

DICTATOR WATCH TEN YEAR REVIEW

By Roland Watson
October 17, 2011

Introduction

It has been ten years now since the Dictator Watch website was launched. During this period my associates and I have focused for the most part on the struggle for freedom and democracy in Burma, and unfortunately the situation in the country has consistently been negative. The people have been subjected to continual and horrific abuse and deprivation, and in more forms than one would have thought possible.

Even though Burma is not yet free, I believe the Dictator Watch initiative has been useful. As one benchmark, we have had millions of pages views (the highest year was six hundred thousand), which is pretty good for a site that does not have daily news updates. This is a huge complement for me as the principal content author. Thank you. I have done my best to help spread ideas about how to achieve democracy in Burma, and to put them into action.

The military regime has recently made a number of gestures, although it is unlikely that they reflect a real sincerity to change. In any case, it is good news that they have released some political prisoners, and also suspended the Myitsone Dam.

This dam project, where Burma's great river, the Irrawaddy, first forms, was personally disturbing for me. I visited the confluence of the Mali and N'mai rivers in 1994. It is a gorgeous and tranquil spot, and should be preserved for all eternity.

This is also when my advocacy for Burma began, as the motivation for my trip was to scout environmental degradation in the country. Using the ruse that I was a luxury adventure travel entrepreneur, I secured permission to visit the far north, perhaps the first Western traveler to do so since World War II. I went from Rangoon to Mandalay, Myitkyina and Putao, taking side trips into nearby forests and villages. At that time, Burma's natural environment was still largely pristine, although it soon became the victim of rampant deforestation, particularly in Kachin State, for sale to China, and on the eastern border, for sale to Thailand.

This was also my only trip ever to the heart of Burma, although I have crossed from Thailand to Myawaddy and Tachilek a couple of times. Dictator Watch advocacy has been so forceful that it became unwise to expose myself to arrest. I still await the day when I can fly back to Rangoon.

Foundation

I established Dictator Watch as a way to implement the ideas I developed in my book *Freedom from Form* (which is also now celebrating ten years of publication). Prior to being an activist I

was a businessman and banker, in New York, Stockholm and London. While this was in some ways rewarding, I wanted my life to stand for more than the quest for profit, so in the early 1990s I grabbed an opportunity to travel through Asia and to write. I'm an adventurer so I went way off the beaten track, by myself. What I experienced, traveling and living throughout rural Asia, was an eye-opener. I realized that the goal for my life was clear and at hand. I needed to oppose dictatorship, in all its forms including through economic globalization, the process of which I had just been a part. This is the only way that everyone on the planet, both people and other species of life, can have the dignity and rights that they deserve.

I then decided to concentrate on Burma, because of the extraordinary character of the people, and its astonishing cultural and environmental diversity. I reasoned that if any place was worth helping, it was Burma.

Principles

Through my travels and writing, I have reached a number of conclusions. The first involves social change, specifically, how positive change can be achieved. Dictator Watch was established to promote an idea about social change that I derived from the mathematics of what is known as chaos theory. This theory states that systems - it is generally applied to physical systems, such as a human body, or a natural ecology - exist in a state of equilibrium. This equilibrium endures until it is subjected to pressure sufficient to cause it to fail. This failure in turn is known as a phase transition, it leads to some new form of equilibrium, and it is accompanied by turbulence, or chaos. (There are other aspects as well, such as the "tipping point," when the transition is initiated, "strange attractors," underlying patterns which survive the transition, etc., and which are described in articles on the Dictator Watch website.)

Applying the theory to human society, we can see that a dictatorship such as Burma is a system in equilibrium. It may be extremely unpleasant for most of the people of the country, but it has endured, since 1962. The only way to escape the system, therefore, is to apply enough pressure to the generals who rule it such that their control is destroyed and a phase transition to a democratic form of social organization is begun.

In recent years, many, many countries have completed the dictatorship to freedom phase transition. This includes the client states of the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact; then the component entities of Yugoslavia, and finally the core state of the Yugoslav federation, Serbia itself; and also some of the former Soviet states, such as the Ukraine and Georgia. (Many post-Soviet states, though, and even Russia itself, are still authoritarian.)

Then, through the broad-based movement known as the Arab Spring, the peoples of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya successfully campaigned for their freedom. Similar struggles are underway in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and elsewhere in the Arab world.

The people of other dictatorships, though, are making little progress. This includes Burma, which had a failed uprising in 2007; Iran, where the Green Revolution of 2009 similarly failed; China, where the people are pushing for more rights but have not yet grasped the idea that freedom from Communist Party rule is the essential prerequisite for such rights to be guaranteed; North Korea, which has a Stalinist dictatorship that is so repressive that the people of the country simply want to escape; and Zimbabwe, where everyone is basically waiting for the dictator of the country, Robert Mugabe, to die.

My greatest fear is that the people of Burma, through all the hardship that they have suffered, will never experience real freedom. They will never feel the way that the Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans now feel: That a tremendous burden has been lifted from their shoulders; That they can think and say what they want; That they can talk to each other freely; That they can openly pursue their spiritual beliefs; That they can move throughout the country at will, and also leave it and return; and that they can work to improve their lives, with a government that actually seeks to help them, not destroy their best-laid plans.

Dialogue

There is a role for dialogue in a social change movement, but it is essential to recognize one thing: Dialogue is not pressure. Rather, it is its opposite. Pressure makes someone change: It forces them to do so. Dialogue instead asks them nicely, and with no direct or implied penalty for noncompliance. Just: Please change.

There has been a clear emphasis on the use of dialogue by Burma's pro-democracy movement. This derives from what is arguably the movement's most important component, the National League for Democracy. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the NLD, for over two decades (when she has been free to speak) has emphasized dialogue with the regime, asking that the 1990 election result, which the NLD and its allies won, be honored; and that prisoners of conscience, Burma's political prisoners, be released. Daw Suu further has rejected the use of violence, the idea that the people should fight the regime to win their freedom. She has, though, promoted some forms of pressure, including international economic sanctions and also the recommendation that foreign tourists not visit the country (since the expenses for such holidays typically go to regime-owned businesses).

The reason why Burma is not yet free, why the 1990 election result was not implemented and why there are still approaching two thousand political prisoners, is clear. Dialogue alone, or even dialogue coupled with these types of pressure, is not enough to trigger the phase transition. The reason for this in turn is also obvious. The ruling generals have powerful motivations not to yield.

Imagine what the generals of Burma will face when the country goes free. First, they may be killed. In the turbulence of the transition itself, there is a good possibility that they will be attacked, either by their fellow officers, through a coup, or by the people. Secondly, if they are

not killed they will be arrested. They will almost certainly be subjected to war crimes prosecution, and end up as inmates in facilities such as Insein Prison, where for decades they have held and tortured dissidents. Thirdly, they and their family and friends, will lose all or a large portion of their wealth. Not everything can be hidden in a bank in Singapore. The businesses that they think they own will be nationalized. And finally, all of this will constitute a tremendous loss of status. In a part of the world where status, "face," is extremely important - Than Shwe after all thinks of himself as King - they will lose it all.

Given the severity of the cost, the military rulers of Burma have no incentive, none at all, to allow democracy. Their only hope is if they can convince the people of the country that small reforms constitute progress, and are sufficient. The goal of the Seven Step Roadmap couldn't be clearer: To emulate the Communist Party of China.

The military regime established the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to fulfill the role that the CCP has in its neighbor. The CCP gives an appearance of broad-based representation, although all important decisions are made by a hidden politburo. Even more importantly, the Chinese people have been distracted and talk only of grievances and rights, not freedom and democracy. If Burma's regime can accomplish this transformation, not only can the generals retain absolute power, they can pacify the people and end their incessant pleas for democracy.

Engagement

The international corollary of dialogue is known as engagement, or more fully as "constructive engagement." Under this policy other nations, and the United Nations, deal with dictatorial regimes in a sanguine manner, and offer various incentives to change. These incentives typically take the form of assistance for social and economic development.

For Burma, the International Community's position parallels that of Daw Suu. She seeks dialogue; other countries, particularly western countries, offer constructive engagement.

There have been very few attempts to pressure Burma's regime. While there are some sanctions in place, they are principally economic and solely from the United States. Europe's sanctions are inconsequential, and other countries, including Russia, China, and other nations from Asia openly cooperate with the regime. Even though it is well documented that the Burma Army has committed war crimes if not actual genocide, there has been no formal investigation or censure, or arms embargo.

Efforts to convince the regime to change and allow democracy therefore have been fruitless. And, according to the theory, this will continue to be the case, one, ten, one hundred, and even one thousand years into the future. Only when great pressure is imposed on Burma's rulers, will they capitulate.

Schizophrenia in Burma

Burma actually appears to be two completely different countries. It has a split personality. To many people, particularly foreign parties such as the International Crisis Group and nations like Germany and France, it's not that bad. Sure, critics may be arrested, but that happens in China and other countries as well and no one cares about it.

What these parties refuse to acknowledge is that Burma is a multi-ethnic society; that the ethnic minorities largely live in the hilly, perimeter areas of the country; that the rulers of the regime are from the majority ethnic group and are racist against the minorities; and that they have acted on their racism by ordering Burma Army soldiers to commit crimes against humanity, against some minorities going back to the 1960s under the policy known as "Four Cuts."

A similar split exists in what might be termed the overall pro-democracy movement. Traditionally, the phrase "pro-democracy movement" has been applied only to the National League for Democracy and its allies which participated in the 1990 election. These groups advocate non-violent tactics.

Some minority groups and their leadership, such as the Karen people and the Karen National Union, were denied the right to participate in the 1990 election. Also, many of these groups took up arms as a self-defense response to Burma Army attacks against their people.

The armed ethnic resistance groups in Burma have been considered separate from the pro-democracy movement. While this distinction does reflect a difference in tactics, non-violent approaches versus a self-defense response, it is essentially a fallacy. The ethnic minorities of course want democracy, too. They want a democratic Burma organized under a federal system, so that their rights are protected, as was promised by Daw Suu's father, the founder of modern Burma, General Aung San.

The International Community has essentially ignored the atrocities committed against the ethnic minorities, and concentrated solely on Daw Suu. The reason for this is obvious. A country where the regime in power is only suppressing dissent presents a certain type of problem. One can envision constructively engaging such a regime to get it to relent in its suppression and to grant greater freedom.

A regime, though, that is committing crimes against humanity requires a completely different response. In this case foreign policy demands that you side wholly with the people and energetically support them, even if need be with armed support as is happening now in Libya. By refusing to acknowledge the truly dark side of Burma, the International Community relieved itself of any real need to act, and of course also greatly simplified the diplomatic task of dealing with the regime's principal supporters, Russia and China.

Dictator Watch policy

My first trip to Burma took me all the way to Putao in Kachin State, but my first friend from the country, also from 1994, was a Karen, a captain in the Karen National Liberation Army (the military arm of the KNU). Through this individual I learned about the suffering of the Karen people, which was and continues to be atrocious.

I've always believed that as a social and environmental advocate you should concentrate on the worst problems. Most activists, of course, are motivated by their own concerns. People from Burma rarely advocate on behalf of democracy in China, for example, and vice-versa. There is more than enough work to do to improve things at home. But, if you have the luxury to work on problems that are not inherently your direct concern, my view is that you should go where help is needed most.

As part of this, I think you should also focus on causes that are not well known. Many people die from cancer, but medical research for the disease receives huge advocacy support (particularly from celebrities). Similarly, natural catastrophes such as the Indian Ocean and Japanese tsunamis, and the earthquake in Haiti, also typically receive a large and well-organized response.

The exception to this was Cyclone Nargis in Burma, for which there was almost no aid. The country in general has been very low on the international radar.

Natural catastrophes are further one time events, but some disasters, like the overall situation in Burma, are man-made and go on and on. Another Dictator Watch position is that you cannot solve a symptom. You have to confront the underlying problem. With a country like Burma, where there is one social and environmental ill after another, the only real solution is to end the regime. Then, and as if by magic, all of the symptoms of its misrule will disappear.

Many organizations provide humanitarian aid to groups that are suffering from Burma's military regime, including political prisoners and their families, internally displaced persons, refugees, and migrant workers. I applaud these organizations, and have also helped in these areas a number of times.

But, the underlying problem in Burma is political. Without a political solution its myriad symptoms will never go away. Therefore, Dictator Watch is for the most part a political advocacy effort.

Interestingly, the United States and various European nations do provide humanitarian assistance to the ethnic minority victims of the regime, through refugee assistance programs. They do tacitly admit the ethnic dimension of Burma's problems and that the military is perpetrating crimes against humanity. But, as discussed, they will not state this publicly, their lukewarm

support for a United Nations Commission of Inquiry notwithstanding, as it would require a vigorous response.

Dictator Watch activities

Positive social change ultimately must be founded in education, both for it to be achieved and to persist. For this reason a major part of the Dictator Watch effort has been to promote the above discussed ideas. I have written probably two hundred articles and statements, and also a basic guide to the democratic system, *Lessons in Democracy*, which is now available in English, Burmese, Chinese, Azerbaijani, and the Ndebele and Shona languages of Zimbabwe.

In addition, Dictator Watch's first press release was a call - in February 2002 - for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to end her effort to have a dialogue with the regime, on the basis that the generals were not sincere and that without real pressure they would never cede power.

With a certain measure of prescience, this statement said:

“The costs of the dialogue far outweigh its (presumed) benefits: to-date, the release of some two hundred political prisoners. At this rate, it may take ten years or more for all political prisoners to be released.”

Once again, in 2011, the regime has just released a few hundred political prisoners. Should we now restart the clock, and hope that in ten years time all of the political prisoners in Burma will finally be free?

The main initial focus of Dictator Watch, though, was on the plight of the ethnic groups. This effort actually predates the website, to early 1997, when I presented a photography show at the first Free Burma Coalition conference at American University, titled *Constructive Engagement*, and which offset images of the regime's international cronies, the CEOs of businesses that have operations in Burma, with portraits of KNLA fighters (a David and Goliath comparison if ever there was one!). I subsequently took the show to a bookstore in New York and to the Universities of North Carolina, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. I also did a second photography exhibit in July 2002 about the KNLA, titled *Burma at War*, for Amnesty International, at a large music festival in Holland.

As part of this I participated in FBC boycotts of large companies active in Burma, which drove many of them to leave the country (although not Unocal, later acquired by Chevron); was the first to publish openly the field reports of the humanitarian group the Free Burma Rangers, in 2003 and 2004, including editing the reports; and lobbied the American Government extensively both in Washington and Bangkok to acknowledge publicly Burma's ethnic dimension and to provide cross-border assistance to IDPs.

Of course, we went a lot further than that. Among the things that I can mention, we did our best to politicize the people of Burma, to get them to feel empowered and to encourage them to revolt, through articles and statements and by infiltrating revolutionary fliers and stickers (of the Fighting Peacock image). We also asked the U.S. for financial assistance to bring down the regime by soliciting large-scale defections from Burma Army soldiers in Eastern Burma, which request was refused.

It was during this period that I began to grasp the significance of the so called pro-democracy split, between Daw Suu and the NLD, and the ethnic armed resistance groups. At this time some of the latter were so unhappy that they were openly considering abandoning the idea of a federal Burma and instead launching separatist independence movements. I said privately, and publicly through articles, that this was ill-advised. There must be unity in the movement. Establishing a federal union is the best option by far. While it is true that Burma's ethnic minorities do have a moral right to push for separate states, because of the treatment to which they have been subjected, it is also definitely the case, and for many reasons, that their individual interests will be best served if the nation can establish a functioning federal democracy.

As part of this I advised the resistance groups to express solidarity with Daw Suu, and which I was pleased to see them begin to do in their statements and not only of course because of my encouragement. I also advocated for Daw Suu and the NLD similarly to express concern and demand justice for the ethnic groups. Here, the response was disappointing, in large part I believe because Daw Suu was usually being held incommunicado under house arrest.

As I said earlier, we have to recognize one thing: The International Community only listens to, indeed, it only cares about, Daw Suu. Were she to advocate energetically for the ethnic minorities, their tribulations would receive far greater publicity and concern.

Unfortunately, there may be another element to this as well, involving not Daw Suu but other senior members of the NLD, and which a Wikileaks cable, 06Rangoon451, from 2006 and titled *NLD and Ethnic: Differing Views on Federalism*, has exposed. According to this cable. "*senior National League for Democracy (NLD) party leaders asserted that they do not consider ethnic minority states capable of properly forming and running their own subnational administrations in a post-transition Burma.*" Specifically, "*U Lwin and U Nyunt Wei doubted Burma could support a federalist system.*" "*U Myint Thein complained ... that ethnic parties want too much power to self-govern.*"

If senior NLD members continue to think like this, the split between it and the ethnic groups is far greater than one of tactics. The NLD should retire from its leadership individuals with chauvinist attitudes; otherwise, the ethnic resistance groups may have no choice but to fight for independence.

National League for Democracy

The NLD is the legitimate leader of Burma's pro-democracy movement, because it won the 1990 elections, the only valid evidence of the people's desires. Further, the NLD made a strong stand when it boycotted last November's sham vote.

Regrettably, its actions since then have undermined this position, since it has responded favorably to the words out of Naypyidaw. The NLD shouldn't try to play it both ways. It shouldn't act as if it regrets not being in Parliament, out of envy of the fact that the traitors of the National Democratic Force are. And, it certainly should not register as a political party, under the terms of the 2008 Constitution and with a puppet government now in place.

If the election was illegitimate - and it was, Thein Sein and Parliament are illegitimate as well, end of story. The NLD should oppose the regime's propaganda. Of course, advocacy for freedom, the release of political prisoners, etc., should continue, but the NLD should never give positive reinforcement to anything that the regime does, absent the completion of real benchmarks. Only such things as the withdrawal of all Burma Army troops from all ethnic areas, the freeing of all political prisoners, and the ending of all foreign development projects, are worthy of commendation, as they are the only steps that would demonstrate sincere intent.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

It is now almost a year since Daw Suu was freed from house arrest. This has been a positive year for her. As many people will recall there were initially great fears that she would be rearrested or - as the government attempted at Depayin - assassinated.

Reflecting these concerns, she has been very careful. But, now that a year has passed, her freedom to speak and act has substantially improved.

Out of respect for Daw Suu, and also because I am not inside Burma and subject to the regime's repression and its accompanying fear, I have to be judicious in any comments that I make. However, as a close observer, both of her treatment and of the reaction of the International Community, some conclusions can be drawn.

The IC is correct that Daw Suu is the leader of the pro-democracy movement. The ethnic nationalities acknowledge this as well.

This is a huge responsibility, and it includes many specific sub-responsibilities. Perhaps the most important of these is moral leadership. Daw Suu is the moral leader of Burma, and here through her sacrifice and courage she has set a shining example.

Daw Suu is also, perforce, the strategic leader of the pro-democracy movement. This role in turn has clear responsibilities. There must be a plan to achieve freedom in Burma. Furthermore, there should be a back-up plan if the first choice plan does not work.

Daw Suu has said that Burma requires a Spiritual Revolution, and also that the people may have to wait a long time before they finally achieve their goals. She further has said that there should be no fighting - she has never offered any positive reinforcement to the armed struggle of the ethnic nationalities, even through acknowledging specific and widely publicized Burma Army atrocities against them. Perhaps she does not yet feel free to make such remarks, but she should understand that her silence has the effect of de-legitimizing their struggle.

Daw Suu has also inferred that there should not be an Arab Spring-style uprising in Burma, stating that the people do not have the Internet resources required to organize it. She is further on record as having disagreed with the Saffron Revolution when it was underway.

This puts the people of Burma in a difficult situation. Should the ethnic groups fight or not? Their people are being attacked, so they have to fight, but Daw Suu apparently does not agree. Should the people of the towns and cities once again rise up, and emulate the Middle East? Again, she is basically saying: No. Is it OK even to protest a specific grievance? Apparently, as with the Myitsone dam, only after she also expresses concern.

This lack of clarity has effectively ended the pro-democracy movement. No one knows what to do. It is still OK to advocate for the release of political prisoners, a real ceasefire, and against development projects, but as far as freedom is concerned it is as if the people's hands have been tied. As I also said earlier, Dictator Watch, and working with well-known Burma activists, infiltrated Fighting Peacock stickers, thousands of them, in the run-up to the Saffron Revolution. There is no point trying to do it again, as no one would put them up out of deference to Daw Suu.

I apologize for saying these things, but in a democracy no one is above criticism. (I hope my comments will be viewed as constructive.) It is not good enough to tell the people to wait. There is a terrible cost to this. More ethnic villagers will be killed or lose their livelihoods; more ethnic resistance - and Tatmadaw - soldiers will lose their lives; more children will die in infancy of preventable diseases.

It is useful to consider the people of Egypt and Libya, including individuals who lost friends and family members in the uprisings. Were their sacrifices justified, or would it have been better to do nothing?

I believe Daw Suu is conflicted. She accepts being the moral leader but is no longer comfortable making the hard decisions of strategic leadership. This is also evident in the area of tactical leadership. Overall strategies have to be put into practice, and this is done through pursuing specific tactics. Even with a position of non-violence, Daw Suu should confer with representatives of the ethnic nationalities, including the UNFC, National Democratic Front,

KNU, KIO and SSA. By talking together now, not only can they unearth opportunities to push for freedom, they will be building a pattern of cooperation for when Burma is democratic. In the current environment it should be possible to establish channels for regular communication between Rangoon and the ethnic groups.

A final realm of leadership is to set foreign policy. Here, and as I have also commented before, words and actions are exceptionally important. It is almost impossible to overestimate their impact. When Daw Suu said that she was “happy,” that moment changed the Burma world. All initiatives to put pressure on the regime were instantly put on hold. Since then she has retracted her position somewhat, apparently recognizing that real reform is by no means guaranteed under Thein Sein, and that he may not even be in charge. But, by then the damage was done. Similarly, her sitting next to an important regime crony at a soccer match sent, to put it politely, an unusual message.

Both the U.S. and Europe jumped on these events, as a pretext for saying that there is real progress in Burma. It is clear from the West’s actions with China that it does not give a damn about democracy and human rights. What the Occupy Wall Street protestors are saying, that corporate money rules in such places as Washington and Brussels, is completely true. For Burma, they are already talking about ending sanctions, resuming assistance, and accepting the regime heading ASEAN.

The damage is done, and the “do business with the regime” momentum will be hard to reverse. What all of this illustrates is that as a recognized leader you have to be cautious to the point of paranoia in what you say and do in public.

The Dictator Watch view continues to be that strategy for the Burma pro-democracy movement is relatively simple, albeit complex to implement. The movement has two arms, non-violent protestors and ethnic rebels. But, rather than opposing each other, they can instead complement and work together, creating what chaos theory calls a feedback loop where the pressure inside Burma on the regime becomes so great that it breaks. If the people start protesting, and the ethnic groups launch offensive operations wherever and whenever possible, the regime will not be able to handle it. What worked in Libya will work in Burma, too.

Also, with this type of democracy movement the International Community would have to get off the fence and help. If it ever becomes the case that Burma is truly nearing freedom, the countries of the IC will have to stake out a position, so they can advance the interests of their domestic corporations, their only real objective, once the transition is completed. Because of this, it is still possible that Burma can be free in a relatively short period of time.

Nuclear proliferation initiative

Dictator Watch has been fortunate to gain access to the inner workings of Burma’s dictatorship, and from no less than five independent and rock solid sources. It was through these sources, and

which became a formal intelligence gathering initiative, that we were able to disclose the existence of the regime's clandestine nuclear activities, ranging from mining, milling and bartering uranium; to at a minimum experiments with uranium enrichment technology; to the purchase and emplacement of Short Range Ballistic Missiles; and also the avowed regime objective to have a functioning atomic bomb by 2020. This intelligence further disclosed the involvement of North Korea, Russia, China and possibly also Iran in these activities.

This initiative was well-suited to put pressure on the regime, and the International Community, as there is no greater security threat than nuclear proliferation.

We and others had argued for years that the regime's brutality and its humanitarian consequences constitute an international threat to security and peace, and that the IC therefore had an obligation to intervene, including under the United Nation's recognized Responsibility to Protect. All such arguments were derided by the regime's Security Council protectors, China and Russia.

Therefore, it was in a sense a huge break when we learned of the existence of the clandestine nuclear and missile programs. Surely, the International Community would respond to them.

I guess I was naive. Dictator Watch and also Democratic Voice of Burma actually secured hard evidence of the programs. I am certain that Western Intelligence, particularly U.S. Intelligence, knows a lot more as well.

Under the provisions of the 2008 Tom Lantos JADE Act, the U.S. is required to disclose what it knows in the form of a Report on Military and Intelligence Aid. It has refused to publish the report. We therefore filed a Freedom of Information Act request, in April 2010, which too has been ignored. I had no idea that the United States Government could simply refuse to follow the FOIA, and that in addition to filing a request you also have to launch a lawsuit to get it to comply.

Dictator Watch is an Internet-based advocacy project run on a shoestring. All it really has required is a lot of time. We simply don't have the funds to file a lawsuit.

Even more importantly, we have had sources who revealed incendiary details of the regime's nuclear program, but which we have not published for lack of corroborating evidence. We have actually been in a position to cultivate this intelligence, but again have not had the funding for the required expenses. It is ironic, to say the least, that for the lack of a little funding we cannot conclusively prove the existence of a major threat to world security. Of course, from the perspective of the West, this is a good thing. If we do ever get the goods on Burma's nuclear ambitions, a real smoking gun, it will be forced to respond.

No one should be deceived by the regime's claim that it is too poor to afford such a program. While Naypyidaw is trying to manipulate pro-democracy campaigners using a series of extremely partial reforms, it has launched major military operations against the ethnic resistance

armies. It is no doubt continuing its nuclear program, which our information says involves at least a dozen installations (including uranium mines), and thousands of personnel.

The issue of funding

As a separate note on funding, Dictator Watch has been run basically without external funding, as a way to ensure intellectual honesty. All we have are our ideas, and if we are not honest with them, the people of Burma would have no reason to listen to us. When you take funding it seems to be the case, from what we observe happening with other organizations, that it is difficult not to follow the agendas of your funders. Certain subjects, and approaches, become off limits. You are forced to censor yourself.

I personally have an institutional background, having worked for large companies for many years. But, I left that environment as a means to de-institutionalize myself, to shed preconceived notions and influences some of which at the time I did not even realize that I had. Now, after twenty years outside the world of big institutions, I can look at reality with clear eyes and try to understand it as it is, not as other people would have me see it.

People in pro-democracy movements should recognize that academics, the media, and government officials (including diplomats), all have this institutional bias, which they may not even recognize. (In other cases - many cases, though, they are true believers.) This means that what they say is immediately suspect, not on intellectual grounds - that they do a poor job of analysis, but because they have a hidden agenda.

It is a huge negative that to get media exposure as an activist you have to have funding - in the U.S. this means a 501(c)3 organization. Unless you do illegal direct action or have real intelligence scoops, this is the only way anyone will pay attention to you. Institutions have a set in stone bias: They only publish other institutional voices. But, if you do institutionalize yourself so that you conform, by becoming a 501(c)3, you will be forced to be biased yourself, by promoting your funders' interests.

I could have built a formal political career after leaving business, and would have loved to have been considered as a candidate for U.S. Special Representative for Burma, which given the background that I now have would have made me a good option. But, following this path would have compromised my intellectual honesty, to say what I truly believe, and in any case if I had such a career I would not be the free-thinker that I am now.

Many of the people who comment about Burma are prejudiced in what they say - if not purposely misleading - because of their institutional connections. All the while the best commentators of all (far better than me), the leaders of Burma's many pro-democracy groups, and who do know the real situation on the ground, are regularly ignored. (How many resistance group statements are published on Burma Net?)

This is not to say that Dictator Watch hasn't tried to secure funding once or twice, but in these instances it was for other groups - we were just advocates, and for initiatives such as our House of Cards idea that really had a chance of bringing down the regime. As mentioned above, the proposals were refused.

It is a pitiful situation but the basic rule for pro-democracy funding is that the more likely an idea is to lead to real change, to freedom, the less likely it is to be funded. Not only do funders have tactical agendas, they have a deeper bias against the achievement of democracy itself.

In other words, they are pushing for something in ways that will never work, or which will take an extremely long time to do so.

Concluding remarks

All of this notwithstanding, I am an optimist. When I did my first "chaos analysis" for Burma in 1999 (where I apply the tenets of chaos theory to a specific example of social dictatorship), I realized that the regime - it called itself SLORC then - would be extraordinarily difficult to unseat. I standardized and updated the analysis in 2001, and concluded that even then freedom for Burma could take at least ten years.

Even with this result, though, I knew that the people of the country, if they were determined, could overcome their oppressors and actually beat my prediction.

It is now been ten years. However, I remain optimistic. As the Arab Spring shows, the age of political dictatorship is ending. Neanderthal regimes like Burma and the communists in China will eventually fall. The people have had enough. They see that others are free. They know that they deserve to be free, too. And, they will do whatever it takes to achieve this.

It has been extremely fulfilling to in a small way be part of this. I've lost a number of close friends, others have been imprisoned, and undoubtedly other people that I have met have perished as well. I believe their sacrifices were completely justified, and reflect a degree of heroism of which I am in awe.

I would encourage the people of Burma, and China, Yemen, Syria, Zimbabwe and other nations where great suffering is still the norm: Do not despair. Your time will come. Don't grasp at straws, and for goodness sake don't fall into the trap of the Stockholm Syndrome (where hostages start to sympathize with their kidnappers). The antidote to despair is action. Even when things go wrong, inside you know you are trying and this makes the pain easier to bear. Your efforts are just. Do not give up. We at Dictator Watch will do everything that we can to help.