

Oil, Guns and Rubies: A Burmese Tragedy

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There is no question that military rule in Myanmar must end, but the scenario is far more complex than western commentators want to admit. The National League for Democracy, the monasteries and the military form a competing triangle for power. There are also the powerful ethnic minorities and western oil companies with a stake in the country's future.

Even the Indian press, which rarely reports on the internal turmoils of our nearest neighbours, has given adequate shocked coverage to the recent merciless military clampdown in Burma (recently renamed Myanmar), showing pictures of long rows of Buddhist monks marching in protest, and lathi charges by the army, along with alarming stories of the killing of monks, and their arrest inside monasteries. Civil society vigils held in India have demonstrated our anguish at these happenings, and we join our government in urging the Burmese authorities to restore democracy and freedom to their peoples.

Response from the West

Laura Bush, the American president's wife in an unprecedented article in the *Wall Street Journal* (October 10) wrote that her husband was going to freeze the American assets of the top 14 Burmese military leaders and ban entry to the US of another top 200 Burmese families. She said that the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-Moon, had assured her that the UN special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, would return to Burma "as soon as possible". So, clearly, the democratisation of Burma had become a family business of the White House. She noted with disgust "the junta's shameful response". As if speaking from the same script, the British foreign minister, David Milliband said, "Burma stands out as a shameful anachronism".

Everyone knows that the latest popular protests in Burma have been sparked off by a sharp hike in fuel prices which led to a great increase in the price of essential commodities. While the American first lady has also condemned the great increase in the price of fuel in Burma, she strangely forgot to mention that this price hike was effected under the pressure from the World Bank and the International

Monetary Fund to end subsidies. She also mentions that her imperial husband was going to slap even harsher economic sanctions on Burma to force that government to restore democracy, but apparently such sanctions will not affect the American oil company, Chevron's 28 per cent investment in the large Yadana gas fields. Apparently, Chevron has "a long-term commitment that helps meet the critical energy needs of millions in people in the region", according to a company spokesperson.

The European Union which has also enforced economic sanctions, exempts the French oil major, Total, which owns majority shares in Yadana, from pulling out. The west is also sternly warning India not to cooperate militarily with the Burmese regime, without acknowledging that the two countries share a jungle-covered 1,600 km long border, criss-crossed by heavily-armed insurgent units. In any case the military helicopters used in border operations are all supplied by the west.

Then, the British vice-president of the European parliament, Edward McMillan-Scott, called for a boycott of the Beijing Olympic Games, being angrily convinced that the Chinese were behind the acts of brutality, a boycott call heartily echoed by the US campaign for Burma led by Republican Congressman Dana Rohrabacher. This strange deduction, perhaps, gives us a clue why the leaders of the "developed world" are, all of a sudden, so concerned with human rights in Burma, which they have ignored for half a century, or, why Burmese monks being beaten is more horrifying than Vietnamese monks immolating themselves during the war America waged on that other Asian country.

An Eye on Oil

Burma has proven gas reserves of 19,000 billion cubic feet, worth around \$80 billion at current prices. Ninety per cent of annual output worth \$ 2 billion goes to the west through Thailand. But the Chinese are also competing for these supplies, and are anxious to build an oil-gas pipeline to southern China, which would also ensure continuity of supplies from the Gulf, even if the US Seventh Fleet created a blockade around its ports. The American right-wing

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think tank, Rand Corporation, has warned its government against allowing China “this crisis management capability”. The Burmese military, also trying to protect itself against any American naval attack, has moved the capital from Rangoon (now renamed Yangon) to Pyinmana (also renamed Naypyidaw or the King’s Royal City), which is 400 km inland near Mandalay.

Now the Burmese tragedy becomes more understandable in the context of the western thirst to maintain control over global oil and gas resources. A disinformation campaign vociferously espoused as defending human rights has been launched against Burma, as it was against Iraq, and also now against Iran. But this recent campaign is only an after echo of the one launched by the British empire, when Winston Churchill’s father, Randolph Churchill, decided in 1885 as the secretary of state for India to annex Burma to control its teak, and its minerals. The Burmese king was imprisoned in a dilapidated building in Ratnagiri on the Konkan coast, just as the Mughal emperor had been imprisoned in an outhouse in Rangoon.

If Milliband finds the Burmese military “a shameful anachronism”, part of the shame should stick to the British, who within 60 years destroyed the underpinnings of Burmese society, rigorously followed a well-tested policy of divide and rule, and privileged Burmans for employment in the army, though a full third of the population was composed of several peoples of different ethnicity, such as the Arakan, the Chin, the Kachin, the Karen, the Mon, and the Shan.

Aung San Suu Kyi

The west after years of supplying arms to the Burmese military in exchange for cheap natural resources now wishes to gain complete control over that country in the context of the Chinese competition for the same. It supports the candidature of Aung San Suu Kyi, a sophisticated lady who married into an elite European family. She has connections with India as well. She graduated from Lady Shri Ram College when her mother was the Burmese ambassador in Delhi. She went on to Oxford, and then got a doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1969. She entered politics only in 1988 to found the

National League for Democracy, and has been almost in continuous house arrest since then, despite her party having won the elections decisively in 1990. However, she found worldwide support, receiving the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1990, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Peace Prize in 1992.

She follows the pattern set by other great Asian women leaders by asserting her claim to national leadership as the daughter of the great Aung San, who resisted British colonialism and brought the modern republic into being. He was the one Burmese leader who was acceptable to all ethnic groups. Under his leadership, a group of patriotic leaders, including minority ethnic chiefs, stitched together the Panglong Agreement of February 12, 1947, to form a federal Union of Burma. He had assured the many leaders that if “Burma gets a kyat, you will get a kyat”, that is, the British policy of divide and rule would be dismantled, and unity would be assured through equal justice for all.

Political Turmoil

On July 19, 1947, within six months of the famous accord, Aung San and all his colleagues were assassinated under mysterious circumstances, and the country was torn apart by civil war. Under prime ministers U Nu’s leadership, Cambridge-educated lawyers drafted a constitution that disappointed the ethnic minority

leaders. U Chan Htoon, a key framer of the constitution, admitted ruefully that while “it was federal in theory, it was unitary in practice”. In the first election, Burmans got 210 out of 255 seats in parliament. Insurgents occupied Mandalay. Renegade Kuomintang, soldiers retreating from China after Mao Zedong took power, established a flourishing opium trade in what has come to be known as the Golden Triangle based on the Shan state. Ne Win, with no more than 2,000 troops, was surrounded in Rangoon. By re-establishing the integrity of Burma, the military won a hard-fought legitimacy to share in governance. Unfortunately, blaming the civilian government for the failed integration of the country, Ne Win took over full control in 1962 with a military coup.

Ne Win’s rule was disastrous on several counts. He expelled the large Indian community of civil servants and traders. He even disbanded the Burmese Civil Service, and installed military officers in their place. He closed the country to outside influence in a traditional return to autarky. His campaign of “Burmanisation” forbade teaching in local languages in colleges, and the national dress was to be strictly Burmese. Bandaranaike made a similar disastrous mistake by his “Singala Only” campaign, which ultimately led to the civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Jawaharlal Nehru wisely avoided confrontation with the Tamils on

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the language issue, but the perceived threat of "Hindi" dominance has continued to sour relations with the Tamilians.

The haemorrhaging conflicts with ethnic nationals and communists beggared Burma, and turned it from being the rice-bowl of Asia into a grain importer. After the great public protests of 1988 and the collapse of communist militants, the military has clumsily tried to improve matters. The former prime minister, Khin Nyunt signed the ceasefire agreements with 17 ethnic militant groups. Their cadres were called "special police" and allowed to operate in their zones of influence, and the insurgents received a "retainer fee" for loyalty to the state, now given the classical name of Myanmar. The populist opposition and the Anglo-Americans have refused to accept even the renaming. Even more important, the Shan, the Karen, and the Kachin continue to wage militant insurgency. The government has entered Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and opened its economy to heavy

foreign investment, especially from Japan. From 1992 onwards, the military has built bridges with conservative monks in the Buddhist Sangha and given them generous support. It gave limited freedom to Aung San Suu Kyi in 2001, and in 2006, concluded a long-standing national convention on constitutional guidelines to ensure a lasting role for the military. However, she refused to participate. It is to be seen if Benazir Bhutto will be more accommodating in Pakistan.

Monks in Political Garb

Amitav Ghosh, a noted Indian writer whose novel *The Glass Palace* is located in old-time Burma, speaking to the *German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (October 1) was happy that the protests were led by the "sole institution which can lay real claim to legitimation", that is, the monasteries. But this legitimation is based not only on the traditional authority the monks exercise over a superstitious

people, including common soldiers, but also on the monasteries being the longest organised political force of Burma.

According to an estimate made in 1997, in a country of 50 million, there are 51,322 monasteries with 4,06,903 monks, matching the army's strength of about 4,00,000. Actively resisting the British and Japanese occupation, and siding with the liberator, Aung San, the monasteries have charted a political course which now leads them to pit his daughter against the military. After the bloody protests of 1988, when General Saw Maung called elections to make amends, he said humbly it was done at the behest of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee Sayadaws. However, pressing home their advantage, the monks supported the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and asked her to hold the first session of parliament in Mandalay, and not in Rangoon. They further predicted astrologically that the military junta would fall. The military, in turn, has played religious politics. It has

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established a special ministry of religious affairs, and helped create a Venerable Monks Committee of “Myanmar” in their own support, and in opposition to the All “Burmese” Alliance of Monks in Aung San Suu Kyi’s camp.

Since Buddhism is the most favoured exotic religion in the west, several civil society activists are in full support of the monks, the lady leader, and democracy for Burma. But few of the Hollywood stars or other elite women who support the pro-democracy movement seem to know or care that poor Burmese workers are drugged to work long hours in gem-producing mines, and that even children are forced to dig for the “pigeon-blood” rubies that are more in demand than diamonds. There has been so far no call for fair trade in Burmese rubies.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, the monasteries, and the military form a competing triangle for power in Burma. The powerful and well-armed ethnic minorities want their rights to be safeguarded before any lasting solution can be found. On the outskirts, the western powers and their oil companies are playing for all they are worth, with propaganda machines, corrupt money, crushing economic pressure, and the threat of military intervention, to swing the balance in their favour. The inscrutable Chinese are carefully assessing this game played in their backyard. Few are interested in the fate of the people. There is no question, of course, that there must be a transfer of power from the military to a popular movement like the National League for Democracy, despite widespread insurgency.

The main issue seems to be how Aung San Suu Kyi will maintain stability during the transition period. As noted by Thant Myint-U, professor of history at Cambridge and grandson of U Thant, former secretary general of the United Nations: “They should aim at some sort of meaningful transition process. It will take several years. The army should play a meaningful role in economic reforms, human rights and poverty alleviation – these are all inter-linked. We can’t move first to democracy. We have to address these three issues” (*The Hindu*, October 23).

The larger issue, once Aung San Suu Kyi has secured power, will be how well she manages to retrace the long and difficult road to nation building that the people of the subcontinent have travelled over the last half century.