

Promoting political change in Burma

by

*Joern Kristensen**

In late September, three prominent Republican members of the US Senate called on the Global Fund to fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria to stop funding to the government in Burma. What had called the Senators into action was a modest \$2.4 million pledge by the Fund to fight the escalating HIV/Aids problem. This action followed a decision by the US Congress few months earlier to renew the tough sanctions it imposed on Burma in 2003. And sanctioning Burma's Generals into complying with western standards of democracy and human rights is a permanent item on the agenda when Foreign Ministers of the European Union meet. Call's for more sanctions were also part of the EU statement prior to the recent ASEM meeting in Hanoi when Burma was admitted as a member. It appears as if the EU and the US cannot get enough of it. And it appears that their strategies are terribly wrong. Not only does it seem that the sanctions, despite new doses being added, still have no noteworthy impact on the current hold on power of military rulers. But much more serious is the knowledge that imposing sanctions defies humanitarian decency and places additional burden on the poorest and most vulnerable segment of the population. The sanctions, banning imports from and investments in Burma and discouraging tourists to visit the country, is not only keeping tens of thousands out of employment. It also demonstrates a continued failure to understand that without dialogue involving the military government, the Burmese people will continue to live in misery. Overseas Pro-democracy and human right-groups have managed to successfully create a high-tech political movement, which now claims the purity seldom found in international politics anywhere in the world, leaving no room for American Congressmen and women, EU and other (Australians and Japanese) politicians to act with the level of pragmatism required in politics. But one should not be mistaken. Success in creating an environment which provides no room to find a position from which to move forward comes at the expense of the Burmese people who continue to suffer.

It is a well established argument within political science that a strong middle class, as a result of economic expansion, is a necessary though not the only, prerequisite for sustainable democracy. In the South-East Asia region to which Burma belongs, Thailand and Indonesia are examples of how foreign aid over the years has affected the progression towards democracy, with a shift in the balance in favor of civilian governments and an acceptable positioning of the military in society. The doctrine applied to Burma has been different: Economic starvation through boycotts and trade embargoes in the hope that it would lead to political changes from within. But it is difficult to find any historical evidence to support the idea that boycott and isolation leads to democracy. The usual reference to South Africa as an example ignores the fact that South Africa already was a highly industrialized country, highly dependent on international trade, with a large middle class that felt the effects of the sanctions and in a position to contribute to pressure for political and social change. Burma does not have these features. The near absence of a middle class in Burmese society means that the rulers are less susceptible to similar pressure. The international trade that keeps Burma afloat, especially with China and Thailand, is not impacted by the US and EU policy. The weight of sanctions applied in South Africa does not carry equal impact in the Burma case. For sanctions to work at all in the near subsistence economy in Burma, unified actions by ASEAN, China, the European Union and the United States would be required. And that is not realistic at a time when China, India and Thailand are increasing their economic cooperation with the country.

In this light, it is not likely that new sanctions imposed by the US Congress and the EU will have any more impact on the current rulers than those that have been imposed in the past. What can be seen, though, is that the most vulnerable segment of the population continues to carry the additional burden of these sanctions, while the military maintains its own supply system and usually relies on support from China to offset the impact of western impositions. The escalation of the economic crisis brought on by the closing of the many garment factories in 2003 has forced more young women into prostitution, increasing the risk of new cases of HIV and Aids beyond the UN estimate of 530.000 in 2000. According to US State department figures, more than 40.000 garment workers lost their jobs in and around Yangon in 2003 as a consequence of sanctions by the US.

If the international community genuinely wishes to help the Burmese population, other ways of approaching the issue of bringing a more acceptable standard of political development to Burma are required. In the current highly polarized Burma debate, there are only losers. There is no political progress, but more importantly the deadlock is directly contributing to a worsening situation for millions of people. The fact that Burma is ranked as country number 132 in UNDP's Human Development Index (2004) speaks volumes of high child mortality rates, low school enrolment, short life expectancy etc.

Currently, the parties that must together find the formula for a more inclusive political system are locked in their separate positions from which it is hard to find an exit. This is where external help is mostly required: to support and encourage the process of negotiation, while maintaining the international denouncement of the violations of the universally accepted human rights taken place in the country.

The members of the international community now promoting sanctions as a mean to achieve change all have strong democratic institutions and none of them have any strategically political interests in Burma. These countries could play a leading role as donors of humanitarian assistance and institutional capacity building and, thus, through the removal of some economic pressure, create good will and more space for political maneuverability for the opposing partners to solve the conflict and develop a greater level of trust and political will. Since the middle of the 1990's Burma has received only about USD 50 – 100 million per year in ODA - just 1-2 dollar per capita. In 1997 Cambodia and Laos received USD 71 and USD 37 per capita. As two of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, Burma's needs are stark in contrast.

Choosing cooperation over punishment may not be an easy scenario to accept with the military involved as one of the parties. However, Aung San Suu Kyi, influential Secretary General of NLD and Nobel laureate has on more than one occasion stated that NLD is not against foreign aid as such as long as it is properly monitored and distributed equally to all those in need, irrespective of their political views. And, according to the Brussels-based think-tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), headed by the former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, the international community does not face a choice between promoting political change on the one hand and supporting social development on the other. Both strategies, says ICG, would have to be an integral part of any genuine effort to help Burma and promote stability and welfare for its 50 million people, as well as for the Southeast Asia region as a whole, being affected by the cross-boundary issues of refugees, narcotic drugs and HIV/AIDS. ICG recommends that the international community provide more aid; that the UN mandate in the country be expanded, and that international donors establish an aid consortium to monitor aid distribution and program implementation in conjunction with the application of other political tools. ICG does not dismiss sanctions and other negative reactions but recommends that they are wielded with due consideration for their humanitarian and human rights protects.

For those who sincerely wish to help the Burmese people there is nothing to lose. The results of almost fifteen years of isolation and sanctions should be enough evidence to prove that this strategy has not brought Burma closer to democracy. Instead the increasing poverty proves how it has negatively affected the life of the very people it was meant to help.

*Joern Kristensen currently holds the post as Country Director of an International NGO in Sri Lanka. He is former head of the Mekong River Commission and UN Representative in Myanmar and Vietnam.