

DEMOCRACY IMPLICATIONS OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S EUROPEAN TRIP

By Roland Watson
www.dictatorwatch.org
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Following her trip to Thailand, I wrote an article, *Policy Questions for Aung San Suu Kyi*, which said that Daw Suu needed to elaborate her positions on the critical policy issues facing Burma. Her statements in Thailand were vague, and only touched upon a few of the issues. However, that trip was also carefully controlled by the Thai authorities, and she may have felt constrained in what she could say.

I made a major effort to get the article to her, with numerous individuals attempting to communicate it directly. She has now concluded her trip to Europe, and her comments at different venues seemed to reflect some of my concerns, which other people have of course voiced as well. In addition, while her trip was also carefully orchestrated by the governments of the countries that she visited, she was in no way censored by them, or subjected to the types of influence that might have led her to censor herself. If there was any place where she should have felt free to speak her mind, it was in Europe.

(On the other hand, she was denied the opportunity to meet exile Burma activists face-to-face, just as she was denied similar meetings at the Thai border. Still, she stood in front of many different podiums, and could have addressed their concerns - which I listed in my article - had she felt the need.)

Some people might argue that being forthright will put her at risk from Burma's military regime. To this I can only say that if she has to censor herself outside of the country, how will she possibly feel comfortable speaking her mind as one of the few democratically-elected MPs in the regime's hand-picked Parliament?

Other than a few specific statements, which will be considered in the balance of this article, Daw Suu for the most part continued her practice of speaking only in vague and general terms. I think at this point that we just have to accept that this is the way she is. For whatever reasons, she will never be specific, or forceful.

There is a joke that every contestant in a beauty pageant, when questioned one-on-one by the moderator about what she would most like to see happen, responds: "world peace." Daw Suu in her comments always calls for peace in Burma and the rule of law. (One commentator satirically dubbed her trip the Rule of Law tour, since she uses the phrase all the time but neglects to describe what she means by it.) Not to be discourteous, but when she makes such statements it is difficult not to be reminded of the hapless pageant contestant.

This is the first point that has serious implications for democracy in Burma. Daw Suu's strategy is to press quietly for change - engage in some sort of secret dance with Thein Sein, and wait and hope. There is a significant risk, though, that this strategy will fail: That absent substantial pressure the regime will never allow a real democratic transition. The Burma pro-democracy movement is saddled with a leader who is pursuing only the weakest of tactics and which the regime should find easy to deflect.

It is essential to recognize that Burma, Parliament or not, is still ruled by a military dictatorship. The regime has no incentives whatsoever to permit democracy, now that Daw Suu herself has opened the doors to economic development.

Things happen because people make them happen. The world now is a bad place because bad people are allowed to do what they want. Good people don't stop them. Daw Suu is a good person, but she's fallen into the trap of believing that calling for positive change is enough to bring it about. It's not. Good people have to take control, and then expel and prosecute the bad. Sitting around and waiting for peace means that nothing will ever change. There will never be peace.

Sanctions

It is extremely unpleasant to criticize an icon, but in the interests of intellectual honesty, and to be true to my commitment to the people of Burma, I have to do it. Further, I would not be nearly as critical of Daw Suu as I am, if she hadn't changed her mind about economic sanctions. It would have been OK if she joined Parliament but at the same time continued her support for the sanctions. If that's the role that she wants to play, to push for change from the inside, that is her right - even if I and others believe that it will never succeed. But by reversing herself she not only empowered the regime financially, and diplomatically, she put great pressure on the ethnic resistance groups, which did have real power to press for democracy. One by one they felt compelled to sign ceasefire deals, even though the deals are only tentative, and also bad for their respective peoples. Among other regime-committed violations, land thefts in the ethnic areas are skyrocketing, and this is a direct consequence of Daw Suu's change of heart.

Moreover, through the regime's effort to push the groups that signed ceasefires in the 1990s to become Border Guard Forces, this led these groups, notably the Kachin Independence Army, to renounce the agreements. This meant that there was a real opportunity, the first in twenty years, for the ethnic resistance forces to form a united front. Daw Suu's new approach though destroyed this possibility, and it also left the Kachin on their own, unless the UNFC members follow through on their threat to end their ceasefires and help their ethnic brothers to the north.

This is the second major democracy implication of the new Daw Suu. Before, there were two paths to democracy, the non-violent approach of the NLD and the armed resistance of the ethnic groups and ABSDF. Either one conceivably could have brought about the collapse of the regime (the NLD by calling upon the people to rise up), and together, even without cooperating, they

created a lot of pressure. With her change, though, Daw Suu sabotaged the ethnic option, and through this made herself the only game in town.

The last year truly has been historic (people will write about it for generations), although the jury is still out on whether the change is positive. First, Daw Suu reversed her position on the sanctions. Secondly, and this event is not nearly as well recognized, GOC (General Officer Commanding) Mutu Sae Poe of the KNLA signed a preliminary ceasefire with the regime even though he was not authorized to do so. His action committed the KNU and through this once again split the ethnic resistance. If he had not signed, there would probably not now be a Karen ceasefire, which in turn would mean that the ethnic resistance groups could work together much more easily, and also that foreign corporations would be more hesitant to enter the country.

Economic development

In Europe, Daw Suu did make a couple of specific comments on economic development. She said that development was acceptable if it was “*democracy-friendly*,” and if it created jobs. She further cautioned against companies doing business with the regime’s Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), because it “*lacks transparency*.”

Unfortunately, and I don’t believe that she recognizes this, economic development is never democracy-friendly. Corporations have their own agenda, and the top three items are making money, making money, and making money. They don’t care if the governments that they deal with are dictatorships, or lack transparency. They just factor into their profit and loss models the benefits (lack of environmental and worker protections) and costs (bribes) that are involved. For example, right after she made her MOGE comment, the regime signed nine different exploration deals with foreign companies. So much for the impact of her statement of caution.

If Daw Suu really wants to understand the Gold Rush that is now happening in Burma, she should go to Happy Hour at the Strand Hotel bar. Foreign profiteers there are in great spirits - literally, promoting one deal after another, and with no thoughts whatsoever for “democracy,” only which regime officials to pay bribes and in what amounts.

The accolades that she just received also had nothing to do with democracy. Corporations needed someone to unlock Burma’s door. Her being treated like a queen by the governments of Europe, the corporations’ promoters, was the payoff for her willingness to do just that, to go along with the charade that constructive engagement will lead to freedom. (It didn’t for Saudi Arabia or China: Why will it for Burma?)

(Note: The reception in Europe was also intended to silence her critics. How can anyone fault such an unparalleled hero? Furthermore, it is important to remember that Europe never banned investment and trade. It only implemented the weakest of sanctions, in deference to the U.S.)

As an additional comment on energy exploration, and resource extraction in general, I can mention that I once worked on the Executive Staff of Union Pacific Corporation, which at the time, in addition to its famous railroad, had oil, mining, and land development subsidiaries. I subscribed to the *Oil and Gas Journal* for years. Because of this, I understand the oil company mindset. They feel that it is their job to supply the world with the energy that it needs. When they go into difficult countries like Burma, they actually believe that they are doing us all a favor. That's where the oil is, so they go get it. It may be a hostile environment, like the North Sea or the north slope of Alaska, or a dictatorship like Burma or Equatorial Guinea, but they are willing to do it. They also say that their actions are separate from the local social and political conditions, but here they are deceitful. It is specious to claim that they do not have an impact in a country like Burma. The revenues provided by Total and Chevron have kept the military junta afloat for years. These companies are not only stealing the resource wealth that belongs to all the people of the country; they are their oppressors' funders. When Daw Suu called Total a "*responsible investor*," she was not only incredibly poorly informed, she was flat out wrong.

(Note: The people of Burma should insist that Derek Mitchell, the incoming U.S. Ambassador, vigorously enforce the United States Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which prohibits U.S. companies from paying bribes. This move alone will prevent U.S. oil companies from new dealings with MOGE.)

Fortunately, development in Burma is not solely up to her. The people and the pro-democracy movement will be able to have their own say. Corporations may then find that the opportunities for exploitation are not so ripe after all. All workers in labor-intensive industries, e.g., factories, should refuse to be wage slaves. They should demand reasonable pay, and working conditions, and the right to form unions, and strike if they are not satisfied. As for resource exploitation (including hydroelectric energy and large-scale contract farming), such resources are located in the ethnic nationality areas, or are distributed through these areas. The resistance groups of course retain the power to disrupt their operation.

Conflict in Burma

Daw Suu also made a number of important comments in Europe about the conflict in Burma. On the civil war between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic groups in the northern and eastern parts of the country, she said: "*resolving conflict is not about condemnation, it is about finding out the root, the cause of the conflict.*" She has also been quoted on numerous occasions as saying that she "*has always had great affection for the Tatmadaw.*"

I can understand that Daw Suu does not want to criticize the regime, because she has to try to work with it as an MP. However, it is unbelievably insensitive for her to imply that the ethnic nationalities are somehow to blame, if only partly, for the crimes against humanity to which they have been subjected. The Tatmadaw has been attacking them for decades, and slaughtering and raping their villagers. The regime is wholly responsible for what is one of the world's very worst humanitarian crises. To deny this is not only absurd, it is a grave insult.

The ethnic nationalities backed Daw Suu because they viewed her as the only Burman that they could trust. However, since she has consistently deferred to the regime in her observations on the conflict, this trust is rapidly eroding. It hasn't been widely publicized, but Kachin people demonstrated against Daw Suu in London (at the event organized by the charity Prospect Burma). *Kachinland News* now has an editorial objecting to her comments.

This issue has major implications for democracy in Burma. The leaders of the ethnic nationality political organizations for the moment are sticking with her, because they have no one else on the inside with whom to ally. But popular opinion among their people is changing. Were a truly free election to be held, the ethnic nationality publics would no doubt vote for their own parties, not the NLD, including parties that had specific platforms opposed to her. Over the long-term, if she is not able to serve as a unifying figure, including through the possibility of being unable to lead due to health problems, it will become extremely difficult to get all of the varied peoples of Burma to cooperate and agree. Daw Suu, by publicly backing the regime, and not blaming it in any way for the civil war, is playing an extraordinarily dangerous game, and which may prove to be another historical turning point for the country.

The Rohingya

On the conflict that recently exploded in Western Burma in Rakhine State, Daw Suu said: “*We need clear and precise laws with regard to citizenship,*” and “*we need more responsible border vigilance.*” Once again, she has misunderstood, and mischaracterized, a pressing national issue.

The question with the Rohingya is not one of citizenship; instead, it is about human rights. All the people in Burma - all the people in the world - have an inalienable set of human rights. When these rights are denied, to anyone, human rights champions, certainly Daw Suu, should rally to their cause.

Many Rohingya live in Burma. That is not a subject of dispute. There is a question though of when large numbers settled in the country, with some people saying for centuries, others since the British took control in the early 1800s, and still others only in recent decades. There are also questions about the Rohingya as a distinct group. They are Muslims, but then there are other Muslims in Burma as well, many in fact, who are not Rohingya.

There has been an astonishingly racist reaction from some Rakhine Buddhists that the Rohingya are not Burmese and therefore should be thrown out. This is a rich argument given, as Bertil Lintner commented in a recent article (*Burma 2012: Democracy and Dictatorship*, in *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*), that “*Burma is a colonial creation...*” Burma has only existed as a country since the 19th century, and furthermore, since 1962 it has been run by a completely illegal government, not one single action of which has in any way been legitimate. The question of who is Burmese can therefore only be determined when a truly democratic government is

established and investigates the issue. Until then, though, everyone in the country should be afforded all of their human rights, and in no way be subjected to violence or expulsion.

Another way to consider the question is to address the racists directly. The following are the options for dealing with the “Rohingya problem.” Which do you think is right?

- All Rohingyas, every man, woman and child, is a terrorist, and should be executed.
- All Rohingyas, if Bangladesh won't take them, should be towed out to sea, following the policy used by the Thai government. (Note: This is of course the same as the first option.)
- Rohingyas should be treated as they are at present, with their existence tolerated but with them denied many basic rights.
- Or, Rohingyas should be treated as everyone and anyone should be treated, with respect, including for their religion, and only detained and investigated when there is probable cause to suspect them of criminal activity. (And, in such cases they should be afforded due process. Since Burma unquestionably needs the rule of law, this is an excellent place to start.)

One disturbing element of the conflict in Western Burma, and which Daw Suu by focusing on the citizenship issue has enabled, is the degree to which it hasn't been properly investigated, including with an apparent self-censorship by the International Community and exile Burma media. The World Food Program reported that there are some 90,000 refugees from the conflict, three times the regime's estimate. Interestingly, the WFP has engaged in self-censorship as well, by refusing to state how many of the total are Rakhine Buddhists and how many are Rohingya Muslims. Atrocities have been committed by both sides, but if - as one suspects - the bulk of the refugees are Rohingya, an effort should be made to determine what led so many people to flee. Specifically, the reports listed as follows and which come from numerous sources need to be confirmed.

- That hundreds and possibly even thousands of Rohingya were killed, both on land and through the helicopter gunship sinking of three packed ships at sea.
- That the killings of Rohingya were not only perpetrated by Rakhine mobs, but also regime security elements including the army, police, Nasaka, and other paramilitaries (photos have documented young Rakhine men who were given police vests and guns). Indeed, the investigation needs to consider if the conflict was in fact orchestrated by the regime, to further inter-ethnic hatred and also to put Daw Suu in a difficult situation.
- That the bodies of the bulk of the Rohingya who were killed, and which bodies have been requested by their communities, were taken away and dumped in rivers and mass graves.
- That Rohingya women were subjected to revenge rapes.

History is written by the winners. However, unless the conflict is properly investigated, it will remain an open sore, and on its own have profound implications not only for the treatment of the Rohingya, and inter-ethnic harmony in Burma, but for the goal of democracy as well.

(Note: It was appalling that both the E.U. and the U.S. applauded the regime's positive characterization of its own response to the crisis, without investigating the reports that it was in fact regime agents who perpetrated many if not most of the murders - shooting Rohingya villagers. U.S. Rangoon Charge d'Affaires Michael Thurston should be pilloried for saying that "*the government is trying to help everyone who needs it,*" when in fact it was Naypyidaw that escalated the crisis.)

One final issue is the question of why many Rakhine Buddhists (and pro-democracy luminaries such as Ko Ko Gyi) hate the Rohingya so much, rather than the regime. If they would fight against the Tatmadaw as forcefully as they do against the Rohingya, the dictatorship would fall in short order.

The future of Burma

The virulent racism that erupted in Western Burma was unexpected. Analysts have long understood that there is an undercurrent of racism in the country, which many people politely describe as "chauvinism," but it was nonetheless surprising to see it accelerate so dramatically.

The racism is due to the regime. The generals that have ruled Burma for the last 50 years have been racists with two distinct foundations. First, they truly believe that the Burman ethnic group is superior. (They inherited this position from previous Burman empires.) And secondly, they encourage racism as a divide and conquer strategy, to distract the people from their crimes and to turn different elements of the pro-democracy resistance against each other.

Burman leaders, excluding General Aung San, have typically taken a dim view of the country's other ethnic groups. (This is also the case with some of the NLD 'uncles.')

Historical empires strove to eradicate the Rakhine and Mon peoples, with the present day generals turning their ire against the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Kachin. They resent that during the colonial days these groups had a great deal of autonomy, while Burma Proper, home of the majority of the Burmans, was closely administered by the British. It has also been evident that such resentment is shared by some ordinary Burmans, as their comments on articles describing Burma's civil war have repeatedly demonstrated (i.e., blaming the Karen or the Kachin). It was an open question, though, how far this racism extended. From the Rohingya crisis, we can now see that the ethnic disunity problem is severe, and just below the surface.

This has extraordinary consequences for democracy in Burma. First, racism itself is of course undemocratic. It is based on the extremely primitive idea of collective guilt, and in some cases the associated idea of original sin. Regarding the crisis, Rakhine and Burman racists, perhaps

without even realizing it, believe that all present day Rohingyas are guilty, and must be punished, because their ancestors committed the original sin of having the temerity to move into the territory.

While it was never going to be easy, I have always hoped that the great reward of achieving real freedom in Burma would be enough to set the different ethnic groups out on a new path, to peaceful coexistence and cooperation. It is further clear that there is great determination among many leaders and people, and both ethnic nationality and Burman, to achieve this end.

Unfortunately, though, the longer it takes to achieve real freedom, the less likely it is that peaceful co-existence will be preserved. (For additional analysis of the inter-ethnic issue, please see Bertil Lintner's above mentioned article.)

The real challenge of Burma is that it has so many pressing problems. If Daw Suu attempts to address these in Parliament, which given the regime's recalcitrance will almost certainly have to be one by one, it is guaranteed that they will never all be solved. There will be more unexpected events, and conflict, and this will disrupt and ultimately end the democratic transition. As the military rulers in Egypt have just illustrated, even with the removal of Hosni Mubarak they are loathe to give up power, and are fighting this tooth and nail. The only logical conclusion for Burma is that its military regime will do the same thing.

The many distinct hurdles include: Actually implementing the rule of law, starting with a new constitution; creating safeguards to try to restrict development to projects that are transparent and "pro-democracy;" ending all the conflict that is underway, including by having the Burma Army withdraw from its ethnic area bases and outposts, and through confronting the society's underlying racism; constructing a social infrastructure with schools, clean water, and medical clinics; implementing the safe return of refugees and migrant laborers; holding a truly free and fair general election in 2015; confronting the narcotics problem and the associated existence of Wa and other ethnic warlords, and their regime business partners; addressing the Naga issue (the Nagas in Northwest Burma want their own country, greater Nagaland, through unification with the large Naga population in Northeast India - like the Rohingya issue this has largely been ignored); etc. The list goes on and on.

To repeat, the only way to deal with all of this is to achieve freedom first, pass a new constitution, and then begin to address, following democratic principles, the different issues. Trying to solve them at the same time as the push for freedom is a recipe for disaster.

In an article published at the end of last year, *Parallel Universes in Burma*, I said that for the first time in my eighteen years of involvement the possibility that the country would fail, and break up into a collection of separate states, had become real. This observation was based on the fact that Daw Suu had started losing the trust of the ethnic nationalities. For the reasons described above, this risk is growing. If she continues to follow her current course, she will be elderly once - if - real democracy is achieved. At that point there will no longer be a unifying leader.

Provocateurs, seeking power, will then do everything they can to trigger ethnic discord and conflict.

It is essential that a true democracy first be established. Then Daw Suu, like Nelson Mandela, can have a period of personal leadership, after which she can serve as a revered elderly leader backstop to Burma's democracy, peace and unity, as a new generation takes control.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Daw Suu is not the only leader of Burma. A democracy means that many people have a say. If there is only one, it is a dictatorship. For example, the writer and former political prisoner "Ludu" Sein Win was one such leader, but unfortunately he has just passed away (on June 17th). Until his death he was devoted to the fight for freedom. He was skeptical of Thein Sein, opposed international engagement and economic development, and even criticized the NLD. His loss is great, but as with Daw Suu herself, there are others ready to fill his shoes. There are many extraordinary individuals in every generation of the Burma public, and from every ethnic group, who are already making a large impact, and who could and would contribute much more if they were only given the chance.

Perhaps the most difficult task of leadership is delegation. It is hard to trust others, to not try to do everything yourself. However, this ability, to identify strong subordinates and then to give them a free hand to do their jobs, is an essential skill of great leaders.

Daw Suu has changed following her most recent house arrest, in other words, since Depayin. She has changed her mind on many important points, and also her overall approach. (She was formerly confrontational with the dictatorship.) Moreover, even in the center of such a bright spotlight, she seems isolated, with few people on whom she can rely and whom she trusts. Now more than ever Burma needs a new class of leaders, committed to democratic ideals, to advise her and to help share the load.

I said that she has changed, and it is important to consider this fact. Some people think that the reason is that she recognizes she is getting older. She has to take a chance now, even if it is on the regime's terms, while she still has her vitality.

While this argument makes sense, I am concerned that another factor is also at play. Since her release, she has been silent on Depayin. She has never talked about it. I am certain though that it has constantly been in her thoughts. What happened at Depayin is that her driver was able to escape from a regime ambush, and she was saved. But behind her, as many as a hundred of her followers, including no doubt personal friends, were killed. It was rightly termed a massacre.

People who accompanied her, and supported her, were killed. While this was in no way her fault - everyone was there of their own free will - it is still a fact. They were there because she was there. I believe the reason that she has changed is that she is no longer willing to have anyone

risk their lives, for her. While not a rigid pacifist on philosophical grounds, she has nevertheless become one because of this.

This is an unrealistic position for a pro-democracy leader. Even in the most peaceful of transitions some lives are inevitably lost, usually at the hands of the regime. Given the nature of Burma's generals, and such things as the racist beliefs that now appear common in some groups, the transition for the country will involve more than a few lives lost, which is of course already the case.

Being a pacifist will not prevent this, and it may even increase the toll. Further, this may happen through chance events, or purposeful action. For the first, had the Saffron Revolution succeeded, the death toll from the Nargis cyclone would have been much less, because a democratic government would have quickly alerted the Delta population of the impending weather catastrophe. For the second, what is happening now, and which groups such as the Kachin are so upset about, is that Daw Suu's pacifism and outspoken support for the Tatmadaw has actually validated its attacks against them. This begs the question: How many such deaths is she willing to tolerate on her long, slow road to freedom?

I imagine these remarks appear strong, but I could actually be much stronger.

I have struggled to characterize Daw Suu, because she is such a singular figure. I believe that the description that is most succinct, though, is as the leader of a Ponzi scheme. A normal Ponzi scheme is an investment fraud, where the initial investors are paid outsized returns using money contributed by later participants. It is a pyramid scheme, meaning that it can survive as long as new gullible investors are found (to form new, lower and wider levels of the pyramid). The basic con of the fraudster is that the investors can earn great rewards, without bearing great risk.

While it is certainly not premeditated (or criminal), I nevertheless view Daw Suu's leadership as another type of Ponzi scheme. She is saying to the people of Burma that they can earn an extravagant social return, in this case freedom and democracy, without the necessary sacrifice.

It is already the case that fewer people are willing to join her pyramid.

Daw Suu says that she doesn't want to be an icon. The solution to this is simple. She shouldn't accept invitations to events where she will be treated as one. As a recent defense, she said that she worked "*very, very hard.*" This is unquestionably true. My advice though is to spend less time with self-serving diplomats (before her trip she met China's Ambassador, although nothing was published about it) or writing speeches for inconsequential meetings. (Even the Nobel Prize is nothing compared to freedom for Burma.) Instead, spend more time understanding what is really happening in the movement for freedom, foremost by meeting and developing relationships with the many people who have been fighting for years if not decades, and who are desperate to make her acquaintance.