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Conspiracies and cockups in Burma

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The claims made by the military government and the activist community about the bizarre behaviour of an American tourist in Yangon in 2009 were outlandish and at times even extreme. However, they conformed to Myanmar's long tradition of wild speculation and conspiracy theories about developments in the country.

Major political developments in Burma have always encouraged conspiracy theories, and the bizarre case of an American tourist's unauthorised visit to Aung San Suu Kyi's house earlier this month has proved no exception. In a familiar refrain, both the opposition movement and the military government are now accusing each other of hatching Machiavellian plots.

Soon after it became known that John Yettaw had swum across a lake to Aung San Suu Kyi's Rangoon home, activist groups began claiming that something was amiss.¹ It seemed inconceivable to them that a foreigner could penetrate the security cordon around Aung San Suu Kyi's compound, let alone remain there for two nights, without the authorities finding out. Surely, they claimed, there were guards posted along the lake shore and possibly even listening devices inside her house, which would have ensured Yettaw's immediate arrest.

1 'Was Yettaw a Pawn of Burma's Generals?', *The Irrawaddy*, 15 May 2009, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15650 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=15650].

The only explanation, these activists have suggested, was that Yettaw was a dupe, if not a willing accomplice of the regime, who was permitted to enter Aung San Suu Kyi's compound specifically to compromise her. Feigning illness and exhaustion, he asked to stay for a few days. The idealistic opposition leader could hardly refuse or report the intruder to the authorities. According to this theory, the visit thus gave the regime the excuse it was seeking to keep her incarcerated after her current detention order expires—some say later this month, others say November.

Naypyidaw doubtless expected some reaction after it charged Aung San Suu Kyi with breaking the terms of her house arrest and sent her to trial. Yet it seems to have been taken aback by the tsunami of outrage that has washed over Burma in recent weeks. World leaders, international organisations, Nobel laureates and other prominent figures have all condemned the regime's actions and called for the charges against Aung San Suu Kyi to be dropped. They have also demanded her immediate release from house arrest.²

In response, the regime has developed a conspiracy theory of its own. The Burmese foreign minister has been reported as saying that Yettaw's visit to Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside home was part of a cunning plot by the opposition movement to intensify international pressure on Naypyidaw. The culprits were 'internal and external anti-government elements', trying to discredit the regime at a time when the US and several other countries were reviewing their hardline policies against the military government.³

In another sadly familiar tactic, one senior Burmese official has even suggested that Yettaw was either a 'secret agent' or Aung San Suu Kyi's foreign 'boyfriend'.⁴ Opposition spokespeople have accused the regime of trying to humiliate Aung San Suu Kyi and undermine her standing with the Burmese people by suggesting that the widowed democracy icon had allowed 'a man' to stay at her house overnight.⁵

2 'Western Outcry Over Suu Kyi Case', *BBC News*, 14 May 2009, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8050545.stm.

3 Yeni, 'Burmese FM Says Yettaw Visit Part of Opposition Plot', *The Irrawaddy*, 22 May 2009, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15715 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=15715].

4 Yeni, 'Burmese Diplomat Suggests That Yettaw Could Be Suu Kyi's "Boyfriend"', *The Irrawaddy*, 22 May 2009, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15709 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=15709].

5 Wai Moe, 'Regime Accused of Trying to Humiliate Suu Kyi', *The Irrawaddy*, 22 May 2009, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=15713 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=15713].

The details of this incident are still unclear. There is a suggestion, for example, that Yettaw had pulled this stunt once before and been reported by Aung San Suu Kyi's staff. If true, that would certainly strengthen the theory that the authorities allowed him to make a second visit. But the facts of the matter are likely to be far more prosaic.

The likelihood of someone trying to swim across Inya Lake, in the heart of Rangoon, to visit Aung San Suu Kyi was always very remote. No supporter would knowingly endanger the opposition leader in that way. As a consequence, the rear of her compound was never heavily guarded. Also, after 13 years without significant incident—at least on the lake side of the house—it is unlikely that Aung San Suu Kyi's guards gave the possibility of an aquatic intruder any thought. Their attention was focused elsewhere, allowing Yettaw simply to wade ashore.

In looking for explanations of developments in Burma and given the choice between conspiracy and cockup, it is always safer to opt for the cockup. In this case, it appears that there were two. A rather foolish and naive man simply failed to think through the dire consequences of his actions. The regime's mistake was in not being more vigilant in their patrols around Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. The result of these cockups has been a major international incident.

In one sense, however, none of this makes any difference. There is little doubt that the regime always intended to extend the term of Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest, probably until after the 2010 general elections. It did not need an excuse to do so. Yettaw's misguided exploit has given the regime an opportunity to dress up its decision in formal legal terms, but it has not changed Aung San Suu Kyi's fate.

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