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Burma's reforms: Foreigners can't take much credit

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Many governments, international organisations and individuals claimed they were responsible for Myanmar opening up under president Thein Sein, but most of the credit belonged to those inside the country. The international community's ability to influence developments was always very limited. The latest developments represented what Aung San Suu Kyi called a rare and precious opportunity for the new government, the opposition movement and the international community to work together.

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, John F. Kennedy ruefully observed that success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan.¹ Albeit from the opposite perspective, this old saw can be applied to Burma today. For, despite 20 years of frustrating and unsuccessful diplomacy, there is no shortage of people and organisations now claiming credit for Naypyidaw's welcome but unexpected reform program.

¹ President Kennedy actually said: 'Victory has a hundred fathers, defeat is an orphan.' Several sources have been given for this comment, or variations thereof, but not all of them are accurate. It was made at a press conference given by the US president at the State Department in Washington, DC, on 21 April 1961. See 'President Kennedy's News Conference No.10, 04/21/1961', *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYx6MG6NkjU.

As stated in *The Interpreter* recently, the remarkable paradigm shift that took place in Burma last year was due mainly to internal developments and a few key local personalities.² External factors played a role, but they were incidental to the main game. This in itself is noteworthy, however, and with the benefit of hindsight prompts a number of observations.

First, Burma demonstrates once again that the international community is limited in its ability to influence the behaviour of states that are determined to go their own way. There were costs, of course, but Burma has shown that, if it is prepared to discount international opinion, forgo rapid economic development and ignore the suffering of its own people, an authoritarian government can withstand considerable external pressure.

Mind you, Burma has a long history of self-reliance, based on a deep commitment to national independence and a strong sense of strategic vulnerability. It has immense natural resources, which reduces its dependence on the outside world. It is also relevant that, when the armed forces took back direct political power in 1988, Burma was in some respects a pre-industrial society. Even now, two-thirds of the population live in rural towns and villages.

Burma also serves as a reminder that economic sanctions are at best a clumsy diplomatic tool and at worst a counterproductive one. They are easy to invoke but difficult to remove. Unless applied carefully, they can miss their intended targets and harm the innocent. Also, unless sanctions have very wide backing, countries can turn elsewhere for trade, capital, arms and diplomatic support.

In Burma's case, the regime responded by developing strong ties with China and improving relations with a wide range of other countries. These steps severely undercut the West's punitive measures. When the Obama administration reviewed US policy towards Burma in 2009, it concluded that sanctions were at best 'modest inconveniences' to the military government.³

A third issue is the importance of strategic imperatives. One reason the US, the EU and likeminded countries adopted a policy towards Burma that was much tougher than any directed at other undemocratic countries

2 Andrew Selth, 'Assessing Burma Reform Program', *The Interpreter*, 24 January 2012, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/01/24/Assessing-Burmas-reform-program.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/assessing-burma-reform-program].

3 Derek Tonkin, 'Suu Kyi is Fighting, But for How Long?', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 11 February 2012, www.dvb.no/analysis/suu-kyi-is-fighting-but-how-long-for/14223 [page discontinued].

in Asia was because they felt there were few critical national interests at stake. After the 1988 uprising, Burma was seen as isolated, weak and of little commercial or strategic value. It was thus deemed a cost-free target.

Yet, as the years went by, Burma's critical geostrategic position and role became clearer.⁴ It was able to play China off against India and, by joining ASEAN, became a factor in regional diplomacy. It was a factor in international efforts against transnational crime and its ties to North Korea raised the spectre of nuclear and missile proliferation. Also, Burma possessed vast energy resources, making it critical to its neighbours' economic development.

Fourth, the steady expansion of the regime's power and influence, in the face of constant external pressure, illustrates the danger of formulating foreign policies without objectively assessing their likely impact. The Bush administration's principled stand against Burma's military government was applauded by many but was pursued despite clear evidence that it would not achieve its stated objectives.

Indeed, the punitive measures and harsh rhetoric aimed at Burma after 1988 aroused the generals' nationalist sentiments and made them determined to resist external intervention. They strengthened the armed forces and may have even considered WMD. Foreign pressure also helped justify their bunker mentality and made them even more fearful of political, economic and social change.

Granted, those countries favouring a policy of engagement did not have much success either. China was closest to Burma during this period, but it struggled to influence the attitudes of Senior General Than Shwe and his circle. ASEAN, too, was unable to make much of an impact. The regime put its survival and Burma's stability, unity and independence—as perceived by Naypyidaw—above all other considerations.

It is also worth noting the impact that notable individuals have had on Burma's foreign relations. During the Bush era, for example, Western policy owed a great deal to Aung San Suu Kyi.⁵ It has yet to be seen whether

4 Andrew Selth, *Burma: A Strategic Perspective*, Working Paper No.13 (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, May 2001), asiafoundation.org/pdf/wp13.pdf [page discontinued] [now at indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/web/burma%202001.pdf].

5 David I. Steinberg, 'Aung San Suu Kyi and US Policy Toward Burma/Myanmar', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.29, No.3, 2010, pp.35–59, doi.org/10.1177/186810341002900302.

Thein Sein deserves the title ‘Burma’s Gorbachev’, but his elevation to the presidency appears to have broken the diplomatic impasse between Burma and Western countries.

Arguably, President Obama could be included in this category. Despite strong opposition, he adopted a more nuanced US approach to Burma that emphasised dialogue and cautious engagement, rather than criticism and punishment. This opened the way for the incremental restoration of bilateral ties, in contrast to the Bush policy, which, for many years, called for nothing less than complete regime change.

In 2010, senior US officials acknowledged that the new policy had failed as far as a constructive dialogue with Naypyidaw was concerned. However, had Obama given up and reverted to Bush’s discredited policies, as many members of Congress and activists demanded, Washington would not have been in a position to respond as promptly and positively as it did to the diplomatic openings that emerged last year.⁶

Now that a reform process has begun and there is the possibility of far-reaching changes in Burma, the international community can play a much greater role. Both Naypyidaw and other governments will remain wary of each other and proceed cautiously.⁷ However, foreign countries and multilateral organisations are in a position to help Burma and it is in everyone’s interests that they should do so.

The best way to consolidate recent changes and encourage further reform is to help make the current process successful. There will still be differences of view (for example, over the 2008 constitution) and the provision of large-scale assistance to Burma will pose its own challenges. But for the time being, the aims of the government, the opposition movement and the international community appear to be broadly aligned.

As Aung San Suu Kyi told the World Economic Forum in Davos last week, this offers ‘a rare and extremely precious opportunity’.⁸

6 ‘Recent Developments on Burma’, US Department of State Special Briefing, Washington, DC, 13 January 2012, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/180710.htm [page discontinued].

7 William Hague and Kevin Rudd, ‘Burma: Real and Enduring Change is Not Assured—But the Glimmers of Hope Must Not Be Stifled’, *The Huffington Post*, 24 January 2011, www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/william-hague/burma-glimmer-of-hope-must-not-be-stifled_b_1228543.html [page discontinued].

8 ‘Aung San Suu Kyi: Annual Meeting 2012’, World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, www.weforum.org/videos/aung-san-suu-kyi-annual-meeting-2012 [page discontinued].

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