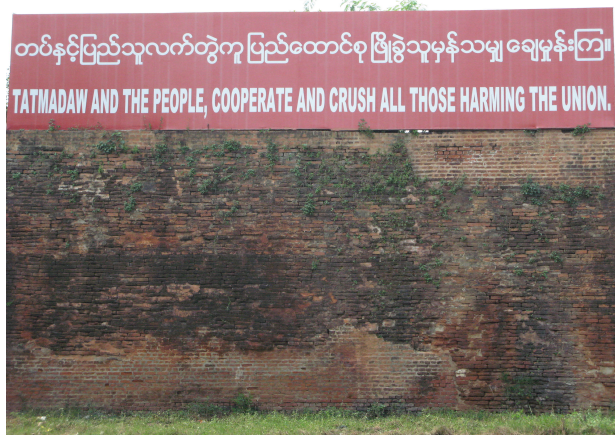
about a dozen political prisoners in February 2009, the number of political prisoners has more than doubled since 2007 and stands at an estimated 2,100.



Burmese courts

The junta has sent a message to pro-democracy activists that they should not confuse the upcoming 2010 elections with an opportunity to build democracy in Burma. Unlike in 1990, when the military was surprised and embarrassed by a landslide victory for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, a result it has steadfastly ignored, this time around expert observers expect the results to be rigged. The model for this sham-in-the-making is the constitutional referendum staged in May 2008 when an unbelievable 92% of voters approved a document that almost nobody had seen. There were

widespread and credible reports of gross irregularities and no Burmese, ethnic representatives or international observers interviewed for this article believes that the referendum was remotely free or fair. As a result, the new constitution imposed by the regime that preserves political power for the military and excludes Aung San Suu Kyi has zero credibility, further undermining the legitimacy of a government that is despised by most of its citizens. [1]



Junta slogans are a constant reminder of the political realities

And why wouldn't they despise it? In September 2007, cracking down on the Saffron Revolution—a monk-led, grassroots response to dreadful and declining living standards—the military murdered, imprisoned and tortured many monks, a transgression that trampled cultural taboos, triggering outrage and a smoldering resentment. People were nevertheless totally unprepared for the government's mind-boggling response to Cyclone Nargis. In early May 2008, Nargis ripped through the Irrawaddy Delta

region, claiming an estimated 138,000 lives, displacing some 800,000 survivors, and leaving some 2.5 million people desperately in need of food, shelter and medical treatment. Any government would be hard-pressed to respond effectively to such a massive natural disaster, but instead of focusing on relief efforts the government prioritized the constitutional referendum. As a result, it was slow to respond and even impeded relief efforts by international agencies by withholding approval of visas for additional relief workers while devoting scarce resources to a sham referendum and ignoring the needs of desperate survivors.



Monks in Mrauk U, Rakhine



Nuns in Sagaing, Mandalay

Win Min, a Burmese political commentator and professor in Chiang Mai, Thailand suggests that the junta's response reflects its risk-averse, security first approach. [2] They saw international relief workers as potential democracy activists who had to be kept out. However, the shame of appearing overwhelmed by the magnitude of the disaster, rather than sympathy for the people, eventually led the regime to open a narrow space for relief efforts that he believes is temporary.



Win Min

Whither Reform?

In the wake of Nargis, there has been renewed debate about how the international community should respond and whether punitive sanctions and isolation are working to promote reform. Indeed, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her recent Asian tour spoke of the need to review US policy towards Burma, saying that the current policies have not worked.[3] The US has not yet made any moves to lift sanctions or travel bans, but she has made it clear that the Obama Administration is reconsidering its options and policies, a shift that mirrors elements of international discourse concerning reform in Burma. Any moves towards softening the US policy will face

tough opposition in the Congress where there has been bi-partisan support for hard-line policies, including most recently the sanctions on trade in hardwood, gems and mining projects included in the Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Burma Democracy Promotion Act of 2007.[4]



Teak for export is subject to US sanctions

Michael Green, Bush's nominee for special envoy to Burma—Congress has yet to act on this nomination since it has not yet been endorsed by the Obama Administration—notes that Senator John Kerry advocates large increases in humanitarian aid to Burma, but he does not expect lifting of sanctions any time soon.[5] Indeed, he strongly supports “coercive diplomacy” and if approved as special envoy he would seek to strengthen international cooperation on sanctions and isolation aimed at pressuring the regime to reform and allow the democratic opposition to participate in fair elections in 2010. Articulating the hard-line position he says,

“We are good at the smart sanctions targeting bank accounts and tracking the flow of money. What we need is better cooperation. Singapore was very helpful with North Korea and I am certain they will help us on Burma. We are hoping that Austria and Australia will tighten up on enforcement. It is important for us to get our “sticks” in a row, close loopholes, tighten targeted sanctions and improve our gathering and analysis of intelligence by the NSA. This is how we will get the junta's attention...hitting them where it hurts.”

The International Crisis Group (ICG) provides in-depth analysis of conditions in Burma, but is often criticized for being overly solicitous of the junta. The principal author of the ICG reports on Burma, Morten Pedersen, argues that the current strategy of imposing sanctions and isolating the military junta is not working, creating a stalemate that shows no signs of resolution.[6] He asserts that sanctions and isolation actually strengthen the junta's grip on power, allowing them to pose as defenders of the nation. In his view, the military leaders will not bow to pressure for political reform and are well insulated from economic sanctions, especially with rising LNG revenues. The problem is that the people of Burma are not insulated from the usual problems of endemic poverty—the UN estimates that 30% of the population faces acute poverty—and many are swept up in a gathering humanitarian crisis. However, despite appalling conditions, international

aid to Burma is only about 5% per capita of what comparable developing nations typically receive. This is one of the costs of isolation that harms the people. The ICG advocates broader, sustained engagement and a sharp increase in aid to fund “sustainable humanitarian development”.

Pedersen acknowledges the brutality and venality of the military regime, but does not think that regime change is a viable or sustainable option because government institutions have withered during four decades of military rule, meaning across-the-board capacity deficits that amplify the difficulties of coping with Burma’s staggering challenges. The military may run a loathsome regime, but it is the strongest institution in a country known for its pervasive dysfunctionality and as such, he asserts, must play a key role in any efforts aimed at improving development, governance or human rights.

In October 2008 the ICG upped the ante, arguing that the Nargis relief experience demonstrates the need to normalize aid relations and suggests a way forward out of the stalemate.[7] The ICG points out that after the initial fumbling response, a normal relief operation was apparent by July 2008 and goes on to argue that the donor community now has an opportunity to build on this enhanced cooperation to transform and expand the aid agenda. Credit for this turnaround goes to the Trilateral Core Group (TCG), a problem-solving task force that had one representative each from the Burmese government, the UN and ASEAN. The TCG,

according to the ICG, proved effective in addressing operational problems and cutting through red tape, allowing aid organizations to conduct their projects as they would in any similar situation and monitor how development aid was used.

The TCG conducted the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) in June 2008 to assess needs in the affected areas. The ICG defends PONJA from critics who argue that it was little more than a government-manipulated public relations exercise, maintaining that its statistical findings are reliable while pointing out that government representatives did not take part in the interviews or serve as translators. The needs assessment by PONJA has been followed by TCG monitoring initiatives regarding relief operations and use of aid. Neither PONJA or the ICG found evidence suggesting large scale diversion of relief supplies and, based on TCG assessments, ASEAN’s Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan has called for an additional \$700 million in relief aid over the next three years. One Bangkok diplomat closely involved in this effort suggests this may be too ambitious a target as major donors remain concerned about the pace and direction of political reform.

Yuki Akimoto, Director of BurmaInfo in Tokyo, disputes the ICG’s seal of approval, arguing that PONJA was deeply flawed and asserts that there are credible reports of aid being diverted. Indeed, Dr. Nyo Nyo Thinn, a researcher at UN University in Tokyo, visited Burma in the cyclone’s aftermath and heard reports of significant diversion of relief supplies from

people active in the relief effort. She also witnessed relief items for sale in Yangon markets. [8]Akimoto adds,

"The ICG assessment lacks credibility because it misrepresents the reasons why Burma is suffering socio-economically and not receiving development assistance. It is one thing to advocate for increased engagement with the regime, but it is an entirely different matter to defend the military regime, as the ICG assessment effectively does. ICG avoids holding the military regime accountable for the situation the regime itself has caused through its brutally self-interested actions and policies, which have enriched the generals and their cronies while impoverishing the nation." [9]

Thant Myint U, former UN diplomat and currently researcher with the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, believes that the Nargis relief operations have helped build a better working relationship between the junta and international donors, saying,

"The Nargis relief efforts have led to a big shift in attitudes. Now many in the government understand that there is no great danger in providing access to international aid workers while on the reverse side many donors see the possibilities of working in Burma while meeting international standards of transparency and accountability." [10]



Thant Myint U, author of *River of Lost Footsteps*

He argues that it is imperative to build on the Nargis relief experience.

"Cyclone Nargis created a sense of urgency in the donor community and it responded with great generosity in addressing the emergency humanitarian needs of millions of people all over the delta. But there is a lot more work to be done and urgent humanitarian needs elsewhere in the country as well. What's important is to find a way to respond that is acceptable to everyone."

The ICG, in calling for normalizing aid as a strategy for promoting change, maintains that the TCG can be the model for broader engagement elsewhere in the country. A task-based, problem-solving

approach to engagement and development, it argues, offers reassurances to the various stakeholders and has, at least in the Irrawaddy Delta, worked to the benefit of the people. It is also, according to the ICG, a process of urgently needed capacity-building involving human resources, governance, transparency and accountability. The ICG also argues that, "... aid can not be used as a bargaining chip, but should be seen as a valuable instrument in its own right for improving governance and promoting socio-economic change."

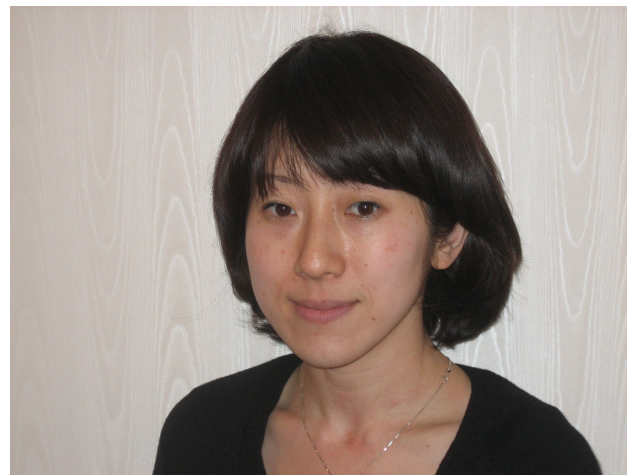
Thant Myint U, grandson of UN Secretary General U Thant, is less optimistic about copying the TCG model for expanded aid efforts elsewhere in Burma. He observes,

"What is certain about the TCG is that it has been an invaluable mechanism for delivering emergency aid to people in the Nargis-affected areas. The international aid community has been given unprecedented access and it appears that space for ongoing relief and recovery operations can be sustained. Whether it can be expanded to other parts of the country is unlikely. We need creative solutions and shouldn't be tied to the TCG model. What's important is not the mechanism per se but finding ways to deliver aid in a way that meets basic international norms."

Yuki Akimoto agrees, adding,

"The TCG has a built-in limitation in that one of the three parties is the

military regime whose priority has been to sustain and enrich itself, not to help Burma's people. Therefore it would be difficult for 1) the TCG to develop programs and projects that are designed genuinely to benefit those most in need; and 2) independent parties (international organizations or the press) to monitor the implementation of such programs and projects. I think the TCG was useful in channeling urgently needed relief and recovery assistance. But for longer-term engagement, however, including reconstruction assistance, I believe donors should explore other options."



Yuki Akimoto

Green also dismisses the TCG model and faulted the ICG report as, "Terrible. They always manage to find the silver lining in despicable regimes and support softening sanctions and pressure, undermining everything we are doing to promote reform."

Bertil Lintner, a veteran journalist who has written numerous articles and several books on Burma since the mid-1980s, is one of the most eminent critics of the ICG analysis. He dismisses the ICG report for what he views as a fundamental misunderstanding of the military and Burmese politics. He rejects as "... naïve in the extreme the proposition that adopting a more respectful tone toward the junta, understanding their worldview and not making an issue of past misdeeds will make it more likely to act rationally and engage in substantive dialogue." [11] According to Lintner,

"The generals are not listening no matter what, they are doing what they want and ignore pressure, sanctions and engagement. Neither isolation nor engagement has worked and there is no reason to believe that engagement and expanded aid will change their ways. They are happy to have the ICG doing their bidding. In Burmese they have a derogatory word for such people...they are not taken seriously."

In Lintner's view, the TCG does not offer a promising model for expanded engagement elsewhere in Burma, a point supported by several Burmese exiles in Thailand. Aung Zaw, editor of *Irrawaddy*, the leading source of critical analysis and information about Burma, called it an,

"...ivory-tower perspective written for people who want to increase aid programs. In reality it won't work and advocates should be ashamed of

themselves for looking for any excuse to work with an authoritarian regime. But let them come and [Senior General] Than Shwe [the junta's leader] will teach them a lesson just like the Red Cross. He is good at using and manipulating international organizations and they are good at fooling themselves. He created a small opening in the delta, but can shut them down anytime he wants." [12]



Aung Zaw

Aung Zaw also scoffs at the ICG's assertion that the junta is able to exploit sanctions to portray themselves to the public as defenders of the nation against foreign enemies, suggesting that the ICG has a condescending and inaccurate view

of how gullible the people are. He says that Burmese do suffer from the sanctions and isolation, but see them as symbolically important, boosting people's morale because they know the junta is humiliated and that other countries care.

One Burmese economist who requested anonymity points out that the TCG was effective because there were only three ministries involved and each had talented representatives.

"There is limited competence in the government and this makes it impossible to see how the TCG model can be expanded elsewhere. And, the government has made sure to insulate the rest of the country from the TCG opening. There is no political backing for an expanded TCG process, it is only for the delta. I can't imagine, for example, the government allowing such a process in Chin state where there is a famine and desperate need for relief."

Lian Sakhong, an ethnic Chin who is General Secretary of the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) also doubts the government will allow relief operations in his homeland and thinks the TCG process will not be extended to any of the ethnic areas where development aid is urgently needed. In his view, the regime is interested in pacification and assimilation, trying to impose a mono-ethnic, centralized model that fails to recognize Burma's rich ethnic diversity. [13] The military remains allergic to a federal model, but Dr. Sakhong, winner of the Martin Luther King Prize in 2007,

insists this is the only way to create lasting stability.



Lian Sakhong

Win Min notes that the ICG has developed cozy relations with mid-level officers and bureaucrats, but doubts this will lead to political reform because there is no top level political backing. He echoes the concerns of many experienced Burma-hands that the ICG is being manipulated and worries that expanding engagement and aid, "...is unlikely to lead anywhere while conferring legitimacy and stature on a regime that deserves neither. "

In contrast, Aung Naing Oo, a Burmese political analyst living in Chiang Mai, says

"I agree with the ICG about a long-

term gradual process of opening and reform and it is worth trying. The problem is that Burmese political culture tends towards extremes. There are no quick solutions and the problem is that the government and opposition have become mirror images of each other, unwilling to compromise. Sanctions have prevented change because the regime sees the West standing behind Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. These are targets they can hit. What you have to understand is that many military officers do want better relations with the US. They want to have a modern military and know they can not rely on China.” [13]



Aung Naing Oo

The Burmese economist, fresh from running a project management workshop for Burmese monks, suggests an engagement strategy that emphasizes technical assistance programs aimed at capacity building. He notes that monks play a critical role in providing social welfare services in Burma, including running orphanages and clinics. In his view, the Nargis response exposed just how inefficient and weak the government is. “International disaster relief specialists who arrived found just how little institutional infrastructure there is to mount an effective operation. The lack of capacity is endemic and a major obstacle to raising living standards.” Everywhere in Southeast Asia over the last 20 years, he observes, except in Burma, living standards have improved.

He finds the ICG analysis flawed because,

“... it fails to acknowledge that the regime kept international engagement at arms length. The relief operations were sequestered and the Nargis relief operation was a one-off exception reflecting the regime’s desperation. The junta has made sure the TCG has not set the tenor for regime policies. It has done everything possible to insulate the nation from this model.”

He further asserts that replicating the TCG model elsewhere in Burma is “way too ambitious” and there is no basis for believing that the same results could be achieved elsewhere given the lack of capacity and the fact that the regime will not permit the same civic space needed.

He also doubts that the UNSC will lift sanctions and believes that the World Bank and IMF will remain locked out for the foreseeable future, further undermining the ICG engagement scenario.

Nonetheless, in this economist's view more happened in terms of engagement and capacity building in the second half of 2008 than in the past 6 years combined. He suggests a brick-by-brick approach to reform, using technical assistance projects as a basis for incrementally ramping up capacity while contributing to improvement of living standards. Expanded technical assistance programs, he believes, would help shape the internal dynamics of the junta and improve prospects for the post-Thaw Shwe era. In his view, the current predatory economic model is unsustainable, based on the military monopolizing LNG revenues as a way of consolidating its power and eliminating rivals.

"Whoever succeeds Thaw Shwe faces a steep learning curve and will need to find out where the money is stashed. The big difference over the past 20 years is that before there was shared poverty and now there are huge disparities caused by institutionalized corruption. Everything on the surface looks the same, but now there is a new rich elite. Contrary to my expectations, the economy seems to be thriving in urban areas and there are lots of goods available, but relatively few seem to be sharing in this."



Thaw Shwe in 1999 photo

Elections and Beyond

Bo Kyi, co-founder of Burma's Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, expects little from the 2010 elections and argues that if the junta is serious about democratization they can start by releasing all of the pro-democracy activists they have rounded up. He contends that, "The military does not want to listen to the will of the people because they know it is against them." [14]



Prisoners in Burma are often sent to labor camps

David Scott Mathieson, Human Rights Watch's Burma expert, argues that the recent crackdown on dissidents was a mistake because it undermines the credibility of the elections.

"Apart from being incredibly brutal the regime was incredibly stupid in sentencing more than 300 dissidents to long prison sentences. Had they not done so it might have been able to present this sham process as a legitimate, "disciplined" approach to democracy, giving the outside world grounds for working with it. Under the circumstances, HRW will not endorse the elections because they offer no glimmer of change. They are a dead-end." [15]

His fear, shared by many other observers, is that several governments are eager to use the elections, however deeply flawed, as a fig-leaf justifying resumption of normal ties. Mathieson believes, however, that major donors will now find it much harder to, "...ignore the absurdity of the elections."

Michael Green warns, "The junta has been adept at sowing division and exploiting the lack of coordination." He worries that the elections have high potential for dividing the international community even if they are a sham because they would provide cover for some countries eager to normalize relations with Burma. Given this risk, Green asserts it is crucial to quickly clarify and build an international consensus on what is minimally required for the elections to be recognized as legitimate by the international community

mentioning monitoring and political participation by pro-democracy groups and ethnic-based parties. He says it is essential that, "the junta will have no doubt about the 'carrots and sticks' it can expect."

A prominent Burmese observer suggests that forging this consensus will be difficult because the US emphasis on human rights and democracy is at odds with the Indian and Chinese emphasis on maintaining stability in border regions. He also has a slightly more optimistic view about the elections, arguing,

"In 2010 the junta will do as it says, hold elections and allow for the creation of a new government by the end of 2010. This will not represent a clean break with the past and the new government may well include some of the current leadership. But it is important not to underestimate the significance of this transition. There will be a generational change in the political leadership and there will be a slight broadening of the political base of the government as it attempts to bring more people and groups under its tent."

He worries less about the elections providing an excuse to engage than as a reason to continue isolation, saying, "It may well turn out that the elections are deemed unacceptable by some Western donors and this would lead to a continuation of current policies and the stalemate. It would also mean a decline in Western involvement and influence in shaping outcomes in Burma and this

would be regrettable for the Burmese.”

The democratic opposition has given up, in his view, on the 2010 elections.

"The NLD remains opposed to the referendum and the elections and still clings to its victory at the polls in 1990. The chances of those results ever being recognized are virtually nil. If it decides to run in the 2010 elections it will be accepting much less than it could have had at several points in the recent past. It is like an investor who has seen his stocks lose 90% of their value. They are holding on because they don't have much more to lose. So far it looks like they are not in a bargaining mode and are sticking to a hard line position on the elections and won't participate, and are hoping for a huge, unexpected political change."

He adds, however, "If there were free and fair elections any party lead by Aung San Suu Kyi would win a sizeable vote and probably a clear majority." Alas, nobody thinks she will get this opportunity and thus the Burma tragedy will persist unless various stakeholders think creatively about exploiting opportunities the elections may create.

Aung Naing Oo says, "After the 2010 elections Burma will need and seek lots of help. This is an opportunity for the West. Not just throwing money at the opposition, but in terms of capacity building across-the-board. The nitty-gritty of training programs is the basis for long-term engagement that will help the

people."

Nobody interviewed for this essay believes that the 2010 elections will lead to significant reforms although some observers are more optimistic than others about the potential dynamics that may emerge. The elections appear to be a gambit by the junta to appease international critics, but even if new faces emerge, the military retains a constitutional veto power over elected governments, retains key portfolios, has reserved representation in the parliament and, ultimately, has the guns to carry the day.

Indonesia and Vietnam represent regional models for reform. The Indonesian model (military returning to the barracks and returning political power to civilian politicians in exchange for immunity) is attractive, but unlikely. In Indonesia, the military formally withdrew from politics after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 and since then the country has been led by democratically elected civilian presidents although the current president Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono is a retired military general. Agus Widjojo, a retired Indonesian general closely associated with reformists in the military who decided to withdraw from politics, has visited Yangon and believes there is little interest in such reforms in the Burmese junta even though they are interested in resumption of military ties with the US, including training programs. [16]

The US Department of Defense, according to Green, is looking at the possibility of resuming IMET (International Military

Education and Training) programs with Burma if circumstances improve to the degree that this is feasible and desirable, suggesting the ball is in the junta's court. IMET represents an attractive carrot for the military and interest among relatively senior officers has been conveyed. The DOD is also looking at improving disaster relief coordination in the region, possibly reflecting the frustration of US forces conducting military exercises in the region when Cyclone Nargis hit. The junta refused permission to land in the delta and deliver relief supplies.

The key in Indonesia lay in officers like Widjojo who had overseas training and experience who came to understand the need for the military to protect its institutional interests by ceding politics to civilians. Bertil Lintner, however, has little hope for the younger officers in Burma, saying they are poorly educated, more indoctrinated and more blindly obedient than the current leadership. In his view, they represent scant hope for reform and are more likely to pursue similarly draconian policies.

According to the Burmese economist,

"There has been a steep decline in military education and mid-career officers and below lack a cosmopolitan perspective. They are much more indoctrinated and are not a likely force for reform. Burma's problem is that we can't expect regime change from within the military and we can't expect the democratic opposition to negotiate a transition towards democracy."

Thant Myint U is also pessimistic about an Indonesian scenario, pointing out that,

"The West often focuses very narrowly on politics at the top while neglecting the other numerous challenges facing Burma. If there had been no trade sanctions and boycotts over the past 20 years and if international financial institutions and Western donors had been engaged there would at least have been greater economic development and arguably a far better landscape for reform. The Indonesian landscape of the 1990s doesn't exist in Burma. Indonesia had a reasonably good record on economic development and had received lots of international support and assistance. There was a much bigger middle class. The Indonesian army had a good relationship with the US and didn't feel they were facing a hostile international environment and the possibility of outside intervention. They trusted skilled technocrats, and had allowed fairly strong civil society organizations to develop. Millions of tourists had opened up the country. All that is absent in Burma. Thus the back to the barracks scenario is very unlikely."

According to the Burmese economist who at times advises the government,

"The military is impressed by the Vietnam model of *doi moi* because economic reform has not entailed political change. To improve living

standards, there is an urgent need to improve food security. This will require technical assistance in the agricultural sector combined with the introduction of market reforms that give farmers an incentive to produce more. This has worked in China and Vietnam without causing political reform."

In his view, *doi moi* thus represents a more attractive option to the junta than the Indonesian model.

In off-the-record comments a senior Bangkok-based diplomat opined,

"If Burma was a priority for the Obama administration I think they would come to the same conclusions about the need for more extensive engagement, but I don't think it is a priority and there may well be no one willing to stand up and take the heat to promote a shift in the US policy of sanctions and isolation. It seems that none of the lessons from the 1990s about dealing with failed states have been learned. There was a missed opportunity in the 1990s with the beginning of the ceasefires and the regime signaling that it wanted to open the economy and open up to the outside world. The West should have responded positively and locked that in, but it maintained a hard-line policy. The fundamental flaw in western policy towards Burma is the narrow focus on democracy, ignoring the economy, the armed conflicts, and the different priorities of Burma's

giant neighbors India and China. India and China understandably prioritize stability on their borders. This perspective seems lost on the West. The nightmare scenario for China is a resumption of armed conflict on its southern border. China is happy with the ceasefires achieved by the regime and is seeking to maximize stability after 50 years of civil war between the government and dozens of armed groups. Any realistic approach towards Burma must take into consideration the interests and priorities of India and China."

Even, he argues, at the expense of democracy.

Conclusion

The possibility exists that the junta will stage elections in 2010 that meet minimum international standards, possibly including some form of monitoring and participation of democratic opposition groups. Indeed, at the recent ASEAN Summit held in Thailand, Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein reportedly said he would allow United Nations officials and developed countries to monitor the 2010 elections. It is not encouraging, however, that the junta has not yet promulgated the ground-rules for the elections, more than 2,000 of pro-democracy activists remain imprisoned, Aung San Suu Kyi, the still popular and influential icon of the democracy movement, remains under house arrest and is also barred from holding office by the new constitution.

Under these circumstances, the junta has dug itself a very deep hole in trying to convince the international community, much less its own citizens, that it is embarking on substantive political reforms.



Aung San Suu Kyi

If the NLD, landslide winner of the last elections, decides to boycott the elections as it now seems inclined to do, it risks political irrelevancy. However, its aging leadership and threadbare organization already run that risk and a boycott would cast a pall over the outcome, making it a very hard sell to even those nations eagerly seeking some fig-leaf to resume fuller engagement. Some NLD supporters in Tokyo and Chiang Mai advocate participation, maintaining that it can

better expose the shortcomings of the election, and lobby against international acceptance of the outcome, if it participates.

In any case, following elections in 2010, the junta's western opponents will have to decide whether to stay the course on isolation or develop a new strategy that conforms to a desire to improve living standards, human rights and accountability. The wild card is the US, a nation that has long taken the hardest line against the military junta. It has browbeaten and cajoled allies to support sanctions and isolation, but to little effect. The ICG-view on ramping up humanitarian aid and development assistance is gaining broader international support, especially within Europe, while in Washington prioritizing regime change has given way to support for democratic reform, increased humanitarian assistance and improved governance. Cyclone Nargis did give Washington an opportunity for regime change, but it decided not to intervene. Asked to confirm reports that the US considered a military invasion aimed at toppling the junta in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, Green smiled and said that an assessment indicated that anti-aircraft batteries could be suppressed and the delta region could be easily controlled, but that the risk to aid workers and other foreigners in the country was unacceptable.

The trouble with the Bush Administration's policy towards Burma, one broadly supported by Burmese in exile because of its forthright condemnation of human rights abuses,

was the difficulty in translating moral opprobrium into effective policies to achieve desired outcomes. It was a “feel good” policy with minimal cost and minimal impact.

Secretary of State Clinton has sent a signal to Naypyidaw, the generals’ new capital, that there is scope for dialogue, but there seems little likelihood that the junta will take this up. Congress may agree to relaxation of bans on top level contacts, increase humanitarian aid and, if there are encouraging developments, lift some of the blanket sanctions like bans on the import of garments manufactured in Burma that are seen to harm ordinary Burmese more than the junta. However, such a shift will only happen if the junta adopts dramatic reforms that presently seem unlikely.

Some optimists suggest that these elections are the first step towards reform, one that will produce inadvertent and unanticipated forces of change in a country that has languished in stagnation. They see possibilities for transforming the dynamics within the junta and also have an eye on the post-Thaw Shwe (age 76) era. In their view, it behooves supporters of democratic reform, improved governance and human rights to nurture this process through expanded and sustained engagement. Development programs and technical assistance projects are most often cited as the means to nurture Burma’s capacity to build on this process, gradually and incrementally.

China and India have a decisive role in

Burma and from their perspective stability trumps democracy, and the slow and steady scenario outlined above is vastly preferable to regime change. This suggests that they will accept the outcome of the elections even if they are a sham and continue their policies of expanding engagement. Burma is in the enviable position of being geo-strategically important and endowed with key natural resources, ensuring that it is much more likely to be wooed than isolated by its neighbors. For Burma’s leaders, support and accommodation by regional powers will insulate it from international pressure and lessen unwanted western influence and meddling.

The Burmese people, however, might just change these dynamics favoring the status quo. After all, who would have imagined that the military would be so humiliatingly repudiated in 1990? Who would have imagined that so many monks and others would take such risks during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, knowing as they did the horrific fate of the 1988 anti-government activists? And, the 2008 Nargis relief efforts organized by ordinary Burmese and monks suggest there is more to civil society in Burma than meets the eye. Indeed, Dr. Thinn believes that the capacity of civil society to address Burma’s many challenges is overlooked and calls for international aid agencies to nurture greater local empowerment in order to tap into this dynamism. She adds that the monks have the moral authority, social networks, skills and sense of duty to make a huge difference if given more

scope for action.

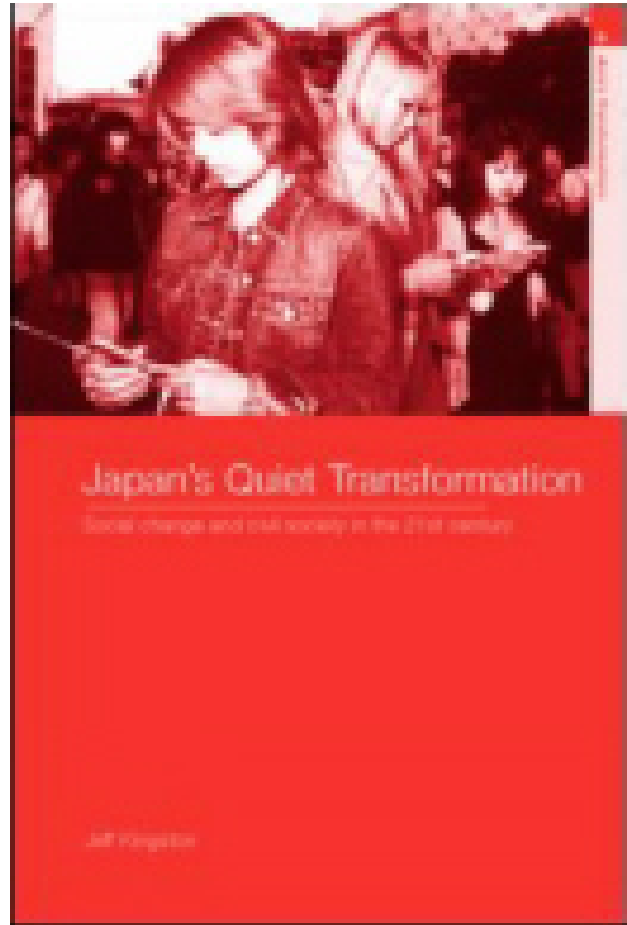
Certainly the junta is stacking the odds against the people and has demonstrated how ruthless it can be in dealing with pro-democracy activists, but 2010 could bring some inspiring, and possibly tragic, surprises. There is much to despair in Burma, but the people have demonstrated time and time again a capacity for heroic actions that indict and undermine the authoritarian edifice, both in the colonial era and now under the military. Should they make a stand yet again it is hard to imagine much of the world lining up behind a bloodied fig-leaf. Such a scenario would compel the international community to hit the reset button on broader engagement and yet again focus attention on an odious regime and the need for accountability.

Much is at stake for the Burmese people and for Burma's neighbors. Bearing in mind that India and China prioritize stability in border areas, it is imperative that the elections shore this up by gaining the participation, and trust, of ethnic groups in these regions that constitute 40% of the population occupying 60% of the nation's territory. The cease-fires negotiated by the current regime are a major accomplishment, creating a fragile peace in areas that have been devastated by prolonged civil war. These ethnic regions are subject to a gathering humanitarian crisis, however, and are desperately in need of assistance on a scale that only international donors can deliver. Credible elections can make this possible and thus shore up political stability and improve human rights while

disenfranchising the ethnic groups and ignoring their call for greater autonomy imperils stability.

The 2010 elections are the culmination of the junta's 7-step roadmap to "disciplined democracy" and as such constitute an important barometer for reform. There are at least three election scenarios the junta can contemplate. First, under the fig-leaf scenario it can run reasonably fair and peaceful elections and launch a new government that looks somewhat different than the current regime and regain just enough credibility to facilitate a resumption of somewhat more engagement by much of the international community, meaning gradual and incremental improvement over the current situation as donors test the pace and direction of reform. Second, the junta can persist in targeting pro-democracy activists, tightly restrict the space for political activity, impede monitoring, muzzle the media, rig the elections in an obvious manner and claim a hollow victory. Under this pariah scenario, the situation could turn ugly, deteriorating into yet another bloody crackdown that further undermines the roadmap, alienates the international community and prolongs the stalemate. Third, under the dream scenario the junta can call on the UN to play a role in the elections, allow monitoring and media coverage, permit the democratic opposition and ethnic groups to run and count on its superior organization and resources to enable its' proxy party to win most of the seats while the fragmented opposition and ethnic vote gain a respectable representation

that confers legitimacy on the elections. Under this scenario, Burma can count on robust engagement by the international community and the resources necessary to launch the ICG plan for sustainable humanitarian development. This scenario could facilitate expanded ties with the US, lifting of sanctions and access to military hardware and training programs. The generals would welcome this development because it would offset China's growing presence and influence. Transforming the current nightmare into this dream scenario remains a very remote chance, however, because the junta fears the peoples' will and is risk averse.



Jeff Kingston is Director of Asian Studies, Temple University (Japan Campus) and a Japan Focus associate. He wrote and photographed this article for Japan Focus. He is the author of "Burma's Despair," Critical Asian Studies, 40:1 (March 2008), 3-43, several recent articles on East Timor and Japan's Quiet Transformation: Social Change and Civil Society in the 21st Century (Routledge, 2004).

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Notes

[1] Burmese I met randomly while travelling in Burma and others I interviewed in Thailand and Tokyo openly criticize the military junta in the harshest terms and assert that the overwhelming majority of Burmese oppose the military junta. They also maintain that many of the millions of Burmese who are members of USDA (Union Solidarity and Development Association), an organization with close links to the military, are reluctant participants who feel compelled to join. For a sense of the anti-junta mood in Burma based on fieldwork conducted not long after the Saffron Revolution was quashed see, Jeff Kingston, "Burma's Despair: Critical Asian Studies, 40:1 (March 2008), 3-43.

[2] Interview Chiang Mai, Thailand Dec. 2008. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

[3] Glen Kessler, "Clinton Signals Possible Shift in US Policy on Burma", Washington Post, Feb 18, 2009.

[4] BLOCKJADE ACT, HR 3890 RFSEAS, 110th CONGRESS In the Senate of the United States, 1st Session December 19, 2007.

[5] Interview Tokyo Dec. 17, 2008. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

[6] Interview Nov, 2008, Tokyo. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

[7] International Crisis Group (**ICG**), **Burma/Myanmar After Nargis: Time to Normalise Aid Relations**, 20 October 2008. Asia Report N°161.

[8] Personal communication, Nov. 2008. Subsequent attributions to her draw on this communication. For a detailed critical assessment of the Nargis relief effort see [here](#).

[9] Interview Tokyo Feb. 7, 2009. She is the author of "[Post-Nargis Analysis-The Other Side of the Story](#)" (October 2008).

Subsequent quotes attributed to her draw from this interview.

[10] Telephone interview Feb. 8, 2009. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

[11] Interview, Chiang Mai, Dec. 2008. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

[12] Interview Chiang Mai Dec. 2008. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

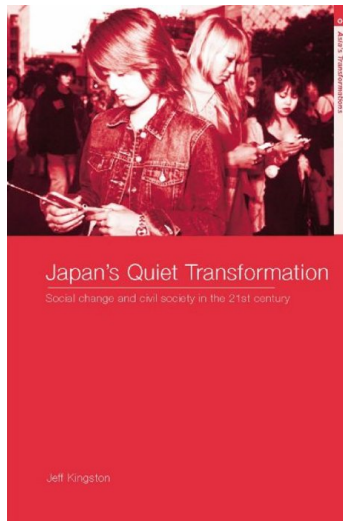
[13] Interview Chiang Mai Dec. 2008. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

[14] Interview Chiang Mai Dec. 2008. Subsequent quotes attributed to him draw from this interview.

[15] Telephone interview Feb. 9, 2009.

[16] Telephone interview Feb. 8, 2009.

[17] Interview Jakarta Dec. 1, 2007



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