

BURMA: THE POLITICAL CANCER IS SPREADING

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The National League for Democracy - that's right - "Democracy" - has just won an election in Burma, and by a landslide. Real freedom and modern democratic governance therefore must be close at hand. So, what possible reason could I have for using this article's title?

The six Burmans

In the last two weeks there have been a number of meetings, none of the details of which have been publicly released. All of these meetings have involved Aung San Suu Kyi, who can now safely be characterized as the country's new "democratic dictator." Prior to the election, many well-qualified individuals who wanted to run under the NLD banner were not selected, and some people were actually expelled from the Party. The reason: They did not toe her line or accept her absolute control. (She has also refused to develop a new generation of leaders.) She then ordered everyone in the country to vote for the Party, meaning her, and not the specific candidates. She announced that she would be above whomever is selected - whomever she selects - to be the new President. And, she has demanded that all NLD MPs commit to an oath of fealty, to vote on legislation as she decides. Through these and other steps Suu Kyi has cemented her intention to become the new ruler of Burma.

She is further a member of the Burman ethnic group. While the vast majority of Burmans are not racist, at least knowingly (some have unwittingly succumbed to decades of propaganda), the Burman-led military regime that has oppressed the country since 1962 (and which is responsible for the propaganda) most assuredly is. This follows a colonialist pattern of internal domination of other groups by Burman Kings dating back centuries. To be generous, one could say that Suu Kyi is still a question mark on the issue. However, her words and actions (or silence and inaction) regarding the Rohingya, and the country's other ethnic nationalities, suggest that she is a racist as well. The idea that she would insert herself into the nation's civil war - and peace negotiation, an area that she has studiously ignored, is therefore problematic at best. While the Rohingya people are hoping that she will finally act on their behalf, this is also wishful thinking. She no doubt considers them to be "Bengalis" - "kalars" - as well.

For the meetings, Suu Kyi met the dictator of Burma, Than Shwe; his puppets, Min Aung Hlaing, Thein Sein and Shwe Mann; and his grandson, Nay Shwe Thway Aung. It is clear that a grand bargain is being struck. Suu Kyi will leave the military and the police alone, and not seek to prosecute them for past and ongoing atrocities. (Of note: The worst of these crimes have been perpetrated against the non-Burman groups.) She will also protect their economic interests and those of their cronies, even though this represents the stolen wealth of the nation for the last fifty years. In return, she can be the "leader," and fulfill her belief that she and she alone knows what

is best for everyone, and without any input from anyone, or discussion. Through this, she can continue to satisfy her seemingly bottomless narcissism and megalomania.

(For the observation about narcissism, her sarong collection now matches Imelda Marcos' shoes. This is relevant! She's showing off a new silk sarong every day, in one of the poorest countries on earth. Could she please just have a little humility?)

In summary, six Burmans are deciding the fate of one of the most culturally diverse nations on earth. What could possibly go wrong?

Two other notes: Suu Kyi considers herself, as Aung San's daughter, to have essentially unlimited privilege, and which has been reinforced by her long and favored residence in England (one of the world's most class conscious societies). As an analogy, think of the self-image of the children of U.S. Presidents, times ten. At her age she is also clearly undergoing the hardening of views that some elderly people experience, whereby they become increasingly autocratic. To summarize: An unprincipled and for that matter unskilled leader, with a background of extreme privilege as well as dictatorial tendencies, and a racist to boot, will be the new and unchallenged leader of Burma, to work hand-in-hand with a gang of war criminals.

Again, what could possibly go wrong?

Actually, there's a seventh Burman as well, the individual that Suu Kyi intends to install as President - her own puppet!

One country, two governments

In theory, what is being done in Burma is almost acceptable - another Asian Values version of democracy. (International diplomats and businesses certainly think that it is.) Suu Kyi will run a democratically elected Parliament, which will work alongside the military. She in turn will oversee the many ministries not constitutionally-granted to the military. (The military controls Defense, Home Affairs - this includes the police, and Border Affairs - meaning the ethnic nationality homelands and commercial development therein.) The idea seems to be that Parliament will focus on social services, while the military manages large development projects, external defense (Burma is subject to no such threat!), internal security, and its favorite cause - "non-disintegration of the Union."

While this setup may seem reasonable to some, in reality, it is preposterous. All democratic societies subsume the military under the Executive. This is the only way a democracy can be conducted. Otherwise, the military has too much power, and is a threat to the nation.

In this type of arrangement, one would expect the Parliament to challenge the military again and again, demanding that it end its abuses and accept a reduced role. But, this in turn could lead to a coup, with the generals attempting to reclaim unchallenged power.

Suu Kyi is apparently afraid of this possibility, and her fear lies at the heart of the “Six Burman” deal. She will not interfere when the police arrest students and other protestors (continuing her current practice). She will not object when the Burma Army launches new assaults against the ethnic nationalities (again, her current practice). She will not even complain, at least not strongly, about corruption and the military’s total control of the economy. (All her talk about the Rule of Law was just for show.) This is - she believes - the only course that she can follow if she wants to maintain her standing. To preserve the illusion of real leadership, she will kowtow to Than Shwe.

Three Rohingya individuals have been murdered in the last week, in separate incidents (a pattern that has been underway for years). They include two men, with one killed by the police and the other by Rakhine racists; and a woman, perpetrator unknown, who was also likely raped as her body was found naked. There was not a peep about this from Suu Kyi or the NLD. Do they track crimes against the Rohingya, or any other group for that matter? Do they even care?

The military cancer

A revealing way to think of the Burma Army is as a political cancer - a racist, political cancer. Just as real cancerous tumors are supplied by networks of blood vessels, so the military in Burma is a collection of cancerous tumors - its bases and outposts, connected by rivers and roads. And, just as a biological tumor kills the body, so the Tatmadaw has been killing Burma, and in innumerable ways, from the just illustrated direct murder of its citizens; through imposing poverty, which disproportionately kills children and the elderly; to the decimation of the natural environment.

Nonetheless, as bad as it has been since 1962, the military cancer in Burma can get much, much worse. Cancers need oxygen and nutrients to grow; the Tatmadaw - money. In the past, it mainly relied on the sale of natural resources, including oil and gas, timber, minerals and gems. But, after huge personal thefts by the top generals, and the pursuit of a never-ending civil war of aggression, this actually left little surplus. Burma is a “least-developed” state. What this means is that the tumor in the country is still limited and clearly defined. While it is true that every soldier, police officer and bureaucrat has sworn allegiance, the actual dictatorship, both political and economic, is quite small. Because of this, surgery to remove the tumor - a popular revolution - would be straight-forward. Were the people of Burma to rise up in numbers even a fraction of those who have just voted, they could cut the dictatorship off at its head and begin a real transition to democracy.

Than Shwe’s strategic goal is not only to maintain the status quo for his lifetime, or even for that of his grandson. He wants Burma to be a military dictatorship in perpetuity, like China. He will be the Burman King that established the new dynasty, and perhaps just someday his grandson will be King as well.

His genius in organizing this has been through cultivating his most public enemy, Suu Kyi, and turning her into an ally. Through careful management, mainly by Thein Sein and Shwe Mann, but also with the backing of the International Community, he has transformed Suu Kyi from a revered and legitimate pro-democracy leader, into a spokesperson for the regime.

Furthermore, the main real-world consequence of her willingness to overlook essentially everything, will be greatly increased commercial development in Burma - as has already begun since her surrender in 2011 (when the NLD re-registered as a political party). Moreover, almost all of this development will be owned by current regime figures and cronies. The economic foundation of the Burma dictatorship, and through this the military cancer, is about to expand exponentially. By the time Suu Kyi dies, or otherwise leaves the scene, such that new and real democrats can finally take over, economic dictatorship - feudalism - will be so entrenched in a new generation of princelings that the challenge of revolution will be a thousand times greater.

It's also worth commenting on the basis of her well-recognized opposition to public protest. Were a popular revolution to succeed in Burma, her iconic status would degrade. The new democratic leaders would be selected from among the individuals who led the uprising.

Suu Kyi has said that the people of Burma will have to wait a very long time for real freedom and democracy. Through her own actions, hers and hers alone, she is guaranteeing that this becomes true.

This is her legacy.

Popular responses?

With the deck so stacked this way - Suu Kyi, the generals and the International Community are all against them - what are the people of Burma to do? For the general public, the answer is obvious. The people need to continue to demonstrate for democracy and against any infringement of their rights, from the repression of students, to unacceptable working conditions, to land thefts, to environmental travesties. The regime will, of course, continue to make arrests, and the number of political prisoners will grow. Nonetheless, there is no other choice.

For the ethnic nationality resistance groups, they need to maintain their guns and not yield an inch of territory. They need to fight back against all Burma Army incursions, in particular those in support of environmental crimes (e.g., new dams and mines). Also, it is worth remembering that ethnic turncoat Mutu Say Poe will not control the KNU forever. A day will come when he is gone, and new leaders can resume the Karen Revolution, and re-establish unity with the other resistance groups.

Finally, the ethnic resistance may also need to reconsider two things: Their long-standing unwillingness to engage in offensive operations; and their opposition to separatism. For the second, the Panglong treaty clearly gives the ethnic nationality peoples of Burma this right, and

frankly, life under the new Suu Kyi-Thaw Shwe regime may prove to be unbearable. (It is possible to create a new country out of Eastern and Northern Burma, and which would even have access to the sea - at Dawei. Remember, the age-old conflict in the Balkans ended when Yugoslavia was divided.)

Even Suu Kyi would have a hard time opposing this, since Panglong was her father's achievement.

The threat of separation - just to discuss publicly the possibility, e.g., at UNFC and EAO meetings - is the ethnic nationalities' strongest bargaining card. For one thing, it would stop large developments in their tracks (including what has begun now at Dawei). No companies will invest in long-term projects in the face of this risk. Even more, though, the ethnic groups need to anticipate future threats, foremost that the Tatmadaw will use development proceeds to rearm, with U.S. and Israeli weapons, and launch a full-bore multi-front offensive, and with Suu Kyi's backing.

In conclusion, since Suu Kyi has rolled over, and real Burman pro-democracy leaders have been imprisoned, the ethnic groups must continue to underpin the entire national resistance, by refusing to yield.