

POLICY QUESTIONS FOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI

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Aung San Suu Kyi has just visited Thailand. During her trip she was once again treated with adulation appropriate for a queen, and to which she responded with queen-like vague but feel-good pronouncements. However, Daw Suu is no longer only a subject of idolatry; she is now a hands-on politician - an MP. It is not enough for her to make non-specific and hence empty statements. She has to convey clear policy points for the many critical problems facing Burma. This is her responsibility as a leader, and also the means by which the people of the country, now formally her constituents, will evaluate her performance and hold her accountable.

The most important policy issues are as follows:

Sanctions

The main purpose of her trip was to speak at the World Economic Forum, which is a collection of business leaders. Through this engagement, she effectively restated her support for ending economic sanctions against Burma's military regime. It is critical to note that this specific policy position is at odds with much of the pro-democracy movement, including the ethnic nationality leadership in organizations such as the UNFC and KNU, which issued statements calling for a continuation of the sanctions.

Development

Daw Suu's remarks at the WEF sent mixed messages on the issue of development, specifically development by foreign corporations. Her participation at the event was obviously an affirmation of pro-development policy, and also her concern about joblessness in Burma. (It is extremely significant that she did not focus on human rights.)

On the other hand, she warned against reckless optimism, although this applied more to Burma's overall supposed reform, rather than commercial development per se. About this statement, I must say that it demonstrates remarkable naivete. The reason there is great enthusiasm by international corporations about Burma, and by the corporations' diplomatic promoters, is Daw Suu herself. In Bangkok she was therefore complaining about something for which she is personally responsible. Nothing has really changed on the ground. There are still Burma Army atrocities, political prisoners, religious persecution - the list goes on and on. The only true substantive event has been her change of heart, including that she trusts Thein Sein and is "*happy*."

What is more sinister, though, is that Daw Suu backs Thein Sein's policy to put development before a political solution to the country's problems, meaning democracy and federalism. She has said that it will take a long time for the people of Burma to achieve their goal. By adopting this policy she is making her statement self-fulfilling.

She is also now directly in opposition to the ethnic nationality groups, and others, which have said that they want a political solution first. They recognize that development is driving conflict and human rights abuses, furthering corruption, and enriching the regime.

Moreover, it is notable that she is silent on major projects such as Myitsone, other dams, the huge Tavoy project, the Dawei port and pipeline, the Kaladan intermodal project, new resource extraction, etc. Indeed, the Thai authorities no doubt viewed her trip as support for Tavoy, which is being built by ItalThai. As far as development driven jobs are concerned, however, many people would agree that a better course would be to focus on the political solution, to free the country, after which the people of Burma can set up their own companies and work for themselves. This is far preferable to being exploited within their own borders by Thai, Chinese, Singaporean, Indian, Japanese, South Korean, European, Australian, and American corporations.

Also, the question should be asked: What is Daw Suu's position on environmental conservation? Unfortunately, it seems that she is opposed to it, since the development path that is now underway in Burma will unquestionably continue the country's legacy of ecological devastation.

Migrant workers

A related issue is the exploitation of the millions of Burmese who have fled to neighboring countries to work as migrant laborers, and who have been exploited terribly in the process, with many forced into nothing less than slavery. In Thailand she did visit with migrant workers, and expressed unease about their treatment to Thai government officials, notably Chalerm Yubamrung. Again, though, Daw Suu is naive, if not incredibly poorly informed, if she thinks that Chalerm, right-hand man of dictator-in-exile, Thaksin Shinawatra (who is pals with Burma's still Senior General Than Shwe, and a secret promoter of Tavoy), has sincere concern for Burmese migrants. The Thais like having large numbers of foreign workers to exploit. The government will never give this up willingly, or even push for material improvement in their conditions. If Daw Suu wants to make this a signature issue, she will have to urge it again and again. Otherwise, her comments can only be viewed as self-serving, to make it look like she really cares.

Armed struggle

To-date, Daw Suu has been silent about Burma's civil war. It was therefore extremely disappointing that she was not allowed to meet the ethnic leaders in Mae Sot. This would have given her the opportunity to explain her position on their struggle. Because of this, many questions remain unanswered, including:

Does she view a self-defense struggle as legitimate, or does she agree with Thein Sein that the ethnic resistance forces are terrorists?

Would she ever support a true liberation struggle, such as the one that freed Libya? (The answer here clearly is no.)

What is her policy on the war in Kachin and Northern Shan States and the associated humanitarian crisis? Does she believe that the Burma Army is to blame, or not?

Is she aware that the Burma Army is taking advantage of the Karen ceasefire to resupply and reinforce front line units, that human rights abuses in Karen State such as forced labor and land thefts are continuing, and that there have also been a few clashes with the KNLA? Does she support a pullback of Burma Army troops from the ethnic areas?

What does she think of the imminent UNFC June 10 deadline to reconsider their ceasefires if the Burma Army's aggression against the Kachin is ongoing as of that date?

Why doesn't she support an international inquiry and tribunal for the regime's war crimes?

Refugees

As with the migrant workers, Daw Suu also expressed concern about the refugees from Burma living in camps in Thailand. She admirably said that they should not have to return until there is peace, and implied that any such return should be voluntary. She further said that she would push for the recent reduction in their food rations to be restored.

(Note: She has never discussed the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.)

Here, she can have a direct and immediate impact. The cut in food rations has been implemented by Europe. A Norwegian deputy foreign secretary recently had to defend himself in Chiang Mai from claims by activists that Norway and other European donors are trying to starve the refugees out of the camps to pave the way for development and to force the ethnic resistance groups to accept the regime's 2008 Constitution. Daw Suu, who frequently meets with European diplomats - she is traveling to Europe in just one

week, can easily make the point that the rations should be restored, and that refugee resettlement has to wait until there is real and enduring peace.

This is actually a policy point over which she can be held accountable. If the refugee funding is not restored, it is clear that she does not truly consider the issue important, or that she has failed in her discussions with the Europeans.

The constitution and the rule of law

The only policy points that Daw Suu has articulated is that she is opposed to the 2008 Constitution, and that she supports the creation of the rule of law. However, these are vague, over-arching objectives that have imprecise benchmarks and long-term horizons. If she really does support these policies, and is not just announcing them to obtain good public relations, she should outline a timetable of specific steps to be achieved by which (1) the dictatorial 2008 Constitution will be revoked, and a new democratic constitution drafted, and then presented to the people for approval in a national referendum; and (2) a program is implemented to create the rule of law, including an overhaul of Burma's current legislation, both criminal and civil, a complete restaffing of the country's courts, and prisons, and the establishment of mechanisms by which such laws will be enacted in a fair and impartial manner so that no one is favored and all the people of the country enjoy justice.

Nuclear and ballistic missile programs

As she has never referred to the issue, the question should also be posed if Daw Suu is aware of the documentation that has been published that the military regime has a long-standing program to acquire nuclear weapons and related missile delivery systems. Further, as a specific policy point, she should state that the IAEA should be given permission to enter the country to investigate these claims, including the regime's cooperation with North Korea, China and Russia.

Who represents the people

There are many civil society and resistance groups in Mae Sot (and elsewhere in Thailand) that Daw Suu should have met, and with whom she should have had long, detailed, consultations. Often at great personal risk, the officers and members of these groups have kept the flame of freedom in Burma alive, in particular during the years to which she was subject to house arrest.

A critical policy point is if she grants these groups any role in the present and future governance of Burma. After all, she and her associates in the NLD appear poorly equipped to deal with their new position as a formal opposition party. There are many pro-democracy groups that have worked tirelessly on innumerable issues, starting with

drafting the text of a democratic constitution for the country. They represent a large reservoir of dedicated, well-educated individuals, who have years of experience in one problem area after another. To deny them a role is not only unfair; it is stupid.

Said another way, does she accept that any groups other than the NLD and the other parties that actually have seats in Parliament are stakeholders? Further, does she respect the UNFC as a legitimate ethnic voice and a partner in the future political development of Burma?

The only evidence on this issue is her statement on arriving in Rangoon that her trip was “*very good*,” “*very successful*,” and “*very satisfactory*.” This, ironically, is a bad sign. One would have hoped that the highlight of her trip would not have been speaking to a bunch of corporate executives, or talking with demonstrably pro-regime Thai leaders, but meeting - finally - the heart of the resistance at the border. Since it was denied, one would have expected - were these her sentiments - an expression of regret upon her return to Burma.

There was no such regret. We therefore must conclude that she does not believe that the border-based groups (even the UNFC) have a role to play. This is an extraordinary snub. She is back after the seven years of her latest house arrest, during which years the border groups kept the movement alive. Her change of tune has not only invalidated their work during those seven years, but everything that has been done since 1988. She has changed her mind and decided that the best approach is to rejoin the legal fold. Everyone else should either do the same, or go away.

Political prisoners

One group in Mae Sot that Daw Suu clearly should have met is AAPPB. The NLD’s dispute over the number of political prisoners is quite unseemly. AAPPB has assiduously documented this situation, and if it says that it has verified 471 prisoners, and that another 465 individuals may be prisoners of conscience as well, there is no good reason to dispute this.

Daw Suu has stopped talking about political prisoners. Since this was her focus for many years, it is surprising, to say the least, that she has dropped the policy point of pushing for their freedom.

Popular movements

There is a new wave of popular unrest in Burma, over such things as electricity blackouts and worker complaints. Daw Suu is on record saying that she was opposed to the Saffron Revolution. Yet another question is: Is this still the case? Does she support the demonstrations that are now taking place, or does she object to them? Even more, does

she support the idea, or not, that these new protests can grow into a nation-wide movement along the lines of 1988 and Saffron?

The answer to this is unknown, but one suspects it is “no.” Even more worrying, the regime recently had a meeting with the parties represented in Parliament, including not only its ally the USDP, but the NLD as well. The purpose of the meeting was to obtain support against the demonstrators. In effect, Thein Sein is asking Daw Suu to negotiate with the protestors and to get them to stop.

If she assents to this, she can no longer hold on to any pretense that she is for democracy. Pro-democracy advocates protest dictatorship. Anyone who seeks to stop them is pro-dictatorship.

Aung San Suu Kyi as a leader

Since she has been released from house arrest, many aspects of Daw Suu’s leadership style have become evident. Unfortunately, the picture that has emerged is not flattering. To begin, her actions have not been transparent. No one knows what she said to Thein Sein, Hillary Clinton, Derek Mitchell, and the many other diplomats such as David Cameron that she met (including for the last the business executives who accompanied him “as tourists”). Her interview comment to the *Wall Street Journal* about the people of Burma, that “*we’ve told them what they need to know,*” still resonates.

Further, she is inaccessible. Innumerable people have tried to reach her, to no avail. This begs the question: What sort of leader doesn’t listen to her supporters?

(The question should also be asked, who is funding the NLD, and Daw Suu’s foreign trips?)

It is also now clear that in her own way she is authoritarian. Within the NLD Daw Suu does not delegate, with the result that the party is badly organized. And, to paraphrase *Animal Farm*, her voice is more equal than others. She appears to be acting as the dictator of the NLD.

One aspect of authoritarian leaders is that they have enormous egos. All the adulation goes to their heads. Daw Suu now appears to suffer this as well. Her comment to Chalerm about the migrant workers, that “*I will take all of them back home ...,*” was astonishing.

(The only alternative to viewing this as an expression of egomania is to suggest that she doesn’t choose her words very well.)

Finally, Daw Suu’s judgment is suspect, witness her use of traitors to the KNU to organize her trip to Mae La refugee camp, and she is intolerant to criticism. The latter is

an essential test for a democratic leader, not only to endure criticism, but to acknowledge and respect it. Perhaps the ultimate question for her is as follows: Is she able to admit her mistakes, or does she think that she is infallible?

As if she needed any more evidence, Thein Sein's and the Thai reaction to her trip is proof that the reform is false. For example, real peace in Burma is extremely easy to achieve. All that has to happen is for the Burma Army to withdraw from its camps in the ethnic areas, and to stop abusing the local people.

In an earlier article I wrote that appearances notwithstanding, Daw Suu didn't want to be the dictator of Burma's pro-democracy movement. I may have been wrong.

So, in the last year and a half we've learned a lot more about her as a person, the person she is now, post-Depayin, and even more crucially about her policy. The trip to Thailand was illuminating. She promoted development before democracy, and accepted being treated like a queen.

It is not enough that Daw Suu says she is for freedom. Her specific words and actions are more important. A concluding question, but this time for the people of Burma, is as follows:

Do I still want her as my leader, given the specific policy that she is pursuing? Do I want to follow someone with whom I disagree?

Closing Note: Maybe it is time - even during her trip to Europe - that Daw Suu is greeted with something other than adoration.