

INDIA AND THE WORLD
ESSAYS ON IMPORTANT ISSUES

Political Black Hole

Please use your liberty to promote ours.¹

BHARAT JAIN

Just picture this scenario: In an isolated land a few power-crazy military men put a pro-democracy woman activist, one who is physically frail but endowed with an indomitable spirit, under house arrest. The house is put under intense military surveillance, the kind of which would make a Cold War era Communist dictator proud.

The end of the latest six-year house arrest term is due in July this year. With barely two months to go for the expiry of the house arrest term, one night a stranger swims across the small lake around the pro-democracy activist's house, stealthily enters the building and stays for two nights without anyone noticing his mysterious presence.

The military raids the house, captures the mysterious trespasser, and charges the pro-democracy activist with subversive activity and harbouring an enemy of the State.

What do you make of this story? To some it may sound implausible; to others, ridiculous yet symptomatic of a banana republic. However, if you are Burmese, then the story would appear all too real, for this is the story of their own country.

Star cast

The isolated land is Burma (also called Myanmar); the power-crazy military men collectively form the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC; some call it the Junta) while the pro-democracy activist is Aung San Suu Kyi. And yes, let's not forget the stranger. The trespasser turned out to be an American, John Yettaw. No one, till date, knows why the American entered Ms. Suu Kyi's residence.

Fear is not the natural state of civilized people.²

At the time of writing this article, Ms. Suu Kyi was lodged inside Insein Prison, described as a hell-hole of a prison. It is widely believed, and feared especially by her supporters, that Ms. Suu Kyi would be convicted, in a sham trial, of violating the terms of her six-year house arrest term and conspiring against the government.

Freedom

The military-controlled SPDC runs the country as a fiefdom. All dissent is crushed with either a term in one of the military's several notorious prisons or silenced with a bullet.

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*For what avail the plough or sail,
Or land or life, if freedom fail?*

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Across the border, in India, people live in freedom, enjoy all kinds of freedoms (social, economic, and political) and enjoy the right to dissent. Do the Burmese enjoy similar freedoms? To put it mildly, such freedoms do not exist in Burma, leave alone enjoying them.

A great majority of the ordinary folks are malnourished and impoverished. Once considered the richest land in South East Asia, Burma has turned from being the 'Golden Land' into a political black hole, all in a matter of a few decades. What has brought about this catastrophic change?

The answer to this simple question is complex and lies in our understanding of the workings of the ultra-secretive regime of the Military Junta and the Military State they have so effectively spawned since 1962.

Economic & Human Geography

A predominantly Buddhist nation, Burma has historically been a land of peace and prosperity. Nature has endowed her with superabundant resources, lush green forests, mineral resources, and several large rivers.

Burma, a nation of about 50 million people, is home to around 60 per cent of the world's native teak reserves. The country holds an estimated

283.2 billion cubic meters of natural gas, one of the largest in the world.

One dubious distinction Burma enjoys is that after Afghanistan, it is the world's largest producer and exporter of opium.

There are several ethnic groups in Burma. Burman (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), and Rakhine (4%) are the four major ethnic groups. Like all societies where so many ethnic groups exist, the tension between them often surfaces, though they all have one common enemy to fear: the Junta. The unfortunate situation of fighting between the military led by the Junta and the minor ethnic groups, who fear subjugation and demand independence from the Burmese State, is being played out on the sidelines of the larger canvas of the siege that the country has been under since its independence.

Violence as destiny

Burma gained independence from Britain in January 1947. Violence greeted the newly independent nation when Aung San (father of Aung San Suu Kyi), the man who led the independence movement against the British, was assassinated, along with scores of his followers.

The incipient state continued to suffer violence. In 1962, the military led by General Ne Win staged

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“ I could not, as my father’s daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on. This national crisis could, in fact, be called the second struggle for national independence.”³

a military coup, took over the reins of power and suspended the constitution. Ne Win set up a one-party, military state system. In order to lend some political legitimacy to the Junta, he established the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP).

The general population, led by pro-democracy student and trade unions, refused to accept the Junta and staged massive protests calling for restoration of civilian administration. The Junta responded with unprecedented brutality: the military rounded up protestors and executed hundreds of them. Some of the pro-democracy protestors escaped into Burma’s vast and deep jungles in the interior and on the border with Thailand.

General Ne Win was a great admirer of Josef Stalin and Karl Marx. Soon after usurping power, he declared that the guiding philosophy of the Junta would be the “Burmese Way to Socialism”. Under this, the Junta forced foreign companies to leave the country and nationalised their businesses. Almost all means of production passed into the hands of the Junta.

The Ne Win administration effectively shut the country out from the rest of the world, even from its closest neighbours including Thailand and India (both of which share long borders with Burma).

Under Ne Win, the Junta consolidated its hold on power by making all forms of protests illegal and used brutal force against any form of dissent. The military elite fattened itself as all forms of investments were channelled through its corrupt administrative machinery.

When fear rules a people, an understanding of fear becomes a necessity to understand the make-up of the society, its polity, and even its very existence. Burma is today a proxy for fear.

Four Eights Movement

General Ne Win, a very superstitious man, madly loved with astrology and numerology. His favourite number was 9. In 1987, he ordered that the Kyat, which is Burma’s national currency, should be issued in denominations of 45 and 90 (both divisible by 9).

This move, which turned other denominations of the currency into worthless paper, wiped out the hard-earned savings of the ordinary Burmese folks. The already impoverished people, with decades of living under repression, began to release their pent-up frustrations.

The protests, led by student groups who called for democracy and carried pictures of the late Aung San, started in Rangoon. The Junta, which brooks no opposition to its dictates, killed a few

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Aung San Suu Kyi

Concepts such as truth, justice and compassion cannot be dismissed as trite when these are often the only bulwarks which stand against ruthless power.⁴

of the protestors at a Rangoon educational institute. The killings generated angst leading to mass protests across the country. This time around, however, students were joined by Burma's deeply venerated monks, in addition to ordinary folks like doctors and teachers.

The demonstrations continued over several weeks and succeeded in taking their toll on General Ne Win, who resigned. The resignation of General Ne Win only emboldened the protestors, who continued to call for democracy. Several thousand (some say, a few lakh) protestors marched together on August 8, 1988 – hence the name, Four Eights Movement.

Eighteen days later, a calm, elegant woman addressed a large gathering at the holy Shwedagon Pagoda. The crowd latched on to every word of Aung San Suu Kyi, who had entered the country only to take care of her ailing mother, the widow of the late Aung San. (Before this visit to Burma, Ms. Suu Kyi resided in North Oxford with her husband and two sons.)

In her landmark speech on August 26, 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi announced that she was joining the movement for democracy. *"I could not, as my father's daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on. This national crisis could, in fact, be called the second struggle for national independence,"* Aung San Suu Kyi told an entranced audience.

The Junta, sensing that the protest movements with their calls for democracy were attracting large numbers of the discontented citizens, unleashed brutal force on the protestors.

In the midst of this political upheaval, a new set of generals replaced the old dispensation on September 18, 1988. The new Junta called itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The new generals got down to the business of crushing the democracy movement with an iron hand: the army sprayed bullets on the protestors. A conservative estimate puts the number of dead at 3,000. Till date, there is no record of the survivors of this pogrom.

Refusal to accept reality

Soon after, the SLORC announced that it would hold elections. Responding to this, Ms. Suu Kyi

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It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.⁵

announced the launch of her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) to contest the elections. Her campaign across the country roused hopes among the ordinary folks of freedom from the Junta and prospects of a better life.

The SLORC, worried by her rising popularity, put her under house arrest in July 1989. However, this move boomeranged because when elections were held in 1990, the NLD scored a landslide victory, winning nearly 80 per cent of the seats.

The NLD's win meant that SLORC would have to vacate the power centre. Clearly shaken by the election verdict, the SLORC, which did not want to let go of power, annulled the election results.

Instead of accepting the election result, the Junta promised Ms. Suu Kyi a safe passage out of Burma provided she never returned. This fearless icon of democracy chose to stay back and struggle along with her oppressed compatriots. (The world acknowledged the courage of this intrepid woman when Ms. Suu Kyi was awarded the 1991 Nobel Prize for Peace.)

In 1992, Than Shwe became the head of the SLORC. In 1996, the SLORC was renamed State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The Junta changed its name but didn't change its focus:

suppress all opposition, oppress dissenters, and repress all forms of freedom.

Between then and now, the situation hasn't changed much. Ms. Suu Kyi continued to be under house arrest during most of this period. Under detention, she is denied access to telephone, newspaper, television, visitors, and basic freedoms.

The 2007 uprising

The last large-scale public demonstrations against the Junta happened in 2007. In August 2007, the SPDC raised fuel prices by an astonishing 500 per cent. In a country ranked by the UN as one of the least developed and poorest in the world, this massive increase in fuel price hit the vulnerable and poor people very hard. The fuel price hike had a cascading effect in raising the cost of living, thus severely crippling the already impoverished Burmese.

Just sample this: In towns, where labourers earn less than 2000 Kyat (equal to \$1.5) a day, the revised fuel charges would mean that they would have to pay nearly three-fourths of their wages in travel.

Responding to this arbitrary and sudden price hike, Buddhist monks, those most revered members of Burmese society, took to the streets in thousands. As they took out demonstrations in Rangoon and

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Senior General Than Shwe, the leader of the Junta, seems to strongly believe in the words of Leonid Brezhnev: *“The trouble with free elections is, you never know who is going to win.”*

other cities including Mandalay and Akyab, the Buddhist monks were joined by pro-democracy political activists and lay people.

It's not that the fuel price hike was the sole reason for the massive protests. In fact, the economic mismanagement by the Junta since 1962 has left the people severely impoverished and the local economy crippled. Over the decades, the Junta has exploited the rich natural resources, especially energy, for their own profits. While the Burmese experience serious shortage of energy supply, oil and gas resources are sold off to countries like India, China, and Thailand. Forget about interior areas and villages, even people in Rangoon do not receive more than three hours of power supply.

Lack of political freedom and economic opportunity, rising food prices, arbitrary imposition of taxes, and destruction of potent cultural symbols (especially non-Buddhist) has only added to the resentment of the people against the Junta. So, in effect, the huge hike in fuel price only acted as a trigger.

It was not that the Junta ignored the massive protests led by the monks. It was only sharpening its response against the protestors. First, the Junta warned the monks to give up protests and go back to their monasteries. When the monks didn't heed to the warnings, the Junta unleashed brutal force against the monks. Hundreds of monks and pro-democracy activists were rounded up and sent to prison, while many more were executed.

Sanctions, a blunt tool

To cripple the Junta, the U.S. and the EU have imposed tougher sanctions on Burma. The idea behind this strategy is to make life tough for the Junta by choking their economic lifelines. Let's analyse as to why the strategy of sanctions will fail.

If we study the Burmese economy carefully, one would stumble upon a startling fact: that Thailand, and not China or India, is actually Burma's largest trading partner. About 22 per cent of Thailand's electricity comes from Burma, which exports nearly \$3 billion worth of natural gas each year to fuel Thai power plants. The demand for gas and electricity from Thailand is only rising while India and China are competing with each other in

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Revered monks and people! This public rally is aimed at informing the whole world of the will of the people... Our purpose is to show that the entire people entertain the keenest desire for a multiparty democratic system of government.⁶

investing billions of dollars to grab oil and gas blocks.

As of now, natural gas export is by far Burma's biggest source of foreign cash. The revenue has helped the Junta buy new offensive weapons from India and China. It has even helped the Junta set up a test nuclear reactor from Russia.

However, one conspicuous way in which the Junta has used the money from gas exports is by building a new capital city (Naypidaw, located around 330 km north of Rangoon in the interior of the country), right from scratch.

Burma exports a paltry \$3.56 billion worth of goods each year. Among its major exports is hardwood, mainly teak. As nearly a quarter of the world's internationally traded teak originally comes from Burma, hardwood export contributes to at least 12 per cent of Burma's official foreign exchange earnings.

Sanctions will not impact teak exports because the West is not the destined market for such exports. On the other hand, sanctions have hurt industries, like textile, which employ lakhs of ordinary Burmese and consequently impact them directly. In addition, sanctions have only increased illegal logging. China, ever hungry for timber, has

displayed no will for reducing illegal logging in Burma and, in fact, Chinese companies are a major part of the problem.

The hypocrisy of global powers

The brutality of the Junta – be it their suppression of political and economic rights or their repressive treatment of Ms. Suu Kyi – has often goaded the world community into action. More than the intent, what's important is how major global powers have evolved their policy towards Burma.

The U.S. and the EU have asked for the unconditional release of all political protesters including Ms. Suu Kyi, and that the SPDC engage in genuine dialogue with the pro-democracy movement and ethnic groups.

The divided house that is the UN, it is mostly clueless about how to deal with Burma; in a more general way it would pass resolutions that do precious little to mitigate the suffering of the Burmese.

China wants reconciliation and an 'improvement' of conditions in Burma.

India, Burma's large western neighbour, has called on the Junta to exercise 'restraint' and free Ms. Suu Kyi.

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“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

The ASEAN talks of ‘constructive engagement’ with the Junta and does not favour any strong action.

Let me now evaluate the reactions of some major powers to the unfolding crisis in Burma.

U.S. The United States has called on the Burmese Junta to give up power and hand it over to Ms. Suu Kyi. The world’s most powerful democracy has often said that it does not want to deal with the Junta and has already put sanctions in place.

The American stance is both hollow and hypocritical: the world’s most powerful democracy has no qualms in hobnobbing with tyrannical regimes and dictatorships around the world.

China. China is seen as a country which wields the greatest clout with the Junta in Burma. The international community, including the UN and the U.S., has called on China to use its clout with the Burmese military regime. China’s influence comes from its support of the Junta and its strategy of investing billions of dollars, which Burma’s Junta badly needs, in the country’s huge energy sector.

China needs reliable sources of oil and gas to propel its fast-growing economy. Also, China wants to reduce its dependence on the Gulf region for its energy needs so that it could avoid using the dangerous Malacca Straits (which today is

more or less controlled by the U.S.). China’s strategy of investing billions of dollars in Burma’s energy sector has paid off as Burma has often offered favourable terms to Chinese energy companies.

There is another strategic reason why China will shy away from taking any tough measures against the Junta. Burma is a perfect fit in China’s ‘ring of pearls’ strategy. The ‘ring of pearls’ strategy envisions developing harmonious and deep relations with Pakistan, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma. The strategy is intended to give it access to ports for its naval and merchant vessels if ever hostilities break out with the United States. To this end, China has taken Burma’s Coco Island on lease. Coco Island, where China has set up a ‘listening post’, is located very close to India’s Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

Also, in the past few years, increased trade with China has strengthened the Junta’s income sources, and thus reduced any incentive for them to implement urgently-needed reforms.

India. Another country the international community has asked to use its good offices in Burma is India. India has traditionally supported ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ movements all over the world.

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Bono in “Walk On”, a song dedicated to Aung San Suu Kyi

“What you’ve got they can’t deny it. Can’t sell it, can’t buy it. Walk on, walk on. Stay safe tonight.”

Till the mid-1990s, this was also the focus of India’s Burma policy. Till that time, India had maintained that it would not talk with the Junta and asked it to free Ms. Suu Kyi, accept the 1990 election verdict, and restore democracy.

The foreign policy of a country is determined by its strategic interests and needs. Morality is an ‘ideological ideal’ but one that does not often make for great foundation of a ‘progressive’ foreign policy. In India’s case too, this holds true. India’s outlook towards Burma’s Junta changed when she ‘realised’ that her strategic interests were best served if she engaged with the Junta.

To this end, we shook hands with the generals in Burma. We talked with them, asked them to take action against the various separatist groups which are waging war against India and which have taken shelter across the border in Burma. And yes, we have invested billions of dollars in Burma’s energy sector. We were always worried about China: that China would get there first, take away all the oil & gas, and make Burma a strategic ally. So, we gave up the ‘moral’ high ground and supped with the Junta.

Last word

Fear rules Burma. Fear rules the lives of the Burmese. Fear defines what they see (and don’t see) and do (and what they don’t).

When fear seeps into every aspect of life, it begins to dominate each moment of it. All things, even the most ordinary and those usually taken for granted, begin to be quantified in terms of the fear factor.

In a farce of a trial, a new house arrest sentence for Ms. Suu Kyi is more or less a certainty. That’s not what her supporters fear; what they fear, and their fear is quite palpable, is what the Junta will do to the ordinary Burmese who support Ms. Suu Kyi.

The Junta remains defiant, even in the face of international censure. Democracy in Burma was stillborn. How long the situation will last is anybody’s guess. To hazard a guess would be too premature and this, the Burmese know best. **ME&U**

^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6} Excerpts from speeches of Aung San Suu Kyi.

⁶ First public speech (August 26, 1988)

