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No One Talks to the Generals

Strategic Insights, Volume VIII, Issue 5 (December 2009)

By Peter A. Coclanis

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The trials of Aung San Suu Kyi, the courageous and much admired Burmese opposition political leader who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, never seem to end. With elections in Burma scheduled for 2010, even long-time observers sensed—or at least hoped—that earlier this year an opening of sorts might be made for “the Lady,” who has been under house arrest for most of the past two decades. Better late than never, right? Ms. Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), should have become Prime Minister of the country twenty years earlier, of course, after the NLD won the last real election in the country. But the 1990 election results were annulled, and “the Lady” was already under house arrest in any case.

Supporters’ 2009 hopes came a cropper beginning in early May, after an incident that can only be characterized as bizarre: Ms. Suu Kyi’s alleged sheltering for two days of a beached swimmer—a middle-aged American named John William Yettaw—when he made land at her house on Inya Lake in Rangoon. Because Ms. Suu Kyi’s alleged actions violated the terms of her house arrest, she and two house servants were tried this summer, as we all know, at Insein Prison just outside Rangoon. The verdict on August 11—three years of hard labor, quickly commuted to eighteen additional months of house arrest in Rangoon—was certainly no surprise to anyone who has been following Ms. Suu Kyi’s trials and tribulations over the years.

This fall, however, things began to get strange, and have been getting curiouser and curiouser ever since. In September, senior U.S. officials began meeting with representatives of the junta. Then in October, seemingly out of nowhere, the military government permitted Ms. Suu Kyi to meet several times with foreign diplomats, such meetings reportedly coming after “the Lady” wrote to junta chief Than Shwe suggesting ways to get international sanctions lifted against the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), the Burmese military regime. Although it is still unclear what will come of these unforeseen developments, there now exists at least a margin of hope that some progress will be made in peacefully reconciling various constituencies in Myanmar/Burma.

The chances for real progress in my view would be enhanced if the international press would both cover Ms. Suu Kyi a bit more objectively—she is admirable in many ways, but like the rest of us has her faults—and at least make an attempt to understand the position, strategy, and worldview of the other principals in this narrative: The generals running the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Indeed, as much or more ink has been spilt on Ms. Suu Kyi’s attire, demeanor, and flower-festooned hair and on the motives of Yettaw, the buffoonish swimmer, as on analyzing why Than Shwe and the rest of the ruling junta think and act the way they do.

To be sure, it is easy enough to paint Ms. Suu Kyi as a brilliant, 100 percent- pure moralist and to write off the generals as a bunch of uneducated, xenophobic, kleptocrats, and call it a day. In so doing, however, one must somehow suppress the uncomfortable fact that Ms. Suu Kyi's political ideology is rather more a muddled mishmash of garden-variety rights talk, Buddhist musings, and vaguely Fabianist clichés than a coherent, much less systematic system of thought, which certainly correlates with the additional fact that she graduated with a third-class degree at Oxford, and, why, according to her biographer Justin Wintle, she was rejected by the PhD program in PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Similarly, apotheosizing Ms. Suu Kyi makes it difficult to explain why in 1985--twenty three years' into the generals' reign—she authored a breezy travel guide entitled *Let's Visit Burma*, which book she later said she only wrote to pay her sons' school fees in Britain. And in dismissing the generals as irrelevant objects of study, one reduces them to caricatures, and, more important, demonstrates disdain toward history and the possibility that time and context matter very much.

For example, one doesn't have to buy the generals' contentions that Burma would fall apart in short order without military rule to acknowledge the fact that the military, for better or worse, is clearly one of the few forces capable of holding together the multi-ethnic nation. Nor does one have to endorse the junta's authoritarian ways, or its fixation with order (let alone its rent-seeking behavior) to appreciate the fact that few places on earth have experienced the devastation, dislocations, and human suffering —much of which imposed from without—that Burma has since at least the 1930s.

Anyone who follows Burma/Myanmar, even casually, will recall the misery in the south of the country brought on by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, but few know anything about the country's calamitous history over the past eighty years. For starters, how about economic depression, a millenarian revolt, and anti-colonial struggles in the 1930s, horrific death and destruction during the Second World War, a difficult and bloody decolonization campaign against the British in the late '40s (during which Ms. Suu Kyi's father, General Aung San, the struggle's principal hero, was assassinated), the destabilizing presence of Chiang Kai Shek and the military forces of the Kuomintang (supplied by the U.S.) in the 1950s, and numerous and seemingly endless secessionist struggles, some of them extremely violent, from independence in 1948 down to the present day? And these events and episodes hardly exhaust the register of difficulties—the disorder and early sorrow, as Mann might have put it—that the young nation of Burma has gone through, again, much of it externally induced.

Instability, dislocation, and the threat of outside influence, pressure, and control, then, are the defining characteristics of Burma's modern history—particularly from the military's point of view. Faced with increasingly inept and ineffective civilian governments in the late 50s and early 60s, the generals therefore moved in, decisively and most tenaciously with Ne Win's coup in 1962. That the generals' subsequent attempts over the next half century to isolate Burma from the outside world, to impose economic autarky, and to crush democratic dissent failed, often miserably, does not absolve outsiders from trying to understand the context for the generals' policy preferences, including their consistently harsh policies toward Ms. Suu Kyi.

To appreciate their approach to Ms. Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's "George Washington," one can do worse than to draw an analogy between Aung San and "the Lady," on the one hand, and the father of our country, on the other. Pretend for a moment that George Washington had a young son, who, a decade or so after the bloody battles of the American Revolution came to an end, quit the new nation for the detested colonizing power, Great Britain. Once in Britain, the scion of the President went to school, got married to a Brit, started a family, and launched a career there. Around 1815 or so, he happened to come back to the U.S. on a private visit in the midst of a national political crisis. Anti-governmental dissenters, sensing the political and PR uses that could be made of the Washington name, opportunistically offer George's son the Number 1 position in the anti-government movement, which is accepted as once. Think the American

government in power, a fiercely nationalistic one in 1815, would appreciate this expatriate Georgie-come-lately, particularly if Georgie just came back after twenty-odd years of living in Britain?

Change the name from Washington to Aung San, the gender from male to female, the date from 1815 to 1988, and alter the biographical detail slightly to fit Ms. Suu Kyi if you want some sense of where the leaders of the SPDC are coming from. If not, you can just smugly attribute everything to the generals' ignorance, xenophobia, and corruption and be on your way.

About the Author

Peter A. Coclanis is Associate Provost for International Affairs and Albert R. Newsome Professor of History at UNC-Chapel Hill. He has written extensively on the economic and demographic history of Burma, and has visited the country more than a dozen times since the early 1990s.

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