

UNKNOWNNS FOR BURMA

By Roland Watson

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It is a very dynamic time in Burma right now. There are a number of new and significant trends, and most of these are positive for the pro-democracy movement. Indeed, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi recently said, in her speech to the Community of Democracies, that “*Burma will achieve in the not too distant future what we have been working for for so long.*”

With dynamism, however, comes uncertainty. There are many different unknowns about Burma, factors over which we have little information or which are difficult to predict. This article examines these factors from the position of how we can best shape them to achieve the long desired goals of freedom and democracy for the Burmese people.

1. What is Than Shwe doing?

While pro-regime diplomats and journalists are saying that Than Shwe has retired - he is now drinking Johnny Walker Blue Label by his mansion pool, with no remaining authority over either the civilian “government” or the Tatmadaw (Burma’s armed forces) - this is certainly not the case. Rather, he is undoubtedly personally directing the renewed Civil War against the various ethnic resistance armies. Than Shwe thinks of himself a warrior king. Kings don’t retire. They also don’t accept disloyalty, such as from the Kachin, DKBA and Wa. Setting up a puppet government has freed him to focus on the war. He is also unquestionably continuing his quest for nuclear arms, as the May interdiction by the U.S. of a North Korean ship bound for Burma illustrates. Few people paid attention to the fact that one North Korean ship - at least one - was able to transport cargo to Burma last year. This is a mistake. The WMD program is in no way sidelined.

Few people also noticed the evolution of the regime's related propaganda. First, it said that it had no nuclear program or aspirations whatsoever. Then, after Dictator Watch and Democratic Voice of Burma provided hard evidence to the contrary, the regime changed its position, saying that while it did have a nuclear program, it was for peaceful, research purposes only. To our knowledge, no Burma analysts recognized this subtle shift. Now, the story has changed again to the junta’s recent plea of poverty - it can’t afford nukes, all the while energy prices and also direct investment in Burma are soaring.

While new intelligence on the WMD program has been sparse, it is clear that Than Shwe is moving full steam ahead with his ambition to in one way or another possess an atomic bomb.

You might note that I used the word, “junta.” How is this justified given that the SPDC has been disbanded? Another item that few people paid attention to was the news that the generals formed a State Supreme Council. Since the first reports about the Council came out early this year, there has been no new information. This body, with Than Shwe as its head, is the real power in Burma. But the Senior General has also learned that creating a public entity such as the SPDC, or SLORC before it, gives the opposition a target to focus on, hence the new Council has been censored out of the people’s consciousness.

An important issue with the Civil War is how much Than Shwe’s orders are being followed. The recent commander reshuffle is a classic technique to reestablish control over rogue field officers. However, the Burma Army is becoming stretched, and suffering large-scale casualties. Further, these casualties are more frequently extending into the officer ranks. Than Shwe doesn’t give a damn about rank and file soldiers, but he relies on mid and upper level officers for his support. As they are increasingly targeted by the resistance, and die, the survivors will become less likely to follow his orders. The Tatmadaw is already having a hard time with the Karen, Shan and Kachin. Will its commanders agree to open even more fronts, against the Wa, Mongla and Mon, especially since the morale of the rank and file, already low, must be plunging even further?

This is why the regime is trying so hard to establish a new ceasefire with the Kachin. It is losing the war. A ceasefire will also give the Tatmadaw time to reposition its troops, including potentially in China, to make more concerted attacks on the KIA. The Kachin should not be deceived. To limit itself to defensive operations at this point would be a huge mistake.

Some people are calling for the hostilities throughout all of Burma to cease. This too is a mistake. The Tatmadaw is under duress. It is a invading army, a colonizing force, in the ethnic areas. It should be treated as such, and fought against tooth and nail. The goal should be to inflict as many casualties as possible. Then, not only is there a good chance that the commanders will ignore Than Shwe’s orders; the coherence of the Tatmadaw itself may crack, leading to its downfall.

2. How will the Civil War in Burma develop?

Simply put, and no matter what the KIA does, the Tatmadaw cannot win the Civil War in Burma. Given the terrain, and their tenacity, the ethnic resistance armies can never be summarily defeated. Moreover, they are unlikely even to experience large setbacks. As the KNLA demonstrated in its Brigade 7 area, if need be they can abandon their bases, regroup in nearby mountains, and shift to concerted guerrilla actions. In these types of clashes Burma Army casualties are always an order of magnitude higher than that of the resistance.

Some people say that the ethnic armies will never be able to cooperate with each other, citing differences of opinion between the various groups and also transport and communications obstacles. What these commentators do not realize, though, is that such cooperation is not required. The ethnic forces do not need to be organized under a central command.

The Tatmadaw controls the central plains and watersheds of Burma, but it is surrounded - encircled - by the ethnic armies. These armies do not need to cooperate with each other on specific battlefields. Rather, they just need to open up many, simultaneous fronts. This will spread the Tatmadaw thin and deny it the ability to shift its troops from areas where there is minimal conflict to other areas where battles are raging.

Currently, Than Shwe has been moving troops from Arakan State to the eastern fronts. It would be best if groups such as the Arakan Liberation Party, and also the Chin National Front and Naga units, increased their guerrilla operations, to force the Burma Army to keep these troops in place.

As we understand it, the United Nationalities Federal Council has asked its member groups to step up their local activity. The UNFC appears to recognize that united they can stand, but divided they will suffer.

If the Kachin do in fact agree to a new ceasefire, they will be betraying their ethnic allies, repeating the act of betrayal when they signed their first ceasefire in 1994.

Another issue, referred to earlier, is the likelihood that China will increase its materiel transfers to the regime, and even allow the Tatmadaw to use its territory to launch attacks against the Kachin and perhaps at some point against the Wa. Military trucks have already been transferred, and Burmese soldiers are now on Chinese soil. The Burma pro-democracy movement needs to protest these moves. The large community of Kachin villagers in Yunnan Province should organize and protest, and Burma's diaspora should escalate their demonstrations against Chinese interests, such as embassies, businesses, etc. The Chinese communists will back down if they are forced to pay a cost for their support of Than Shwe.

A final unknown is how the dictator of Burma will respond to battlefield setbacks. A great fear is that he will resort to an increased use of chemical weapons.

The Tatmadaw have already fired chemical mortar rounds, possibly containing chlorine gas, and as recently as June. These have been small scale attacks, only a few rounds have been fired, but this might change as the conflict escalates (if local commanders follow Than Shwe's orders). The resistance needs to be prepared for this. In the event that such weapons are used, all victims, both resistance soldiers and villagers, should immediately be shown and if possible interviewed in videos. (All this takes is a cellphone.) The posting of these videos would not only cause world outrage; they could be used to force an investigation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. China may be able to block a United Nations Commission of Inquiry on War Crimes, but it cannot block the OPCW.

3. What will Daw Suu do, and how will the regime respond?

There has been a disconnect in the Burma pro-democracy movement for the last twenty years. The NLD has been pressing for government reform - for the 1990 election result to be implemented and for the people to be given their rights, which is an activist strategy. The ethnic groups, though, have been fighting, which is armed revolution.

The foundation for the disconnect has been Daw Suu's adherence to non-violence. She rightly understands that violence regularly leads to more violence, and that the preferable course by far is to find another way. Interestingly, the ethnic groups completely agree with this, but in the face of attacks on their villages they have had no choice but to take up arms. They understand that using force in self-defense is completely different from the junta's violence of aggression and domination.

With the Civil War escalating, the pro-democracy movement's commitment to nonviolence is being reexamined. It is difficult to ignore this subject when there are new battles every day.

Another unknown has been the basis of Daw Suu's position. Is she a pacifist true-believer, like the Quakers in America, or is her position more pragmatic, to avoid conflict if at all possible?

Her recent remarks in the BBC's Reith Lectures have clarified her position. From the first lecture, in response to a question:

“SUE LAWLEY:

Nevertheless, Aung San Suu Kyi, Nelson Mandela himself changed, didn't he? He said that non-violence as a tactic should be abandoned when it no longer worked. Is that something you might be tempted by?

AUNG SAN SUU KYI:

It's possible because I have said in the lectures that I do not hold to non-violence for moral reasons, but for practical and political reasons, because I think it's best for the country. And even Ghandiji, who is supposed to be the father of non-violence, said that between cowardice and violence, he'd choose violence any time.”

From the second lecture:

“I was attracted to the way of non-violence, but not on moral grounds, as some believe. Only on practical political grounds.

This is not quite the same as the ambiguous or pragmatic or mixed approaches to non-violence that have been attributed to Gandhi's satyagraha or Martin Luther King's civil rights. It is simply

based on my conviction that we need to put an end to the tradition of regime change through violence, a tradition which has become the running sore of Burmese politics.

When the military crushed the uprisings of 1988 by shooting down unarmed demonstrators with a brutal lack of discrimination or restraint, hundreds of students and other activists fled across the border to Thailand. Many of them were convinced that those who lived by the gun could only be defeated by the gun, and decided to form student armies for democracy.

I have never condemned and shall never condemn the path they chose because there had been ample cause for them to conclude the only way out of repressive rule was that of armed resistance. However, I myself rejected that path because I do not believe that it would lead to where I would wish my nation to go.”

In response to a question:

“MALEK AL-ABDA:

In your first lecture, you talked about the possibility of a change in tactic given the brutal nature of the Junta in Burma. How seriously would you consider supporting violence to achieve goals?

AUNG SAN SUU KYI:

I wouldn't support armed action just because somebody else is calling for it. I place all my hopes in the young people of our country, but I wouldn't support armed action simply because they called for it. I think if I were to support violence, it would only be because I believed that a short burst of violence, if you like, would prevent worse things happening in the long-run. Only for that reason would I ever support violence if I were to support it.”

Given her status, that she can be attacked by the regime at any time, Daw Suu cannot openly support armed action in Burma, even the self-defense efforts of the ethnic groups. But her comments in the Reith lectures do represent a significant clarification - even a shift, which everyone should recognize.

Perhaps the biggest unknown for Daw Suu is how the regime will respond to her new travel plans. Since her courage is without limit, she is likely to fulfill her announced plans to take trips that are overtly political. The unknown is what Than Shwe will do. We at Dictator Watch fully expect him to order that she be stopped, but it is questionable if this order will be followed. Attacking Daw Suu at this point would lead to a War Crimes investigation overnight - China and Russia, as occurred with Libya, would be unwilling to spend the political capital required to block it. More importantly, Burma would explode. The people would finally escape their fear, and rise up en masse. Defections within the Tatmadaw would skyrocket. A coup would become not only possible, but probable.

It is even possible that the West would start arming the resistance, just as France has begun arming the Libyan rebels.

4. What will the new United States Special Representative do?

Derek Mitchell has been interviewed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His presentation was bland, as were the questions his interviewers posed. He is certain to be approved for the post.

Mr. Mitchell intends to try to work with regional parties such as China, India and Thailand. Frankly, I envy him his position, jetting around to the different capitals, engaging in these types of meetings. What a glamorous life!

His mission, though, is hopeless. The reason for this is that he is dependent on the U.S. Administration, whose policy on Burma is itself hopeless. No matter how capable Mr. Mitchell may be, he has no chance of success given the policy he is charged with implementing. For example, he must talk to the real stakeholders of Burma, which comprises one group and one group only: the people of the country. He should meet with not only the NLD, but also ethnic representatives, and not the sell-outs who accepted the 2008 Constitution and ran in 2010. Mr. Mitchell cannot really understand Burma if he does not meet the resistance groups including the KNU, RCSS and KIO. However, no American diplomat to my knowledge has ever held open discussions with such groups, using as the pretense for this lack of formal contact that they are associated with units that bear arms. Of course, the real reason is not to anger Thailand, since such meetings would likely take place on Thai soil.

If the United States cannot be so forthright that it engages the parties that are actually involved in Burma, its "players," then any consultations that are held will be inherently biased and flawed.

The real problem, however, isn't Thailand. There's a deeper reason for Washington's reluctance. The Obama administration is more intent on talking to the regime than it is to the pro-democracy opposition. It also apparently believes, as Aung Din of U.S. Campaign for Burma has pointed out, that if it exerts pressure the regime will refuse its entreaties. The difficulty with this logic, though, is that President Obama is not stupid. He knows that you can't talk with dictators like Than Shwe, that they only understand force. By resting all his foreign policy hopes on diplomacy, he is essentially admitting defeat, even unconcern. A sentence or two every month or so by Secretary Clinton is not evidence of real concern. On the other hand, there is real concern about the nukes, witness the North Korean ship interdiction, but not about freedom and democracy, at least not insofar that the Administration might take actions that would yield tangible results.

As evidence of this, we can reconsider - once again - the JADE Act. The appointment of Derek Mitchell fulfills one of its unsatisfied provisions. But two significant gaps remain. First, the Administration will never reveal the Act's required Military and Intelligence Report. Obama's

White House is opaque - it will not say what it knows about the nukes. But also, there is the issue of the banking sanctions. Under the law the U.S. can bar any foreign entity, including banks, from access to U.S. financial institutions if they do business in or with Burma. For instance, were this sanction to be imposed, Singapore banks that hold money for Than Shwe, his family and cronies would be barred from business with U.S. banks. Implementing this sanction would isolate Burma financially. It would be a crushing blow.

The question, then, is why it hasn't been put in place, to supplement the sanctions on regime officials, new investment, imports, and precious gems. One answer to this is that doing so would make it extremely difficult for the energy company Chevron to be paid, not to mention American oil field service companies working in Burma, Total and many other European companies, etc. Indeed, this sanction has the potential to be so powerful that it could force every major business worldwide that is active in Burma to divest. So, why hasn't it been implemented? Is it to protect Chevron, and Total, or simply that the President really and truly prefers engagement with, over pressure against, a regime guilty of crimes against humanity?

The Burma pro-democracy movement should not get its hopes up. While Mr. Mitchell will undoubtedly be more sincere than the string of U.N. envoys that we have had to bear, he is also likely to accomplish nothing, and tragically, through no fault of his own.

5. Why does the world media pay so much attention to Libya, but not Burma?

The Arab Spring is underway: Tunisia and Egypt have already expelled their dictators. The dictator of Libya, and also the dictators of Syria and Yemen - and Bahrain, are under great public pressure. For the last three the pressure is characterized by protests, but in Libya it has developed into armed revolution.

The world press is riveted on these struggles, especially Libya. There are television news stories and updates every day.

This coverage dwarfs that given to Burma. There are some stories about Daw Suu, she is after all an international celebrity, but almost none on the internal conflict. But Burma is identical in many ways to Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. In fact, from a human rights perspective, it is worse. The junta's crimes in recent years are exceeded only by what has been happening in North Korea and perhaps Sudan. The conflict underway in Eastern Burma is of the same scale as that in Libya. Why doesn't the media find the Burma story more compelling?

Some explanations include:

- The Arab Spring is a multi-country movement, and the individual struggles are all covered because of the significance of the broader trend.

- In Libya Nato is involved and air strikes are being used. The West is part of the fight, so everyone takes notice. Also, to journalists jets and missiles are sexier than a drawn out ground war.

I believe, though, that there is one other factor that is at least as significant. All of the Arab struggles are unquestionably fights for freedom. It is absolutely clear that the people want to expel their dictators and will accept nothing less. Journalists warm to this type of story. It is a classic tale of human interest, David versus Goliath, and easy to sell.

This is not the case in Burma. The NLD's goal is not to expel the junta, at least not directly and right now. Instead, it has been to have the results of the 1990 election implemented, however long this might take. Similarly, while the ethnic groups clearly want Than Shwe gone, they don't phrase their goals consistently and repetitively in this manner. The arc of the Burma story is confusing. There are in fact so many different peoples, ethnic groups: What does Burma's general public really want?

When NLD and student activists started demonstrating in August 2007, they were protesting energy price increases. When the monks took to the streets in September, they were protesting the arrests of the students, the price increases, and the crackdown on the first monks who got involved in Pakokku.

The people of Burma and their political leaders have never found a way to present their struggle as having one goal and one goal only: Liberation from tyranny. Were they to find a way to speak with one voice and to announce this emphatically, they would get more frequent and positive media attention and through this international support for their cause.

Conclusion

Is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi right? Even if it hasn't been well articulated (at least in English), the people of Burma, in cities, towns and villages all over the country, clearly want freedom. Will this goal be accomplished?

Counterintuitively, the expanding conflict in Burma is a good thing. It can be the "*short burst of violence*" that Daw Suu finds acceptable. If the ethnic armies can continue to wear down the Tatmadaw, and the people find a way to renew their protests, and this time with an explicit focus on freedom, not subordinate grievances, Than Shwe can be expelled. Indeed, ethnic action, and additional victories, together with careful prodding from the NLD and agitation from the underground groups in Burma's cities, can create the spark that reignites the Saffron Revolution.

There is one other hidden bias in the world's common approach to Burma. Individuals, activist groups, and governments say that they want Burma to be free. They also say the same thing about Tibet, the earth (that environmental devastation should end), etc. But even with their

protestations of concern, Burma and Tibet are not free, and the natural environment continues to be destroyed.

All of these parties are hypocrites, and traitors to Burma, Tibet and nature. They want to have their cake and eat it too: Say that they care but then do nothing to help. If the Burmese can rise up, though, it may be possible, with greater media coverage, to force the world's hand. China, Thailand, India and Singapore are the regime's regional allies. Without their support Than Shwe's hold on power would be much more precarious. This will only change if at a minimum the U.S., but ideally with the backing of Europe, Australia and Japan, presses these countries and in a way that brooks no compromise. Unless the Obama Administration is willing to make this type of commitment, to spend its own political capital, it is a waste of time for Mr. Mitchell to talk to them, even to appoint him Special Representative.

I would implore readers, Daw Suu, and Derek Mitchell, to view the following short video, of young victims of the military regime's crimes against humanity. The international community was willing to intervene in Libya. This is what is happening in Burma. It must intervene here as well.

Living in fear

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgRQ6kJzJOY&feature=youtu.be>