

PARALLEL UNIVERSES IN BURMA

By Roland Watson
www.dictatorwatch.org
December 7, 2011

(Opening note: People in Burma are extraordinarily polite. Many individuals refuse to criticize or even comment on their leaders. In appreciation of this, one of the things that I have tried to do with Dictator Watch is to be their voice. I've received a lot of support for being forthright, and for which I am very thankful.

I'd also like to say that I am not a hard-liner. I just want Burma to be free.)

Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness: a psychosis. It also takes different forms, including one in which the sufferer inhabits multiple realities (dissociative identity or multiple personality disorder). In the Dictator Watch Ten Year Review, I observed that Burma appears to be experiencing social schizophrenia, because it also has two distinct, and mutually exclusive, personalities. These personalities are in fact so dissimilar that the country somehow seems to be occupying two different, parallel universes.

Parallel universe #1

In this universe Burma is undergoing a remarkable transformation. The military regime that has ruled the country since 1962 has realized the error of its ways. It has now embarked, irreversibly, on a process of reform which will lead to nothing less than democracy. The regime wants to normalize relations with its dissidents, and even bring them into the political process. All prisoners of conscience will soon be released. The people are also now allowed to protest, so there will be no new arrests.

The regime further wants to make peace with Burma's ethnic nationalities. There is no Civil War.

This is confirmed by the fact that other than Aljazeera no international media outlets cover the areas of the country where conflict, in this universe, is not a bloody, daily business. None of the journalists from the BBC, CNN, ITN, ABC, NBC or CBS, for example, see any need to investigate something that clearly is not happening. After all, war is the single most newsworthy event. If a major conflict were in progress, of course the world's combat journalists would be there, too.

Also, in the small amount of conflict that this universe grudgingly allows is underway, regime soldiers are committing only a few war crimes, and then only in the heat of battle. In any case the problems of conflict, internally displaced persons, and refugees will soon be resolved.

Finally, there are no aspirations to develop nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles, including in cooperation with North Korea, Russia and China. The regime is too poor for this, and it would much rather devote its scarce resources to social development, to education and health care, and economic development, preferably, for both, with extensive assistance from the international community.

Parallel universe #2

In universe number two nothing of significance has changed. If anything, the on the ground situation in Burma is now worse. Senior General Than Shwe and the other top commanders of the Tatmadaw are still absolutely in charge. The reform movement is nothing but calculated political theatre. Thein Sein and Shwe Mann are playing the parts of good cop. They are saying carefully scripted lines, designed to appease Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy, and the international community. However, they are not following up their words with action. In terms of concrete steps they are doing the absolute minimum to keep the charade alive.

Than Shwe has shifted his strategy and launched this “reform gambit,” in response to the successful pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East. He is determined, as Bertil Lintner recently commented, to prevent an alliance between internal pro-democracy groups, including the NLD and student and monk organizations, and the ethnic nationality resistance armies (which alliance we at Dictator Watch have been working for years to promote and organize). More generally, the reform gambit is designed to buy time: to eliminate demands for immediate change and instead to substitute a slow process of “dialogue” that can be extended indefinitely.

As for development, the Tatmadaw still gets almost all national revenues that are not stolen by the top generals and their cronies. The regime also wants to expand commercial development with international corporations, as this will mean more money to steal and to buy weapons.

In this universe there are lots of political prisoners. They are just not called that (at least by the regime). The heroes of Burma’s pro-democracy movement, individuals such as Min Ko Naing and U Gambira, are in prison for felony criminal actions.

In truth, there are well on two-thousand political prisoners and perhaps many more, when you count all the villagers arrested by the police over local human rights disputes. No political prisoners were released for Secretary Clinton’s visit, and any future releases will be limited in scope and occur only as part of choreographed campaigns to increase the regime’s international legitimacy. Moreover, new protests remain completely illegal, since nothing of consequence will ever be approved. The new law that says protests are allowed with five days’ notice is a clever artifice. Any significant pro-democracy protests will once again be met with extreme prejudice.

Worst of all, the regime's racism towards the ethnic nationalities of Burma is not only unabated, it is increasing. To the Tatmadaw, the ethnic groups are insurgents and have no rights. As numerous commentators, including Zoya Phan, Khin Ohmar, Maung Zarni and Mr. Lintner, have recently and eloquently pointed out, the Burma Army has escalated its scorched earth campaign in the Kachin, Shan and Karen areas. The sweet talk in Naypyidaw is designed in part to create a distraction from this. BA units are committing crimes against humanity with wild abandon, and in a way that clearly must have senior command blessing, if not direct orchestration.

Lastly, there is no reason to believe the regime statements about the nuclear and missile program. A nuanced reading of U.S. statements, on the other hand, implies that the program is substantial and of immense worry.

Which universe is real?

Daw Suu believes in universe number one. She apparently plans to join the Naypyidaw regime and work to change it from the inside, somehow, to a real democracy.

While it is great that she is now free to meet people inside Burma, at least in Rangoon and Naypyidaw, and that she is also free to meet international diplomats, most if not all of whom just want the Burma problem - with or without genuine change - to go away, I do not believe that the regime is sincere. I also have many friends and associates from Burma who do not believe this, either. For us, universe number one is a bit too inconsistent with the well documented reality on the ground. To be honest, the ongoing attacks by the Burma Army against the ethnic peoples are all the proof we need. If the regime were sincere, it would stop its attacks immediately, and also immediately release all the political prisoners.

In other words, a visit from Hillary Clinton is nice, but it does not equal democracy. The honeyed words from Thein Sein and Shwe Mann are pleasing to the ear, but they are lies. Movement is not the same as progress.

What is incontrovertible is that Burma's prisons and labor camps are still full of political prisoners. Everyone in the country is still afraid, and the many freedom fighters who have been forced to flee do not feel safe to return. The Tatmadaw has intensified the civil war against the ethnic nationalities. Indeed, the level of conflict has been extraordinary. The Dictator Watch conflict blog, which was only launched in April, now has over one hundred pages of links, and each link connects to an article about specific clashes and Burma Army abuses (with little overlap). Moreover, the Tatmadaw has suffered major losses, a minimum of over three thousand killed in action casualties this year and at least the same number wounded in action, in response to which it has acted with exceptional brutality against local villagers. The regime continues to bring in new troops, and an expansion of its offensives now that the dry season has arrived is a near certainty.

Put all of this together and only one conclusion makes sense: A wolf in sheep's clothing is still a wolf!!!

Predictions for Burma

The split in perception about Burma is hugely significant. It represents a hitherto unimaginable level of disunity in the movement to free the country. It further has innumerable specific consequences, many of which are unrecognized or misunderstood.

1. There will not be a renewed popular uprising in Burma. Daw Suu is on public record, repeatedly, as opposing such an uprising. The people of the country, even the students and monks who would like to revolt, will not act against her wishes. (Recently, senior monks even told younger monks to stop protesting.)

2. As Daw Suu and the NLD, and the ethnic resistance groups, occupy different worlds, there is almost no chance that they will cooperate. In fact, it is unlikely that Daw Suu will mention the ethnic plight other than through her vague offers to help with national reconciliation. It is a mystery what she plans to do in Parliament. She has said that she is a politician. In the United States, congresspersons (the equivalent of MPs) have no problem criticizing the Administration. (They actually view it as one of their principal responsibilities - Congress is a check on the White House.) Many U.S. congresspersons are also friends of Burma and have specifically criticized the Naypyidaw regime for its abuses against the ethnic nationalities. To my knowledge, Daw Suu has yet to make one specific criticism of Thein Sein and the Tamadaw. While this may change once she is an MP, it is unlikely. She seems to be trying to follow the path of least resistance, pursuing an approach that is all carrot and no stick.

As for the NLD, one can understand its desire for reregistration, since it never should have been illegal in the first place. Still, reregistering while the Tatmadaw is openly raping and murdering ethnic villagers is a suspect move. On the other hand, the party's ambition to enroll one million members is interesting. If it is successful at this and these members then take to the streets, the regime will collapse. But, since the new members probably won't be given permission to march, one wonders what their role will be. Is the plan simply to wait until the next national vote, many years from now, and hope that that result too won't be stolen?

The only comparable situation where a pro-democracy leader joined a dictatorial regime is Zimbabwe, where in 2008 Morgan Tsvangirai was appointed Prime Minister to Dictator and President Robert Mugabe. This move was presented as a power-sharing arrangement, and it seemed reasonable at the time. However, Mugabe, who controls the military and the police, continues to run Zimbabwe unchallenged and to do as he pleases.

Daw Suu sold herself short. If she was going to rejoin the legal fold she should have demanded a similar station.

The act of reregistering is now completed, so that's the world we have to live in. But Daw Suu has not yet run for Parliament and joined Naypyidaw. We still have time to convince her that this is a bad move.

3. Because of all of this, it is now much less likely that there will be a coup in the upper ranks of the Tatmadaw. The Army's role is protected. The new Constitution will not be changed, at a minimum for many years.

4. Therefore, the only way that Burma will be freed is if the armed ethnic resistance groups defeat the Tatmadaw. This is not as far-fetched as it might sound. Just as there is now a growing Free Syria Army, dedicated to removing the Syrian dictator Assad from power, there is also a Free Burma Army, organized under the United Nationalities Federal Council, and which is striving to do the same to Than Shwe.

It will not be easy, though. There is much greater pressure on the non-ceasefire groups to accept some sort of settlement (*"if Suu Kyi believes the regime, you should, too"*). Unfortunately, one stalwart of the resistance, the SSA-South, has just signed a deal. This move is coming under a lot of criticism from Shan people, and the SSA-S's actions in the last year have been confusing. It previously announced that it was unifying with the Shan State Army-North, into a single SSA, but apparently this move was not sincere. There are now one thousand Tatmadaw soldiers in the area around the SSA-N Wanhai headquarters. The question is: How will the SSA-S respond when the Tatmadaw resumes its offensive against Wanhai? Will it help its Shan brothers and sisters to the north, or not?

5. The regime's clandestine nuclear and missile program will almost certainly continue.

6. Burma's political prisoners will not be freed, and new arrests will be made.

7. The exploitation of Burma, the rape of its natural environment and the theft of its natural resources (other than through the suspension of one dam), will be accelerated. Not only will there be no confiscation of wealth (or nationalization of the operations of the regime's international corporate partners), all of the proceeds of the theft will continue to go solely to the generals and their cronies. Than Shwe will continue to be able to buy priceless jade for his wife, diamonds for his daughter, and if he wants even a Premier League football team for his spoiled grandson.

8. However, the United States will not remove its sanctions. Activists should be able to pressure Washington to keep these in place until at a minimum the political prisoners are released (which as just stated will not occur). Whereas Suu Kyi is placing all her chips on the belief that Thein Sein has real power and is sincere, the U.S. is hedging its bets. Secretary Clinton's visit in any case was more about show than substance. The Administration was posturing against China, and it was also reacting to the criticism that it has backed the Arab world's dictators. It is trying to say that it won't make the same mistake in Burma, even if by backing only the pacifist faction it

will help prolong the misery in the country and prevent a real Burma Spring. We should never forget, if the U.S. wanted to it could quickly organize an intervention, just as it did in Libya.

As for China, it is really not that concerned. Regarding the Myitsone dam suspension, while it is a sore point it is only one deal. Beijing is focused on the big picture. It understands that the generals are still completely in power and that real democracy will never be permitted. Moreover, if the army can defeat the KIA, the dam will be resumed.

China still follows Mao's dictum that power comes from the barrel of a gun. It knows who controls the most guns in Burma.

9. The Tatmadaw will continue to commit crimes against humanity against the ethnic nationalities, including arrest, torture, rape, and murder, and for the last through the use of chemical weapons. However, the victims will not receive justice. There is no chance of a United Nations sponsored Commission of Inquiry, much less a war crimes tribunal (or comprehensive arms embargo). Than Shwe is free to continue perpetrating his racism and the practice of Burman racial superiority.

The most poignant comment in the days before the NLD's decision was in a statement by the All Arakan Students' and Youths' Congress. It said that the NLD must recognize that it is the steward of a long and terrible campaign, that *"the banner of the struggle in their hands has been secured and protected at the expense of the existence, life, blood, sweat and tears of the invincible heroes from one generation to the next."*

If the murders of the ethnic nationalities continue, and Daw Suu and the NLD do not achieve a quick and real breakthrough, it is quite likely that the people will say that they failed in their stewardship, and gave up, and that the tens of thousands of heroes over the years who have sacrificed their lives for freedom did so in vain.

10. There is no chance now of a tripartite dialogue. Since the imprisoned ethnic leaders have not been released, their political parties will not reregister. This means that the situation in Burma is now what the ethnic nationalities had feared: A bipartite dialogue - Burman to Burman.

This also means that, and all the regime lies notwithstanding, there will be no new Panglong Conference, as it is impossible to hold such a conference (1) while ethnic leaders are still imprisoned and (2) while it is unsafe for resistance leaders to enter Tatmadaw areas of control.

11. I personally believe that there is now a real possibility that Burma ultimately will split, that it will not be able to establish a functioning federal union and instead will disassemble - following years if not decades of more conflict - into different separate states (as occurred with Yugoslavia). The only Burman leader that the ethnic nationalities trusted was Daw Suu. Unfortunately, and as others have observed, this is likely to change. Further, if there is no Burman with whom the ethnic nationalities can feel secure, their calls for a federal state will at some point shift back to a separatist demand.

It is essential to understand the impact of Burma's history, both distant and recent, on the ethnic peoples. Prior Burman empires perpetrated well-recognized genocides, against the Mon in 1757 and the Arakan in 1784. Since 1962, the military regime has committed crimes against humanity against the Shan, Karenni, Karen and others which taken together also constitute an attempt at genocide. This is the reality on the ground, right now, for the ethnic groups. They rightfully believe that the regime wants to kill every single one of them!

Burma Death Watch

In Tunisia and Egypt the pro-democracy resistance organized large, and successful, popular uprisings. In Libya, in response to Dictator Gaddafi's war crimes, the resistance expanded to include armed struggle, and which, with air support from the West, was also successful. The resistance in Syria is now expanding to armed struggle as well, in response to the crimes of Dictator Assad (although it has not sought foreign intervention).

For Burma, the National League for Democracy has told the people of the country that they should not rise up and and that they should not fight back. Even though the military regime has committed crimes far in excess of Gaddafi's or Assad's, the people should wait and hope that it - the NLD - will be able to organize reform.

When there is free resistance, the people sacrifice themselves for a cause. Therefore, when they die it is not in vain, even if it takes ages for the struggle to succeed. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, the people who sacrificed their lives are national heroes. Their families and friends are suffering a profound loss, but they also understand that the sacrifice served a purpose, that it was a necessary cost on the road to freedom.

With reregistration the NLD has effectively restricted the people of the country's freedom to resist. It has not said: "*We will try talking to the regime but you, the people, should feel free to push for freedom as you see fit.*" Because of this, it now bears some responsibility for the deaths that the military perpetrates, including of deaths within the Tatmadaw itself. There is a human life and death cost to its decision, which the NLD must accept, and which we will document.

Due to the severity of the gamble that Daw Suu and the NLD have undertaken, we are renaming our conflict blog, from Burma Conflict Situation Report, to Burma Death Watch.

<http://www.dictatorwatch.org/burmadeathwatch.html>

Conclusion

Burma occupies one universe and one universe only. Daw Suu finds the words of Thein Sein believable, but there is extensive, concrete evidence to the contrary (or, more precisely, that he has no bona fide power).

Her belief, and actions, in turn have facilitated a new Great Game, and in this game the people of the country are pawns. They have no real voice. The only one that is speaking for them, at least the only one that is being heard, is Daw Suu. (In a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, she said of the people, “*We’ve told them what they need to know.*”)

The international community treats her as if she is the sole legitimate representative of the people. But, while this may have been true in 1990, it is no longer the case (particularly now that she has abandoned the election result). By focusing solely on her, the IC is ignoring the wishes of many people in the country (notably, the ethnic nationalities, political prisoners, and also the large exile community).

Daw Suu has put herself in an extremely difficult position. She refused to support armed revolution, or even a peaceful popular uprising. There was therefore nothing for her to do, other than non-political social work, if she did not choose to accept, and join, Than Shwe’s puppet democracy. Not wanting to become irrelevant, she took this step, even though none of the NLD’s demands in the Shwedagon Declaration were met.

She can now continue her high profile role, and be courted by international diplomats. Once she is elected to Parliament she can sit dutifully in Naypyidaw and propose legislation that the majority USDP will then reflexively ignore. She can continue to act as if there are no crimes against humanity being committed against Burma’s ethnic nationalities.

I’m sorry, but I am not a member of the Aung San Suu Kyi cult. (I don’t believe Daw Suu is, either). I think she is a wonderful and exceptionally brave person, but also a weak leader. To have an entire nation on her shoulders is not only unfair, it is a mistake.

In 2004, and in declining health, the Karen leader General Bo Mya (who also made strategic blunders) was induced to visit Rangoon, when the regime (then called SLORC) held out the possibility of a sincere ceasefire negotiation. When he realized, though, that SLORC was not sincere, Bo Mya held his ground and refused to sign. He understood that he was the steward of a decades long struggle and that he had no right unilaterally to give up. Daw Suu, unilaterally (the NLD’s decision had already been announced before the representatives even voted), and in self-recognition that given her pacifism she had no other options, made the opposite choice.

The consequences of this decision are already severe, and they will only get worse. It is not too late for her to change her mind. To begin, she should become a real pro-democracy advocate again, and, reflecting the asymmetry of suffering in Burma, concentrate on the Tatmadaw’s war crimes against the ethnic nationalities. The following points should be at the top of her agenda:

- That the core problem for Burma is the regime’s Burman chauvinism.
- Specific denunciations of every reported Burma Army offensive and crime, and with a demand for its cessation: Of every rape, assault, murder, artillery barrage, gas attack, village burned, use of child labor, use of forced labor, narcotics deal, WMD proliferation, arrest, extortion, and theft.

The NLD should establish an investigative unit to collect all the documentation that is being published about these crimes, and a press unit to demand that the regime cease and desist.

I'd also like to say something to the top dog in Burma, to Dictator Than Shwe. Senior General: You are a war criminal, and you should be tried for your crimes and then executed. Still, one has to give credit where credit is due. You are also a worthy opponent and a master puppeteer. You are a tin pot dictator, yet you have the pro-democracy opposition run by a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the United States, China, and the United Nations, all dancing to your tune. Amazing. At a time when one dictatorship after another is falling, you have found a way not only to survive, but to prosper.