



Burma: who is pulling the strings? by David I. Steinberg

The House of Representatives Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the International Relations Committee held a hearing on Burma on March 25 to consider whether the U.S. sanctions on the military junta in that country ought to be extended for an additional year. Those present on both sides of the aisle roundly castigated the military regime and its human rights abuses, and there is no question, barring unexpected and radical developments in Burma, that the Congress will so vote the extension. Since then, Secretary of State Colin Powell and indicated to the Congress that he would support continuation of the sanctions.

The subcommittee no doubt thought that they were making policy. And in some sense they were – expressing moral outrage at conditions in that country and the continued, if intermittent, house arrest of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who is now planned to be released by May 17, when the National Convention to formulate a constitution is going reconvene after an eight-years hiatus. At the same time, they were limiting U.S. influence and options in that country, since there is little more that the U.S. can do to influence that country's rulers. It is highly significant, although usually ignored, that no country has followed the U.S. lead and imposed sanctions against that regime.

The reality of policy formation is more nuanced. The chairman of the subcommittee specifically asked the representative of the exiled government, who testified before the committee, whether Aung San Suu Kyi was in favor of sanctions. Prompted by her interpreter, she replied that Aung San Suu Kyi indeed was in favor of them.

The military government in Rangoon has continuously and vehemently chastized Aung San Suu Kyi as being an axe-handle of the Americans – the person who supports U.S. policies toward that country. She is portrayed by the military as the puppet of the Americans. This view is exceptionally flawed. Ironically, it is the United States that is captive to Aung San Suu Kyi's policies. The U.S. is in fact the puppet.

Members of Congress and others who understandably want democracy in that sorry country and are sympathetic to Aung San Suu Kyi's clear and steadfast commitment to that goal have virtually stated that they would vote as she indirectly prefers. U.S. policy toward Burma is subject to her recommendations and even veto. Although the ultimate objective of both the U.S. and the democracy advocates is the same, the tactical means to achieve that end may have to be different.

I testified against sanctions at the hearing. I did so not in the expectation that policies would shift, but in the somewhat naive hope that some dialogue on the important subject of U.S.

policy could occur, because it is highly unlikely that sanctions will result in regime change, which is the goal of that policy.

No one expects Burma to be a topic of debate during this election year. But the democratic process of foreign policy making would be enhanced by open debate on the subject, rather than an orthodoxy of views that inhibit rational discourse on that subject.

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