

1

Burma: The limits of international action

(12:48 AEDT, 7 April 2008)

After nationwide prodemocracy demonstrations in 1988, Myanmar's military government was the target of wideranging international political and economic sanctions. Despite the repeated claims of officials, activists and exile groups, however, there was no evidence that any of these measures prompted significant changes in the regime's thinking or its core policies. The international community's limited ability to influence the generals was again demonstrated after another major outbreak of civil unrest in 2007, which foreign journalists dubbed the 'Saffron Revolution'.

The demonstrations in Burma last August and September—dubbed the 'Saffron Revolution' due to the participation of many Buddhist monks—were initially spontaneous reactions to unexpected fuel price increases and the military government's mistreatment of a few dissident monks. The demonstrations quickly developed, however, into an organised national protest against the regime's brutal and inept rule. Since then, however, the international effort to resolve the crisis in Burma has run into the sand. Indeed, the unprecedented level of attention given to this issue last year, while clearly warranted at the time, may have in fact achieved precisely the opposite of what was intended.

Activist groups claim, with some justification, that the widespread publicity given to the demonstrations last year was the result of their past efforts to arm dissidents with the technology to make the outside world more aware of developments inside Burma. Using satellite phones and

the internet, activists were able to send images of the demonstrations (and the regime's harsh response) out to the foreign news media, which then broadcast the dramatic footage around the world. The enormous public response to the 2007 unrest was in stark contrast to that seen in 1988, when a massive prodemocracy uprising received relatively little international attention, due largely to the lack of news and images available from inside Burma.

The publicity given to the 2007 demonstrations and their aftermath resulted in an unprecedented level of diplomatic activity and widespread expressions of concern about the military regime's continued violation of human rights. Strong statements were issued by many governments and international organisations, including Burma's usual supporters, such as China. As the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) chair, Singapore expressed its 'revulsion' at the regime's actions. This rare consensus permitted the UN Human Rights Council to pass a unanimous resolution on the subject and the UN Security Council (UNSC) to issue a presidential statement. Both bodies deplored the violence in Burma, demanded the release of political prisoners and called for a dialogue on national reconciliation among all parties.

Since October 2007, however, relatively few countries have taken any specific measures to demonstrate their outrage over developments in Burma. The United States (US) and European Union (EU) have tightened their sanctions against the regime—a move followed on a much smaller scale by Australia. Most other countries, however, have been content with diplomatically worded statements of concern. ASEAN has specifically ruled out the imposition of sanctions. China, India and Russia have welcomed the military government's February 2008 announcement that it would hold a constitutional referendum this May and general elections in 2010. These steps along the regime's promised seven-step 'roadmap' to a 'discipline-flourishing democracy' have permitted its friends and neighbours to point to 'progress' in Burma and to argue against further punitive measures, including in the UN. The consensus that briefly emerged last year has disappeared.

The UN's Special Representative has been permitted to visit Burma on three occasions, and even to speak to detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. He has achieved very little in practical terms, however, and has himself acknowledged that the chances of any real progress are slight.

Since last September, the regime has made a number of tactical moves to quieten internal unrest, settle international concerns and reduce the embarrassment felt by Burma's friends in multilateral forums. Yet, there are no signs that Burma's military leadership has been persuaded to modify its core policies, such as a strong central government dominated by the armed forces. Nor has it shown any inclination to seek a substantive dialogue with the opposition movement or to respond differently should Burma's people once again take to the streets. Indeed, some well-informed observers believe that, over the past six months, the regime has become even more obdurate and determined to resist external pressures.

According to this argument, the sudden eruption of protests throughout Burma and the unprecedented international condemnation of the regime have encouraged the country's generals to set aside their differences and stand united against a renewed threat to military rule—both from within and outside the country. At the same time, the failure of the international community to make any progress on political reforms in Burma, despite the rare consensus on the need for change, can only have emboldened the regime. For the international community has once again demonstrated its inability to agree on a policy approach towards Burma and its lack of effective options against a regime that is prepared to put its survival before the welfare of its people and widely accepted norms of behaviour.

Reports by activist groups of serious breakdowns in military discipline last September remain unconfirmed, but the use of force against demonstrating monks clearly unsettled many in the largely Buddhist army. It would be unusual if there was not also a range of personal and policy differences within the armed forces leadership, particularly as Senior General Than Shwe approaches the end of his rule and the regime prepares for a transition to a 'parliamentary' system. Yet, the factors that unite the members of Burma's ruling council still seem to be greater than those which divide them. The former includes a shared determination to keep the country independent, united and stable—qualities the generals feel can only be achieved by continued military rule.

There may be occasional reshuffles of senior military personnel but, as long as the armed forces remain loyal and cohesive and are prepared to maintain their rule with force of arms, it is difficult to see how any domestic opposition group, foreign government or international organisation can loosen their grip on power.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.