



Burma, Myanmar – Whatever We Call it, it's Time to Move by James Clad

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Every now and then, the complex tumblers of a slot machine momentarily align, changing things forever. In the long deadlock we call 'Burma' (but which the ruling regime and most of the world calls 'Myanmar'), the tumblers have aligned for the first time in decades.

If hardliners on all sides have their way, the moment won't last long – that's why it's now time to accept that change in this backward country is real and, if the West will embrace it, irreversible. An immediate opportunity to signal this choice arises in an upcoming ASEAN heads of government meeting, from 17-19 November, when Barrack Obama should meet the new Burmese president, Thein Sein.

When he does, President Obama should make clear the US interest in steady reform – continuing political prisoner releases, open electoral laws, and a democratic environment free of intimidation. Encouragingly, the now-released opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has signaled that recent trends are broadly favorable, beginning with a startling inauguration speech in March by Thein Sein which focused on corruption, governance, and the rule of law. The iconic Burmese opposition leader has since met Thein Sein face to face.

Burma's new parliament, though stacked with government-leaning members, has lively debates and submits to critical media coverage. The local press has bloomed, spawning newspapers and magazines with coverage so candid that media elsewhere in Asia usually pale in comparison. Aung San Suu Kyi is leading a major Films of Freedom festival. New laws have given workers the right to form unions. An IMF team has recently left, convinced of Burma's intention to liberalize its economy and join a Southeast Asian free trade area. Meanwhile, a third release of political prisoners looms in a few days.

Of course these positive trends could come off the rails. But what would the hard line lobby prefer? Wait for a perfect world? We used to laugh at an old joke about Palestinian leaders who, it was said, 'never lose an opportunity – to lose an opportunity'. Yet the US finds itself in the same spot: getting Burma right means getting past timidity, inertia, and threats by an émigré NGO community stuck in a time warp. It means moving now, this month, to avoid predictable paralysis engendered by the coming US election year.

Remaining impervious to an obvious altered reality guarantees that the West will miss an opening which, if closed again, could seal Burma's semi-status as a Chinese colony, consign to marginality another generation of young Burmese, and disappoint our closest Asian friends – Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, Indonesia and the rest of the 10-nation ASEAN group to which Burma also belongs.

I think the sense of exhausted timelessness in US policy on Burma lies in its provenance in the last century. We reacted then, and rightly, to severe repression by Burma's military regime of the Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy's electoral win. But the relentless unthinking ostracism has impoverished the diplomatic toolkit. As Washington policymakers know too well, a 'principled' reaction to repressive governments has an oh-so-easy quality, especially when standing on that principle comes unencumbered by significant commercial interest.

Two decades ago, the US government conveniently 'grandfathered' residual (and non-operating) American petroleum interests in Burma, most of which Chevron now owns. With little or no skin in the game, how easy it is to capture a few congressional staffers, who love to ostracize Burma and play their respective members of congress like well-tuned banjos.

This type of self-righteousness about Burma (and Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, and Nepal, and Bangladesh, and...) can and does hold fast for decades, destroying chances to open dialogue with these regimes precisely because they often comprise some very unpleasant characters. I've seen very senior US diplomats go weak at the knees when dressed down (there's no other word for it) by a senator hostile to leveraging American influence by working quietly with an offending regime for decent but un-trumpeted results.

In Burma's case, hard line consistency of 'principle' has an extra twist – giving China a free pass in Southeast Asia's most important 'straddle' state. Burma sits at the Sino-Indian crossroads and how this resource-rich country tilts in future is going to matter, a lot, to American and Asian interests. Yet when working in the George W. Bush administration's last year, I found American policy on Burma bordering on the irrational: congressionally imposed rigidities prevented contact with the Burmese regime even when, as in the aftermath to the 2008 Cyclone Nargis, we had a real chance to rationalize contact, balance Burma's external relations, and advance the reform agenda.

Instead, an ageing émigré movement subsisting on political 'life support' from Aung San Suu Kyi's long imprisonment blocked another opportunity. The White House chose to endorse an approach which, once again, relied on ostracism and excoriation – but all with little effect, other than facilitating further Chinese commercial and diplomatic

penetration. Some specially targeted Treasury sanctions achieved more.

Just a few weeks ago, President Thein Sein astonished the country by ‘suspending’ a controversial, Chinese financed mega dam, at Myitsone in Burma’s Kachin state, along the Irrawaddy River. It’s hard to imagine a clearer signal about the emergence of a New Burma. Predictably, the ossified lobby claims this move, like others since March, says “it’s not real,” but the suspension, in fact an outright cancellation, is as real as it get.

Way back in 1979 I made my first visit to Burma. Then as now, a class of educated people felt dismayed by the level to which their country – once the rice bowl of Asia and a center of educational excellence – had fallen. When I was at Oxford, on a fellowship in the late 1980s, Aung San Suu Kyi’s husband, the late academic Michael Arris, described this lament to me in eloquent terms.

Thirty two years after my first visit, I find that the societal memory of Burma’s once honored place still remains in place, helping to drive a yearning for change. If however the West chooses to await the Ideal System in Burma (as the old saying has it, to ‘Let the Best be Enemy of the Good’), we will crimp the chances for change, not advance them. All longtime residents of Burma whom I know concur that the changes over the last few years, and especially since March, are palpable, and unprecedented. The tumblers are in alignment and it’s time to get back in the game – the real game of using on-the-ground influence to help Burma regain strategic balance while holding the government, at the same time, to its halting but real reform agenda.

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