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Burma: Ways out of Isolation

Gerhard Will

In the early 1990s the EU and the USA responded to the 1988 military coup in Burma and the new government's failure to recognise the opposition's 1990 election victory by publicly condemning the new regime, terminating development co-operation, erecting trade barriers and drastically scaling back political contacts with the country. The prospects of lifting economic sanctions and improving the political situation were made conditional on the following requirements: the opposition had to be given total political freedom of action; the parliament elected in 1990 had to be convened; and a legitimate democratic government had to be formed.

Unlike the EU and the USA – and to some extent with bitter opposition from Washington and Brussels – the ASEAN countries have been advocating an alternative policy since the mid-1990s: a policy of “Constructive Engagement.” Instead of confronting the government in Rangoon with demands it deems unacceptable, this policy set out to re-establish confidence-building relations with the Burmese military, which would then hopefully pave the way to political reforms and give rise to a constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition. In 1997 Burma became a member of ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, and thereby participated in the organisation's broad process of dialogue and discussion. Ultimately, this policy of “Constructive Engagement” received the official approval of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who in April 2000 duly appointed the leading

Malaysian diplomat Ismail Razali as the UN's Special Envoy for Burma.

Neither of the aforementioned strategies has had the desired effect. The sanctions imposed by the West effectively worsened the living conditions experienced by many Burmese, but did not weaken the military's grip on power. Indeed, in response to external pressure, instead of displaying a greater willingness to make concessions, the military rulers toughened their stance. On the other hand, the re-imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi on 30 May 2003 and the closure of her party's office once again made it very clear that relations between the government and the opposition are all about the struggle for power, rather than being symptomatic of communication problems that could be resolved by bringing in independent mediators.

Consequently, this paper starts out by analysing the factors that led to such an intractable confrontation between the

military regime and the opposition, on the one hand, and between the military government and the West, on the other. It then goes on to discuss which external strategy should be pursued, especially by the EU, with a view to achieving national reconciliation, re-distributing the balance of political power, and improving the more than dire living conditions suffered by many of Burma's inhabitants.

The strategy developed here is based on consideration of the following factors. The establishment of a democratic system in Burma, as in other countries undergoing such a transformation, needs to be viewed as a long-term process that will only end in success if at least relevant parts of the military can be induced to co-operate. This does not mean that the stability of the present regime should be overestimated, even if the Burmese military has learnt from past crises and developed a growing capability when dealing with difficult situations. After all, other 'crisis-hardened' autocratic systems have crumbled surprisingly fast. Since Burma currently has no political or civil structures capable of maintaining a minimum degree of national order and social cohesion, such an abrupt breakdown would (at best) mark the beginning of a long, rocky road to the replacement of the political regime. Even in a scenario where the military was robbed of its leadership, its sub-components would constitute a power factor that merits due consideration by any strategic planners.

Furthermore, we know from experience with other countries undergoing the transformation to market economy and democracy that the path to this ultimate objective is not a straight one, but involves a highly complex process in which shifting political relations and improving economic and social circumstances interact, with each bolstering the other. Accordingly, we must act on several different levels simultaneously, and the action taken cannot be set out in advance in a clear 'road map' or timetable. Therefore no fully coherent concept can be presented at the outset. Some measures

taken may appear to be contradictory, and the importance of the different measures taken will probably only become clear in the course of the transformation process.

The international community's policy on Burma – including the policy pursued by the EU – should not only aim to monitor this transformation process with a critical eye, but also set out to promote it to the best of its ability at the relevant levels. Providing support from outside, sharing experience gained from developments in other countries, creating economic incentives or applying pressure should not be assessed in a general way, but according to each individual project.

At the same time, the possibilities of influencing the development of Burma from the outside should not be overestimated. The international policy of sanctions failed to induce Rangoon to change its ways decisively. Put another way, even a political U-turn will not succeed in bringing about a fundamental change for the better. For ultimately the decision about the success or failure of this process is in the hands of the political forces in Burma, or rather their ability to reach sustainable compromises that will foster the country's development. In this respect, non-Burmese actors will be well advised to take a thorough look at the concepts evoked and the conditions applying in Burma itself. Instead of trying to impose foreign ideas on the country and then proceed to deploy them the international community should consolidate and expand any existing or prospective room for manoeuvre. Here is a list of the relevant tasks and options facing us:

1. If we want to find a solution to the fundamental conflicts in the country in the long run it is absolutely vital that we embark on a comprehensive assessment of our conceptual options – first and foremost with respect to drafting a new Constitution. Versions of a new draft Constitution have been presented both in Burma and by Burmese living in exile. They focus in a highly detailed way on

such matters as the potential balance of power between political leaders and the military, or on how the peaceful coexistence of the various ethnic groups in the country can be organised and their political autonomy guaranteed in a shared political system. It could certainly turn out to be helpful to pass on experience gained in connection with other countries and draw on such experience to improve and reconcile the drafts that have already been presented.

2. No democratic system of government can be installed if the military is solidly opposed to it. So instead of isolating the military government and its representatives any further, the EU needs to do all it can to establish a critical dialogue with the military, and include in that dialogue a maximum number of members of the officer corps. Only a dialogue of this kind is capable of breaking up loyalty-based structures within the military and identifying and then strengthening those forces that demonstrate a willingness to embark on the path of reform. By contrast, persevering with the policy of isolation would merely play into the hands of the hard-liners, who regard broader contacts with abroad as the strongest challenge to their rule.
3. For the time being there are not really many promising foundations for the establishment of the institutions and organisations of a civil society. This makes it all the more important to make systematic use of any opportunities in religious communities or cultural groups and to continue to develop them. This will above all be the task of civil society organisations in ASEAN countries, whose involvement will meet with less resistance from the Burmese government than actions taken by the European Union. The EU should rather see its role in providing indirect support in this instance.
4. Political change and the easing of the devastating miserable economic and

social situation should be viewed much more clearly than in the past as interdependent, mutually supportive processes. The first step towards enabling systematic progress will entail drawing up a national aid plan that lists the most serious problems and goes on to propose possible humanitarian and further-reaching development policy projects. The existence of such a plan would enable far better targeted negotiations with the regime on the implementation of individual projects and actions required of the government or its administration.

The success or failure of the transformation process will primarily depend on whether or not it generates economic momentum promising high rates of growth, which would give millions of Burmese better living conditions. A fresh balance of economic power will also serve as a springboard for the redistribution of political power. International debate about Burma's economic and monetary policy, an increase in foreign direct investment, and brisker trade with Burma are definitely important factors contributing to economic success. However, any such success will only endure if the government is both willing and able to create and enforce the legal framework that would enable such a success.

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