



Mayhem in Myanmar by David I. Steinberg

The reports are still sketchy and contradictory, but there is no question that a serious incident has taken place in Upper Burma with the riots connected with Aung San Suu Kyi's tour. An unclear number of people were killed and more injured. Whether she was hurt remains in dispute; expatriate opposition groups claim that she was, but the government has denied this. Ambassador Sri Tun Razali Ismail, the personal representative of UN Secretary General Kofi Anan, will be visiting the country soon. He has been largely responsible over some two years for pushing a dialogue between Daw Suu Kyi and the military junta, a dialogue that seems to have been stalled for about a year. He will no doubt try to visit her. If he is denied access, the only conclusion that the world will draw is that she was injured in the fracas.

Since her release from modified house arrest May 6, 2002, she has traveled all over the country, with military approval, to reopen National League for Democracy (NLD) local offices and to become reacquainted with the rural areas to which she had been denied access for many years. On all of those trips she had been enthusiastically received. On a couple, there seems to have been some modest local harassment. Since the NLD is prevented from publicizing its activities in the stringently controlled media, her presence in the hinterland becomes an important event. In a sense, the military inadvertently made each visit far more significant than it might otherwise have been, turning what might have been routine into an almost triumphal motorcade, thus defeating the military's desire to limit her influence.

The latest month-long visit to the Kachin State and central Burma was marred by a clash between her growing motorcade, which picked up local supporters as it proceeded, and the local military backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). The USDA is a military-created mass mobilization organization, as specified in its charter, founded to support the military and its programs. It is said to have over 16 million members, about one-third of the total population over the age of 10. It has been used in the past to stage rallies that serve military prescribed activities, such as massive demonstrations against Thailand in 2002 over border clashes between the two states. It seems to have been modeled on Golkar, the Suharto-supportive "functional groups" in Indonesia before it became a political party. Like Golkar, the USDA has the makings of a military-dominated political base should the country return to the elective process.

Because the USDA is under military command, and Senior General and Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Than Shwe is its patron, it seems evident that any demonstrations and incidents involving the USDA must, minimally, have had official military authorization and more likely military incitement. The

demonstrations may have gotten out of hand, and the NLD supporters may have acted inappropriately, as the government claims, but the responsibility rests squarely with the military. Years ago, military intelligence justified surveillance of Aung San Suu Kyi for her own protection, so they said, for if anything untoward happened to her, the military recognized they would be blamed. And now they are!

This incident is a major setback for both the internal dialogue process - which however limited and inadequate was a step in the right direction - and externally for those foreigners who were trying to appeal to the more circumspect among the military who realize the dire state of Burma's international relations and internal political economy. Grammatically and politically, foreigners tend to think of the military in the singular - as a unified and cohesive force. Yet the most heinous crime in Burma, as the military admit, is attempting to split the military, a crime that Aung San Suu Kyi was accused of some years ago. It is likely that there are elements among the military leadership who recognize the damage done to the country and to the military itself by this mishap. What they might be able to do about it is unclear.

Foreign expressions of outrage may be the final push for the U.S. Congress to enact additional sanctions on that unfortunate country. As a moral statement, it has obvious resonance. But as a practical matter it simply reinforces the sanctions that have hitherto proven inadequate to get reform in that country, and will throw hundreds of thousands of workers, mainly women, out of jobs that are nowhere else available. The proposal to deny visas to all members of the USDA, as has been mentioned in the press, would isolate further a state and people we should be trying to influence.

Short of counterproductive sanctions, the U.S. and all countries, including Japan and ASEAN, need to exert whatever influence they can muster to pressure the regime to reform and to open the society - not just to the political opposition, but also to dialogue with the minorities, that one-third of the population that has been left out of whatever discussions have existed and the well being of whom remains the most intractable and vital long-range problem facing the country. In particular, Japan should redefine "humanitarian assistance" to include only basic human needs, and stop action on other projects until this matter is settled.

The tensions in Burma could have negative repercussions for the region, with waves of economic and political migrations causing problems to Burma's neighbors, especially Thailand. It is time for ASEAN, and especially the ASEAN Regional Forum, which is designed to deal with security issues, to have some teeth and to pressure the military rulers of Burma to recognize that the internal distress of one country is of concern to all. In other words, the social aspects of one state are of interest to the group. That is, after all, the logic behind

the Joint Statement of Socially Cohesive and Caring ASEAN, signed by all member states in July 2000.

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