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Burma and the Bush White House

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The visit of then US president George W. Bush and his wife to Thailand in 2008, and their public gestures in support of Myanmar's prodemocracy movement, gave heart to many activists, both inside and outside the country. However, the president's actions also served to underline the US's inability to significantly affect the course of events in Myanmar. Even to diehard human rights campaigners, it was becoming clear that real and lasting change could only come from the Myanmar people themselves, and from within the country.

When George W. Bush and his wife visited Thailand earlier this month, they took pains to draw attention to their continuing commitment to democracy in Burma. Publicly, their statements of support and gestures of solidarity were welcomed by Burma's opposition movement. Privately, however, most Burmese now accept that the US is not able to remove the generals in Naypyidaw. Indeed, some activists have come to share the view that the US's uncompromising approach to Burma since the ill-fated 1988 prodemocracy uprising may in fact have been counterproductive.

Although President Bush finds it hard to pronounce her name, he has been a strong supporter of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and the movement for democratic change in Burma. Under his administration, the US has led those countries that have taken a hard line against the military government, mainly through repeated public condemnation of the regime and the imposition of tough economic sanctions, including blocks on international financial assistance. In July 2003, the US

President signed into law the *Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act*, which was designed to strengthen Burma's 'democratic forces'. It explicitly recognised the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) as the 'legitimate representative of the Burmese people'.

A consistent element in the US approach has been a strong demand for regime change. In 2003, for example, then secretary of state Colin Powell referred to 'the thugs who now rule Burma', and in 2005 his successor labelled Burma 'an outpost of tyranny', to which the US must help bring freedom. In President Bush's 2006 State of the Union speech, immediately after references to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Burma was ranked alongside Syria, Iran, Zimbabwe and North Korea as places where 'the demands of justice, and the peace of the world, require their freedom'.¹

The Bush administration has also attempted to paint Burma under military rule as a strategic problem, due in large part to its failure to address transnational issues, including the outflow of refugees. In 2005 and 2006, the US tried to persuade the UN Security Council to label Burma a threat to regional stability—despite the fact that none of Burma's five neighbours supported the motion. On each occasion that the President has renewed economic and other sanctions, as he is required to do annually, he has formally stated that Burma is 'a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States'.²

During his two-day stopover in Thailand in early August, President Bush met a select group of Burmese 'freedom activists'—significantly, at the US Ambassador's residence, and thus technically not on Thai soil. He also held a 'roundtable interview' on Burma with radio journalists. In a keynote speech on the US's relations with Asia, he said that 'we seek an end to tyranny in Burma'.³ He described his wife as a 'devoted champion' of this 'noble cause'. For her part, Mrs Bush made a well-publicised visit to a refugee camp near the Thailand–Burma border, to meet people who had fled oppression and economic hardship in Burma.⁴

1 The White House, 'President Bush Delivers State of the Union Address', Press release, Washington, DC, 31 January 2006, georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2006/.

2 The White House, 'Message to the Congress of the United States', Press release, Washington, DC, 17 May 2007, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/05/print/20070517-8.html [page discontinued].

3 The White House, 'Bush Visits Bangkok, Thailand', Press release, 7 August 2008, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080807-8.html [page discontinued].

4 The White House, 'Statement by Mrs Laura Bush After a Visit to Mae Tao Clinic', Press release, 7 August 2008, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080807-13.html [page discontinued].

While dismissed by some as a cynical attempt to burnish the Bush administration's tarnished reputation, these gestures were welcomed by many Burmese, both within and outside the country. The fact remains, however, that over the past 20 years, US policy has demonstrably failed to shift the generals from any of their core positions. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued—and not just by Burma's friends and neighbours—that economic sanctions have made life more difficult for the Burmese people. More to the point, the strong rhetoric and punitive measures employed by the US appear to have increased Naypyidaw's sense of threat and made the regime even more determined to resist external pressures.

The risks inherent in current US policy were demonstrated in early May, when the Burmese Government refused to permit US warships to unload aid supplies intended for the victims of Cyclone Nargis. Naypyidaw apparently feared that the US might use the relief effort as cover for an invasion, or at least to provide support for a popular uprising.

At the time, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said: 'It is not a matter of politics, it's a matter of a humanitarian crisis.' Yet, on 1 May, the day before the cyclone struck, President Bush had renewed sanctions for another year and expanded the authorities that allowed the US to target those supporting a regime 'that exploits and oppresses the people of Burma'. The President also condemned the regime's new constitution as 'dangerously flawed' and restated his commitment to help the Burmese people 'in their struggle to free themselves from the regime's tyranny'.⁵ On 5 May, Mrs Bush made an unprecedented public statement highly critical of the regime and its response to the cyclone. Also, it would not have escaped Naypyidaw's attention that, on 6 May, the day the President called for access to the cyclone-affected areas, he signed a law awarding Aung San Suu Kyi the Congressional Gold Medal, the US's highest civilian honour.

In these circumstances, there was very little chance that Burma's generals would feel inclined to divorce politics from other factors. As Georgetown University's David Steinberg has pointed out, in trying to win the regime's trust after the cyclone, Washington had to overcome the accumulated effects of two decades of aggressive rhetoric, an increasingly harsh sanctions regime and long-term support for the military government's opponents,

5 The White House, 'Statement by the President on Burma', Press release, 1 May 2008, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/05/20080501-8.html [page discontinued].

most of whom were dedicated to its overthrow. This problem will remain for the foreseeable future, as US policy towards Burma is unlikely to change markedly whoever wins the presidential election later this year.

After 20 years in the political wilderness, there are now few exiled dissidents who imagine themselves returning to Burma at the head of a conquering army or who expect the Burmese armed forces simply to hand over government to the opposition movement and return to their barracks. Since the 1988 uprising, however, Burmese exiles and activist organisations, and many people inside Burma, have nurtured the hope that strong support from the US and other key Western countries, together with concerted action in the UN, might result in a return to democracy in Burma. If they remain at all, these hopes are now fading.

It is gradually, and often reluctantly, becoming more widely accepted by Burmese dissidents and other activists that economic sanctions and public statements, even by some influential members of the international community, are not going to change the government in Burma. A similar sense of disillusionment has been felt by many Burmese over the repeated failure of UN efforts to persuade the generals to free all political prisoners and open a genuine dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi. Nor, despite the hopes of some activists—and the generals' recurring fears—is the US or UN going to take any direct military action against the regime.

For many idealistic Burmese, outraged at the military regime's brutal behaviour and hopeful for the return of a democratic government, this has been a hard lesson in the harsh realities of international politics, which has left deep disappointment and, at times, even bitterness. External support for the opposition cause in Burma is still being sought and, when provided, is welcomed by the activist community. The gestures made by the US President and First Lady in Thailand were appreciated by many Burmese. Increasingly, however, it is understood that foreign powers are likely to have only limited influence in Burma. Real and lasting change will have to come from the Burmese themselves, and from within the country.

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