

# POLITICS-BURMA: More Uncertainty Lies Ahead

By John Feffer, Inter Press Service

WASHINGTON, Nov 8 (IPS) - Burma is in the middle of a national convention that its military leaders claim is the first step in a sevenfold path toward democracy. But what mix of toughness and engagement the international community should use on the country remains an open question, one that has drawn some comparison with North Korea.

Observers remain divided over the prospects for political change in the South-east Asian country, the degree of threat that Burma poses to its neighbours, and the most effective measures that the international community can adopt to encourage greater freedom within the country.

The example of North Korea hung over a recent discussion, organised by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation on international policy toward Burma and the utility of current sanctions against the Burmese junta and the elements of a package deal that could the country out of its relative isolation.

"As someone said of North Korea, it doesn't respond *to* pressure, but also doesn't respond *without* pressure. The same can be said of Burma," pointed out Michael Green, senior advisor at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies at the discussion.

As with North Korea, the assembled experts spoke of the frustrations of inducing change in Burma and the difficulty of acquiring information about the state of the government and the conditions on the ground.

Unlike North Korea, however, Burma's military government faces a significant opposition movement. Likewise, the military junta, which has failed to recognise the 1990 elections won by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), appears to be on the threshold of reintroducing some measure of democracy.

Although opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest and the NLD has boycotted the national convention, the 1,000-plus delegates at the convention plan to complete a new constitution by year's end as part of the government's "seven-stage path to democracy."

The government promises to put the new constitution to a vote in a national referendum followed by multiparty elections that reserve a certain portion of seats in the new parliament for the government party.

The NLD and ethnic minorities in the country favour a federal constitution that permits greater decentralisation of power. "All the minorities and the NLD have talked about a

federal system," said David Steinberg, director of Asian Studies at Georgetown University. "To an American, federalism makes a lot of sense. But frankly, I don't see the military agreeing to that. The convention was tightly scripted and the military will remain in control."

"Will the NLD compete in these (multi-party) elections - even if some of the constitutional framework conditions were decided in their absence and probably with the idea to limit their voting appeal? But the outcome of those elections may be that Myanmar gets a constitutional government," argued Peter Christian Hauswedell, former director general for Asia and the Pacific region for the German foreign ministry.

"Even if that government will be heavily controlled and influenced by the military, its formation may be an improvement over the present situation," he explained. So the NLD will have to think about the consequences of a continued total rejection of the government's plans and the non-participation in that election."

The proposed political changes are not the only signs of ferment in the country.

The Burmese government has been busy moving the capital from Rangoon to Naypyidaw, a new city in the interior that is off-limits to foreigners and journalists.

Meanwhile, a video of the wedding between Burmese leader General Than Shwe's daughter and a major in the military, recently leaked to the press, depicted an extravagant event marked by luxurious gifts. The leak of this video and the moving of the capital "on the basis of a soothsayer," speculated Mike Green, suggested "evidence of serious doubt of General Than Shwe" and weakness in the "legitimacy of the leadership".

Meanwhile, critics of the regime describe a dismal human rights situation. Human Rights Watch has cited the regime for the detention of 1,300 political prisoners, the killing of protestors, and the use of 70,000 child soldiers, which is the largest concentration of under-18 conscripts in the world.

According to Jeremy Woodrum of the U.S. Campaign for Burma, "over a million refugees, most of them from eastern Burma along the border with Thailand and China, are fleeing because the regime has burned down 3,000 villages over the last 10 years" as part of an effort to target civilian populations in areas that provide a base for ethnic armies.

This flow of refugees, as well as drug trafficking and the spread of infectious diseases, has made it very difficult for Asia to ignore Burma. These problems extend beyond the region as well. "Burma presents a serious security threat to the region and requires attention from the United States and the U.N. Security Council," argues Green, citing how the Security Council is moving forward to address Burma's rights record.

Hauswedell disagrees. "The Security Council debate on Myanmar was an attempt to raise international attention for developments in Myanmar and bring pressure on its

government. But the pretext of that discussion, that Myanmar was becoming a threat to its neighbours, is a bit farfetched. If you would ask Myanmar's neighbours India, Bangladesh, Laos, Thailand, and China whether they see Myanmar as a threat, they would not affirm this. Rather, India, China, and Thailand compete for the country's raw materials and resources and refrain from criticising Myanmar."

Under its recently deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand indeed did not press for change inside Burma. Thaksin stands accused of profiting from his own telecommunications business investments inside Burma.

The military coup that ousted Thaksin has raised hopes among some that Thailand will change its policy. "The new Thai leader is known for his toughness against the Burmese oppression of minorities living along the border and his criticism of Burma pushing drugs into Thailand," explains Pavin Chachavalpongpun, the author of *'A Plastic Nation: The Curse of Thainess in Thai-Burmese Relations'*.

"The United States has already suspended military aid given to Thailand and is using the military suspension to urge a return to democratic rule and new elections and to push Thailand to toughen up its position toward Burma," he added.

Whether the use of the stick has in fact influenced the behaviour of the Burmese junta since the eighties is open to question.

"I don't think the leaders of the Myanmar military regime are necessarily receptive or sensitive to outside voices," argued Shigeru Tsumori, Japan's ambassador to Myanmar from 2000 to 2002.

"We have seen sixteen years of sanctions and unfortunately they have not achieved their aim of restoring and securing democracy in Myanmar," Hauswedell maintains. "The sanctions are not universal and are not supported by Myanmar's Asian neighbours. They were meant to hurt the military government but on balance, they have rather contributed to the economic misery of the common people in the country."

"It is very cynical of us to tolerate this as unavoidable but still legitimate the 'collateral damage' of our sanctions. Rather than isolating Myanmar, the Western sanctions have isolated the West from Myanmar and deprived it of influence over the country's development," he pointed out.

But Jeremy Woodrum believes that the sanctions, which the Burmese opposition has continued to endorse, have been effective. And, absent the sanctions that the United States imposed in the late 1990s, Woodrum argues, "the regime would have been much wealthier and much more of Burmese natural resources would have been sold off."

Hauswedell advises a different approach to the country. "In our dealings with Myanmar we should be more imaginative and use our soft power," he says. "We should not discourage tourism because every tourist is an agent of change and a source of

income not only for the government, but for many individuals involved in tourism. It was a mistake to include the children of the Myanmar elite on our visa ban list because this prevents them from studying at Western universities.”

Given these differences in emphasis between relative engagement and relative isolation, the question remains whether all countries need to approach Burma with the same policy.

Tsumori believes that “all countries don't have to put the same pressure on Myanmar to the same extent. It depends on the individual country. Japan, with its particular history, should use different pressure from the United States. Coordination is, however, indispensable.”

Such coordination, Green believes, could lead to a grand bargain. In exchange for improving its human rights record and moving toward democracy, Burma would receive humanitarian assistance, official recognition of the country's name as Myanmar, and the gradual lifting of sanctions. (END/IPS/AP/NA/IP/JF/JS/06)