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On Rambo and Burmese Politics by David I. Steinberg

Rambo IV is a technically well made, exceedingly bad film. One of its no doubt unintended consequences has been to raise both hopes and fears among the Burmese people (depending on where along the political spectrum one sits) while potentially making today's already bad situation even worse.

The movie's simplistic characterizations of whole peoples and its rudimentary reduction of complex and historic ethnic and political relations are almost as disturbing as its egregious violence. It reverts to a barely modernized 19th century concept of the "white man's burden" – saving the natives from other evil natives (or more accurately saving other white men who were saving natives from other evil natives). Its message to Americans is one of reluctant cynicism leading to a reserved altruism on the part of Rambo (Sylvester Stallone). It also reinforces the stereotypical portrayal of the abominable Burmese military bent on genocide against the peaceful, helpless ethnic Karen minority.

This is a film that by all accounts should have been ignored, but instead it has obtained a certain notoriety in Burma-related circles. For all its appeal (if any) to simple-minded afficionados of gore and killings, it has serious implications for some – on opposite ends of the political spectrum.

To those opposed to the Burmese military, the expatriates who have fled the country because of military oppression and economic need, it may excite emotions that reinforce their plight and reaffirm the lack of legitimacy of the military government. Even more problematic, however, and far more dangerous, is the implication that the regime may be overthrown by U.S. public or private military action. This has been bruted about in various Burmese blogs.

There have been calls by some Burmese (but not by the formal opposition, the National League for Democracy) for a U.S. invasion of Burma to bring about regime change. To Americans, bogged down in the Middle East, with an over-extended military, a population dubious about present let alone future military expeditions, and with ample concerns over the reaction of China were this to happen, this is the most unlikely intervention for any U.S. administration.

Some Burmese opposition figures do not see it in this light, however. The bellicose language from both the administration and the Congress, reinforced by this film, sends a different, if unintended, signal. The moral issue for the U.S. is how much does official rhetoric and this unofficial film raise false hopes or expectations of those who would suffer should they misinterpret U.S. intentions and expect explicit, vigorous military support when none was forthcoming. Shades of the U.S. response to the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

This film may also be interpreted in the Burmese capital as a foretelling of a new U.S. adventure. That the Burmese military government is paranoid about the possibility of a U.S. invasion has been evident for some time. It has been one of the half-dozen various reasons given by internal and external speculators for the movement of the capital from the exposed coastal city of Rangoon (Yangon) 250 miles upcountry to Naypyidaw. Whether this was in the minds of the Burmese military leadership is unknown, but what is evident from conversations (including some with high-level military intelligence officials) in that country is that fear of the U.S. military has been palpable.

The movie Rambo no doubt has been pirated into DVDs and must be widely available in Burma, smuggled in across the permeable Thai frontier and by visitors. The military has banned its distribution and sale, as would be expected in a country in which all literature and media are subject to strict, often arbitrary, censorship, and where information is regarded as power that must be authorized, centralized, and serve the interests of the leadership.

Although freedom of information, views, and responsible entrepreneurship need reaffirmation in the U.S., and thus the producers (that is, the star) of this movie are certainly within their rights, one must question their judgment and those of the advisors to the production. Although most extras are Thai, some of those who fled the repressive Burmese regime ironically found at least temporary employment portraying the hated Burmese military against whom many of them fought. That is at least some positive outcome.

If external administrations and people want to see political and ethnic compromise and productive change in Burma, then this film does nothing to move the glacial process (if indeed it has started) forward. Reconciliation is difficult at best, given present emotional confrontations that are already severe. Now further undercut by an unthinking group of producers and businessmen, their senseless actions contribute neither to art nor to policy.

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