

THE CHANGING FACE OF OPPRESSION IN BURMA

By Roland Watson
www.dictatorwatch.org
August 18, 2012

Burma is still ruled by a military dictatorship. Senior General Than Shwe and the Tatmadaw are still absolutely in charge. Their Sein remains his puppet, the titular head of a parallel fake democratic apparatus.

All that has really changed is the regime's approach to its control of the country's public. Formerly, the junta used gross tools of repression. The population was premeditatively kept in abject poverty, to reduce the possibility of uprising. Community spies instilled fear, to silence free speech. All activism, and also free media, was punished with long prison terms and torture. And, the Burman-led junta indulged its racism by committing crimes against humanity against the country's ethnic nationalities.

Seeing a new risk from the pro-democracy revolutions in the Middle East, and desirous of even greater proceeds from his armed robbery of an entire country, Than Shwe changed his strategy. He enlisted the United States, and "pro-democracy" leader Aung San Suu Kyi, as allies in a fraudulent process of reform.

The control and repression is still there. It is now for the most part just smaller in scale, meaning that Daw Suu, the U.S., and the regime's other pro-development allies will find it even easier to ignore.

The following are recent examples of this type of repression. The regime will escalate these acts, and then back off, indefinitely, to perpetuate its deceit.

Poverty

The issue of poverty reflects the most subtle, and ingenious, shift in Than Shwe's strategy. First, the "reform" is focused exclusively on development, on promulgating new investment laws and regulations as a prelude to signing dozens of commercial development deals. Than Shwe is actually emulating Ronald Reagan's discredited trickle down theory of economics, and, amazingly, Barack Obama accepts it. This is the idea that the development ultimately will benefit everyone. The regime's inner circle and closest cronies will profit enormously, of course (there is no doubt also a tithe for the Senior General from every major deal), but some crumbs will be left over to trickle down to the poor.

However, international agencies and parties are attempting to address directly the widespread malnutrition in the country, and the extraordinary neglect of the educational system and medical care. This is where Than Shwe's strategy is most devious. First, the regime will flaunt these

programs, as proof that its reform is sincere. But, and as with so many international aid efforts in the past, they will be allowed only grudgingly and in a piecemeal fashion. And secondly, as occurred after the Nargis Cyclone, the dictatorship will continue to steal a significant percentage of the aid.

This is evidenced by the recent concern over the World Bank's plan to fund community projects, and also the non-transparency of the Norwegian peace initiative. Aid agencies operating in Burma have historically done a terrible job helping the impoverished population, since they inevitably channel great funds to local parties that are sympathetic to the regime. This in turn leads to widespread and well-funded crony networks that are opposed both to real freedom, and to open, fair, and sustainable development.

When agencies do their best to fulfill their stated mission, as with the public they are repressed. As an example of this, witness the recent arrest of fourteen U.N. and NGO workers in Arakan State.

The regime's overall treatment of Burma's massive population of poor has actually not changed at all. This is apparent from its approach to the most destitute. *Irrawaddy* recently reported that in Pegu Division officials arrested a group of homeless families, including orphans and pregnant women, and trucked them to the Yoma Mountains, where they were unceremoniously dumped. Burma's military dictatorship continues to consider its citizens literally as garbage.

If the regime truly had changed, it would repeatedly advocate, and enforce, an entirely new philosophy towards the public, that the people of Burma are not the enemy, and that they should be helped, and treated with respect.

Also, regarding the commercial development that now dominates the country, it is difficult to see how the plague of land thefts that are being perpetrated by the developers will in any way assist the country's poor, whose land it is that is being stolen.

Basic freedoms

Ordinary people now feel free to speak their minds, at least to close friends and family. There is still an overall climate of fear, though, in particular with any interaction with officials. Indeed, *Karen News* reported that Karen villagers were afraid to talk to the staff at the new KNU liaison offices, because they were passing the villagers' personal information and complaints on to Military Intelligence. Hopefully this has been corrected, but if not, and even more, if the practice is common at all the ethnic nationality liaison offices, not only will villagers be afraid to speak their minds, or even use the offices, it constitutes an extraordinary betrayal of them by the organizations that are supposedly dedicated to their freedom.

A feeling of fear is also evident for the different people and groups that are attempting to work with the regime, starting with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. It is obvious that they are

censoring themselves, by refusing to address publicly not only national crises, like the civil war against the Kachin and the internecine conflict in Arakan State, but even their stated goals, starting with to create a new, democratic Constitution. No one, beginning with Daw Suu, has been willing to say anything concrete about any issue of substance (e.g., following her recent meeting with Thein Sein, where presumably these topics were discussed). Ironically, the Parliamentary Rule of Law Committee, to which she has been nominated, “*will be responsible for monitoring and ensuring that parliamentary representatives, judicial bodies, civil servants and the media abide by the law.*” (Source: *Democratic Voice of Burma*) This mission statement says nothing about protecting the people or prosecuting the Tatmadaw and the regime’s other security organs. What it means in practice is that the Committee will be used to keep the democratic forces in check, to stop them from pressing for real freedom, and with its legitimacy guaranteed through having Daw Suu as an unassailable figurehead.

Disturbingly, one form of speech that is being permitted is hate speech. Regime officials, pro-regime media outlets, and even some monks and supposed pro-democracy figures have called for the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people from Burma. This is an amazing and completely unwanted change. It is noteworthy that hate speech is vigorously condemned in many countries in the West, which are still dealing with their own legacies of racism.

Freedom of assembly and protest

After free speech, the next basic right is freedom of assembly. Here, the regime has passed a protest law, which allegedly guarantees this right. However, the law has many undemocratic provisions, including that the authorities must approve the assemblies in advance, and that the organizers have to supply a list of speakers, the content of their talks, and their biographies.

Even with this law, the regime continues to suppress free assembly:

- Twenty student activists around Burma were arrested as they planned to commemorate the dictatorship’s attack in 1962 on Rangoon University.
- NLD members were barred from celebrating Martyrs’ Day in Pegu.
- A labor activist was arrested in Mandalay.
- Young Kachin education activists were arrested in Myitkyina.
- Permission was denied for a protest in the Kaw Taung District of the Tenasserim Division, against a coal-fired power plant.

These and other such incidents are not random or unconnected. They document a concerted, well-planned strategy by the regime to prevent organized dissent.

Proof of this strategy can also be found in the continuing detention of political prisoners. AAPPB has verified the location of 448 confirmed political prisoners. The total number is undoubtedly much higher.

Political prisoners are also still subject to torture and other forms of abuse. DVB recently reported that prisoner Aung Thu was assaulted at Insein Prison, after he had been moved from Sittwe Prison and had the temerity to protest the guards stealing the prisoners' food.

Free media

The situation is similar with the media. Although Burma's media does have greater latitude now, this freedom is in some cases being abused. *Irrawaddy* for instance labeled Burma's new media "irresponsible" for being "openly partisan, nationalist and aiding a deadly war against the already disenfranchised Rohingya minority..."

Meanwhile, repression is continuing when media outlets diverge from the party line, including by giving a fair portrayal of the Arakan crisis, when covering crony-connected development projects, and when investigating regime officials. On these subjects, publication suspension by the censorship board, the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD), is a regular penalty. A recent *Irrawaddy* editorial documented the suspensions of the *Voice Weekly* and *Envoy*, and harsh warnings against *Venus* and the *Yangon Times*.

The two suspensions were dropped after journalists protested. This is a perfect example of the type of cat and mouse game to which the junta has shifted. We should expect a never-ending series of small-scale repressions, followed by reversals, all to the end of keeping everyone distracted from the bigger picture: that Burma is still a dictatorship; that it will continue to be a dictatorship for the foreseeable future; and that large-scale corporate rape of the country is now underway, including with the extensive involvement of companies from countries that supposedly back freedom (e.g., the U.S. companies General Electric and Pepsico - Derek Mitchell is nothing more than a trade ambassador).

Interestingly, the greatest media freedom now seems to be reporting on Daw Suu. However, this is actually not that surprising, given her open support for the Tatmadaw.

In summary, the media picture in Burma has become a mixed bag. Freedom is allowed when the outlets promote the regime's campaigns of hate against the ethnic nationalities, give unqualified support to the "reform," and when they glorify the junta's partner and Burma's demigod, Aung San Suu Kyi. Otherwise, the media is repressed.

In addition, the regime has yet to pass a new media law, to end pre-publication censorship. It further formed the Myanmar Core Press Council, supposedly to draft the law, although the decision to establish the Council too was reversed - for the time being - following journalist protests. Like the Rule of Law Committee, the MCPC was designed to get its participating members to conduct their own censorship. In the absence of the Council, pre-publication censorship by the PSRD continues.

Large-scale repression and abuse

While the regime has shifted its strategy to small-scale tyranny, massive crimes continue - as always - in the remote ethnic nationality homelands (to which both domestic and foreign journalists are unwilling to travel). The major crimes now in progress include the Civil War with the Kachin; ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya; and large-scale displacement for the Tavoy deep-sea port.

One basic question about the Kachin crisis is why the Tatmadaw won't follow Thein Sein's multiple orders to halt its offensive.

The answer to this is simple.

Thein Sein is not in charge. Than Shwe is. Thein Sein, as a leading General (he never lost this rank), in private with his fellow generals on the National Defense and Security Council (the supreme institution in Burma), fully supports the offensive.

The offensive is about resources, in this case the land controlled by the KIO through which the new natural gas pipeline to China passes. The regime has promised China that it will open the pipeline by September 2013. It cannot do this, though, until the KIO is defeated and the pipeline corridor is "sanitized." The offensive will continue, until this is achieved.

(The Myitsone Dam will be resumed as well if and when this victory is achieved, although personally I don't believe there is any chance that the Tatmadaw will ever be able to conquer the Kachin.)

Also, military dictatorships always engage in war, even when there is no underlying reason to do so. War justifies their existence, and it ensures that the lower ranks will not rebel. Soldiers left with nothing to do may turn against their senior officers.

The Rohingya crisis is an example of this type of war. There is no military rationale for the regime to demonize and attack the Rohingya, but this is what it has done. Although the scale of the crime is different, this is the same sort of targeting that the Nazis did with Jews, Gypsies, and gays.

Creating a common enemy, as a means to divert a population from its own oppression, was memorialized in George Orwell's work, *1984*. While reprehensible, it is nonetheless extremely effective. Focusing on the Rohingya has recruited Rakhine nationalists, Buddhist monks, and even some "pro-democracy" activists, to the regime's side, apparently joining an unexpectedly large number of Burman nationalists.

This is perhaps the military dictatorship's most successful targeting of an ethnic nationality since it seized power fifty years ago. Its rule has been reinforced, and everyone has been distracted from the many small crackdowns that are taking place and also the new corporate rape.

(Note: It is astonishing that the U.S. immediately concluded that the acts against the Rohingya did not constitute ethnic cleansing. How was it able to do this? Even if it is pointing satellites at Sittwe and Maungdaw, there is still no way to determine the extent of what is actually taking place on the ground, e.g., the number of Rohingya bodies that have been dumped in rivers. In fact, it appears that the arrests of the U.N. and NGO workers were designed to ensure that no systematic appraisal of the atrocities could be prepared.)

A final major repression, although still in its early stages, is the massive Tavoy project, which the regime will partner with its long-standing friend, Thailand. (It seems clear that the project was personally agreed between Than Shwe and Thailand's wannabe dictator, Thaksin Shinawatra.) This development, when completed, will force a huge number of villagers from their land. It will also be an environmental catastrophe. Unless the Karen resistance reinforces its opposition, the project - like the Total/Chevron Yadana Pipeline - will inevitably lead to increasing land thefts and forced relocations.

The regime will no doubt extend its Rohingya model to eastern Burma as well. Just as the Rohingya are now called terrorists, Burman and other nationalists will be incited to view any ethnic groups that oppose development as terrorists as well. The Rohingya strategy is not limited to Arakan State. The regime will redirect it to ensure its goal that the country always remain a unitary state, under the control of Burmans, and that federalism and ethnic nationality self-determination are never permitted.

In summary, Than Shwe is an absolute political genius.

Conclusion

This is what is happening in Burma now. The country is neither free, nor democratic. Furthermore, this will not change.

The people of Burma have a choice: To resist, and keep up the fight until their country truly is free; or to accept, and learn to live with, a "semi-free" Burma that at its heart, like its regional neighbors China, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and - if Thaksin ever gets his way - Thailand, is completely authoritarian.

Burma's fate is up to the people. They do have the power - the power of numbers - to win their freedom. If this is ever to happen, though, they need to consider why they have failed to achieve it up to this point. More generally, why does this failing extend to so many other peoples in East Asia? One Arab people after another has successfully achieved real political freedom. What is wrong with Asia?

It is this writer's opinion that the ultimate, deepest reason of all is that East Asian peoples have consistently been indoctrinated since childhood to accept dictatorship. Everyone is taught that the community is paramount compared to the individual; that everyone's specific role is carefully prescribed, in both the family and society at large; and that in the interests of preserving "face" it is impermissible to criticize any of this. Furthermore, these attitudes are reinforced by the idea of *karma* as it is commonly preached in regional faiths, that one's position in this life is predetermined by the merit of your prior life, and that if you now have poor circumstances this is a just punishment for your prior life misbehavior, and which current conditions you should willingly accept.

I really don't know the answer to this, at least in the short term. What these points make clear is that the problem is not only fear. These cultural beliefs, since they have been imposed from childhood, are actually programmed into the brain. (The technical process is called LTP - long-term potentiation.) People simply find it impossible to think of a different life. Freedom and democracy are "unthinkable" concepts.

The only possible solution is education, to train the publics to think in a new way (and for accompanying neural networks to be established). But this requires a complete shift in the educational curriculum, which such regimes will never permit. It is not only freedom of speech and assembly that are denied, other basic rights including freedom of education, and also to be free of religious persecution, are prohibited as well. It is very significant that without educational freedom, the most elemental freedom of all, freedom of thought, is itself unattainable.

A country like Burma is effectively an authoritarian cult. Indeed, this also extends to the Arab States, and their enforced devotion to Islam, where renunciation of the faith is an act of apostasy and punishable by death. The Arab peoples are achieving political freedom, but they have a long way to go to realize religious freedom.

(Note: Don't get me wrong. There are many cults in the U.S. as well, including fundamentalist Christians; the cult of money and greed on Wall Street; and the cult that the Republican Party has become, where its leaders are engaging in massive voter suppression to try to win the upcoming election, and through this move one step closer to their goal to establish a single party "benevolent" dictatorship, controlling all three branches of government, which they believe is justifiable because "they know what's best.")

The only way to escape a cult is to be deprogrammed, which is a difficult and lengthy process. It requires that you accept that you have been brainwashed, after which - with assistance - you willingly pursue the education that you need to learn to think in a new and realistic way.

The assistance is crucial. It is extremely challenging to change one's mind, all the way down to the established patterns in the electro-chemical formation of your thoughts, on your own. It is much, much easier if you have a good teacher.

For Burma, the assistance that the people need takes the form of leadership. The people of the country need leaders to help them understand their situation, the cultural conditioning to which they have been subjected and which they must escape. They need to be presented with as good an education as possible, about what real freedom and democracy are like, including why the changes that are now underway will never lead to it.

The problem here of course is that Burma does not have such leaders. Everyone defers to Daw Suu. To the people, she is the ultimate leader. But, while she has lived abroad and does understand freedom and democracy from real life experience, she refuses to lead! (When she toured Burma before the by-election, this was campaigning, not leading.)

I and others have criticized her in the past for being a poor leader, for instance, for not standing up for both the Rohingya and the Rakhine. However, I have now come to realize that she isn't really leading at all. She may think that having private conversations with Thein Sein every six months; sitting in Parliament next to war criminals such as Colonel Aung Kyaw, who led the crackdown on the Saffron Revolution; or joining a regime-stacked committee, constitutes leadership, but this is not what the people need. Burma needs a forceful individual who is detail oriented and who will confront the country's deepest problems, including by speaking out regularly about the Kachin, the Rohingya, large-scale development, and everything else mentioned in this article.

It will be a travesty if the U.S. awards Daw Suu the Congressional Gold Medal next month, if this is all that she is going to do. If this happens, the award will be a payoff for opening Burma to exploitation by U.S. corporations, and for tacit complicity in covering up ethnic cleansing.