

A Tale of Two Burmas

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Opinion Contributor
February 16, 2011

It has become fashionable lately in some circles to emphasize the “positive” developments in Burma and the “opportunities” for engagement with its “new government.” The narrative goes something like this: In 2008, the people of Burma approved a new constitution and just two years later the country held its first democratic elections in more than 20 years, which allowed for the participation and election of some pro-democracy candidates. National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest. And with the imminent transfer of power to a civilian government, there is a new generation of more outward-looking and reform-minded leaders in charge. Because of these important developments, the international community should remove sanctions, invest in Burma, and vigorously engage with these newly elected leaders and government-approved civil society organizations to take full advantage of the real opportunities this exciting transition has provided.

This alternate reality, however, is nothing more than a fantasy—a carefully constructed image that the Burmese junta has been peddling to the international community both directly and through its proxies. Lets examine the indisputable facts.

The new Constitution was drafted in a one-sided process that excluded the views of the NLD and ethnic peoples. It provides permanent immunity for the military from prosecution for any prior or future acts and enables a military veto of decisions by the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. The Constitution was adopted in a fraudulent national referendum rejected by all reputable international observers as having been neither free nor fair. The elections themselves were also deeply flawed. Beyond having prohibitively expensive registration requirements for candidates and no credible international monitoring, the junta excluded all political parties, including the NLD, which refused to support the 2008 Constitution. Ultimately, the biggest “pro-democracy” party that was allowed to participate in the election won just 12 of the 664 seats in the parliament.

The very same players have just taken on slightly differently roles in the “civilian” regime. Newly elected President Thein Sein served as the junta’s prime minister for the last four years. Snr-Gen Than Shwe has announced he will chair an extra-constitutional “State Supreme Council,” which by its name makes clear who will be really in charge regardless of formal state institutions. And of the 30 new cabinet members, only four are strictly civilian; the rest are ex-military. And not a single one is a woman.

Burma remains, in short, an authoritarian military dictatorship. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the state-run media’s chilling threats directed at Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD that they

will meet their “tragic end” if they persist in pursuing their current policies, including support for sanctions.

But beyond persisting in repressing political dissent, the junta has also failed to honor any of the democracy movement’s specific demands, including the release of all political prisoners; the cessation of all violence directed by the regime against ethnic peoples; and the initiation of a genuine dialogue process between the junta, the NLD and ethnic groups leading to national reconciliation and the restoration of democracy to the country.

So what should be done? I believe there are five key steps the international community should take to support the legitimate aspirations of the Burmese people. First, the United Nations should immediately and proactively initiate tripartite dialogue between the regime, the NLD and ethnic groups. Second, consistent with the NLD’s recent statement, those countries with sanctions imposed on the regime should collaborate to provide benchmarks to the regime that could lead result in their modification, but only if meaningful and irreversible steps were taken. Third, the international community should impose an arms embargo on the regime. Fourth, consistent with the call of UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, the United Nations should establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed in Burma. And finally, the international community should substantially increase its support for cross-border humanitarian assistance as well as human rights and democracy funding, especially for informal civil society groups operating in Burma.

Many sympathetic observers who don’t follow the situation closely have been fooled by the recent elections and release of Aung San Suu Kyi into believing that the situation is fundamentally better. On Feb. 15, I participated in a conference in Prague sponsored by the Czech Republic Foreign Ministry and People in Need entitled “Elections in Burma/Myanmar and the European Policy.” The consensus that emerged from this conference was clear and unequivocal—it is incumbent on those of us who know better to speak up, loudly, and remind the international community that the challenges in Burma persist and the time for action is now.

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