

Burma, Senator Webb, and U Win Tin

by David I. Steinberg

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Senator James Webb's recent visit to Burma/Myanmar has come under fire from the Burmese democracy movement. The protests, while sincere and well-intended, miss the point of Webb's visit – he was not there to praise or legitimize the ruling junta but to help craft a more effective policy aimed at its removal and the restoration of democracy to this proud land.

Writing in the *Washington Post* recently, U Win Tin, a founder of Burma's National League for Democracy (NLD) party and a former political prisoner (from 1989 to 2008) lamented that Webb's visit was "damaging to our democracy movement." I believe he misses important aspects of the Obama administration's Burmese policy.

Make no mistake, U Win Tin is a brave and honorable man who has suffered much for the democratic movement in Burma/Myanmar. His sacrifices, and those of many others in that country, have neither gone unnoticed nor unappreciated abroad. The problems facing both the people of Burma/Myanmar and the international community are manifold. The people indeed have spiraled down an economic abyss while the state has garnered increasing resources from its exports of natural gas and other primary materials.

The military in Burma/Myanmar have a stranglehold on power in that society. They have a vision of their own leadership in that state – a belief that the military is the only institution that can preserve national unity. One may question the validity of their belief, but one should not doubt the conviction with which it is held. That they have not used their now considerable resources for the common good is undeniable – validated by their own statistics on their meager expenditures in fields connected with basic human needs.

The essential premise of U Win Tin and his party is that political change must precede any other action internally or in international relations: if the political stalemate between the military and the opposition, led by the NLD, were to be resolved through dialogue, economic reform would take place, people's lives would become better, minority relations would improve, and international relations prosper. To imply that 20 years of internal political stalemate between the two would be overcome prior to the planned 2010 elections is fantasy.

The military junta's premise is obviously different: unity and stability come first and must be guaranteed by a new

government under a constitution in which, while opposition voices will be heard, the reins of ultimate power will remain in military hands. Only then can economic conditions for the people improve. Foreign states should, thus, recognize the validity of this argument and the road toward what the junta calls "discipline-flourishing democracy."

Both premises, however, are questionable. The military has given no previous indication that they have serious policy concerns for the livelihoods of the majority of the population, and perhaps their own leadership is shielded from the stark realities of survival in that society. The opposition, which has never had a chance to practice its liberal economic and political platform, is likely erroneous on two counts: that the military will now renegotiate the new constitution that is to come into effect after the elections in 2010, and that the international community, of which the military is rightly suspicious since the West has generally called for regime change for two decades, can materially affect the internal distribution of power in that society.

A more productive premise than either of the two would be to start with the plight of the diverse Burmese people: how can their conditions be improved? This is both the critical need and the essential policy question. It is not only a problem resulting from Cyclone Nargis in 2008, but deprivation is endemic in that society after a half-century of ineffective and indeed deleterious economic policies, but was greatly exacerbated by the cyclone's devastation.

Realities erode the high moral ground. Both groups claim it internally for different, antithetical reasons. Externally, sanctions and isolation have been its manifestation. Effective dialogue between the opposition and the military is highly unlikely to take place before the elections of 2010. Yet there are other possible avenues of dialogue; one of them is with the international community. That dialogue with the United States and the West has been in hiatus for a score of years.

U Win Tin, reflecting the leadership of his party, is understandably concerned that this is the last chance for change before the new constitution goes into effect. The dilemma for the NLD, of which he is an Executive Committee member, is this: to participate in the 2010 elections (if allowed to do so – there is not yet a new party registration law) might give them a small opposition voice in a new government, but it would effectively eliminate the victory the League won in the 1990 elections. This is a genuine problem for them and for which there is no easy answer. Sen. Webb's trip did not, and could not resolve Burmese issues, for the problems of that sorry state will only be decided *bama-lo*, as the Burmese say, "In the Burmese manner."

Webb's visit was a first and important step to begin this dialogue process. Change and better relations are likely to move slowly and will depend on staged, reciprocal actions on

both sides. Webb appropriately called for amelioration of conditions in that country. It was an important and productive beginning, but there should be no illusions as to the problems ahead. However one views sanctions, it is evident they are easily imposed and exceedingly difficult to eliminate. But there are other steps that each side might take to begin to deal with the dire Burmese conditions. A prosperous and stable Burma/Myanmar is in the interests of that country, its neighbors China and India, ASEAN, and the United States. Isolation exacerbates the multiple problems facing that state and the international community. We should applaud the modest beginning Sen. Webb's visit has created, and explore its positive ramifications.