

Burma/Myanmar: The Folly of Consistency

by David I. Steinberg

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If US sanctions against the military government in Burma/Myanmar, the goal of which was regime change, have not worked for a decade and a half, by what logic would one suppose that additional sanctions would have a more positive effect? Yet well-meaning human rights and other organizations have recently proposed that further sanctions be instituted and that a UN Commission of Inquiry into human rights violations be convened. This proposal is especially quixotic as the EU has just modestly modified its less stringent sanctions policy in the light of potential progress in that country, and none of the Asian states adheres to any sanctions regimen. Rather than being a step forward, this proposal undercuts both US policy and the potential for positive change in Myanmar. That the Congress and the White House will extend current sanctions policies is a given, as Burma/Myanmar is not an issue about which any administration is willing to use up political ammunition. But, rather than being a step forward, additional sanctions will undercut both US policy and the potential for positive change in Myanmar.

Myanmar has a new government inaugurated this spring – as a result of the clearly flawed elections of November 7, 2010, which in turn were based on a manipulated referendum on a new constitution in May 2008. The cast of characters in this new act of the Burmese tragic drama is largely composed of the former military, but now in mufti. Nevertheless, there are now a few opposition voices in the various parliaments and the first public criticism of state policies has taken place before the new president, in an act unprecedented in a half century. In his inaugural speech the end of March 2011, President Thein Sein set forth a remarkably liberal and positive agenda. It called for progress on the alleviation of poverty, economic reform, more attention to health and education – both in miserable condition – better treatment of minorities, less censorship, and the elimination of corruption. The speech could have come from any governmental spokesperson in a democratic society.

These goals, while articulated by the head of state, are not universally accepted among the military power elite in that society. Strong elements are opposed to reform. They could scuttle positive change and redirect priorities, which have been advocated by many foreign observers and governments. The call for more sanctions and the UN Commission of Inquiry simply lends more credence to those elements within

Myanmar who are opposed to reform, for they will claim that no action will please the US, and therefore the US continues to be a threat, which in turn requires tighter controls on the population and greater military expenditures. The statement undercuts the potential for helping the people of that poor society – those that the advocates of more sanctions wish to assist.

The US has nominated a special ambassadorial envoy to Burma, and his approval is likely in the Senate. His position calls for coordination of sanctions policies and dialogue with the Burmese. Do the organizations advocating more sanctions really believe that this will positively affect his efficacy in dealing with Burmese officials?

The Obama policy review resulting in “pragmatic engagement” went as far as it could given internal US politics. It called for high-level dialogue, which continues, but US sanctions cannot be eliminated except in response to some overarching reforms inside Burma/Myanmar and the expressed concurrence of Aung San Suu Kyi. The US has called for continued support to her and institutionally to the National League for Democracy, a party officially deregistered because of her objections to participation in the elections. No US administration will use up valuable internal political credits to change existing sanctions, and even the new Burmese administration may not be strong enough to take the positive steps the US wants. Change inside Burma/Myanmar is possible but likely to be slow.

These internal Burmese reforms may prove ephemeral, but they are the first positive governmental steps since 1962 and the military coup of that year. We should welcome their beginning, and watch carefully their progress. But it is self-defeating to advocate policies that effectively undercut the possibility of their continuing, which would be in the interests of both the US and the peoples of that sorry land.

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