

ASEAN Warns U.S. On Myanmar Sanctions

by Mike Billington

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretary General Ong Keng Yong, a Singaporean, issued a very strongly worded statement on June 14 against calls for sanctions and other measures against Myanmar, coming from the United States and others in the past weeks. Ong warned that the effort would severely injure the peace and security of the region, including China and India. “The situation there should not be allowed to develop into an ugly confrontation, that will destabilize the situation in Southeast Asia,” Ong said. As he noted, Myanmar has ten distinct communities and 100 linguistic groups, and could become “another Yugoslavia, multiplied many times over.” India “will never allow any destabilization of the Indian Ocean, while China will never allow a deterioration south of its border, where there are many ethnic communities.” He indicated that he did not want to “confront” U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell “or anyone else critical of Myanmar, but I just want to state the facts.”

Powell Raises Sanctions Threat

The new drive to confront the military regime in Myanmar was provoked by a bloody confrontation between a pro-government crowd and the entourage of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a northern Myanmar town on May 30, during one of Suu Kyi’s campaign tours of the country. Four people were killed and dozens injured in the melee.

Suu Kyi has been permitted fairly unrestrained travelling rights for several months—one of the signs of slow but steady progress towards reconciliation in the country. The reconciliation has been significantly aided by the work of UN Special Envoy Razali Ismail, who has made several visits to Myanmar over the past few years.

The new confrontation, still murky in its details, put a sudden halt to the process. Suu Kyi and other leaders of her National League for Democracy (NLD) have been held in protective custody since the May 30 event. Razali nonetheless conducted a partially successful five-day visit in June, which included a half-hour meeting with Suu Kyi. Razali said that he was “quite disturbed” by the visit, but assured the world that Suu Kyi was unharmed and in good spirits, and that he had won a pledge from the government that she would be released soon.

The threat of sanctions took on a more serious tone when Secretary Powell placed a commentary in the June 12 *Wall Street Journal*, denouncing the military government in Myanmar and shifting official U.S. government policy toward support for the most extreme anti-Myanmar (and anti-China) fanatics in the Congress. Powell wrote that the “thugs who now rule Burma” (the name still used by the opposition in Myanmar) have failed in their pledge to move towards democracy. He said the Administration would support aspects of the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003, authored by Senators Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), John McCain (R-Ariz.), and Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), three of the leading neo-conservative warhawks who promote the preemptive, unilateral war policy transforming the United States into an imperial tyrant.

The legislation is also backed by Lantos’ fellow California Democrat Dianne Feinstein, and others of the “Project Democracy” liberal imperialist mold, associated with the “Burma Project,” the non-governmental organization financed by speculator and drug-legalizer George Soros, which is one of the guiding hands behind the effort to destabilize Myanmar and the region.

The Act calls for freezing financial assets of the junta; banning all remittances to Myanmar in order to cut into their foreign exchange; placing restrictions on “travel-related transactions,” and limiting commerce with the country. McConnell and Feinstein even called, on June 18, for the expulsion of Ambassador Linn Myaing, the Ambassador of the Union of Myanmar to Washington. Although such a move is highly unlikely, the suggestion coming from U.S. Senators will cause further instability, and anti-American sentiment, throughout the region.

Secretary Powell, showing an uncharacteristic “undiplomatic” tone in his attack on the junta, announced that he would force the question at the pre-scheduled ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Phnom Penh on June 18. The leaders of the ten ASEAN nations then took measures to “judo” the threat, while also creating conditions for finding a more productive solution to the crisis within Myanmar.

A Target Is China

Secretary Ong Keng Yong’s statement expressed the concern in ASEAN that the threats to punish Myanmar, despite the possibly sincere intentions of some of those involved, would create a broader destabilization of Asia.

That this is the *intent* of some forces in the West, was

demonstrated by an editorial in the favorite outlet of the neo-conservatives, the *Wall Street Journal*, on June 9. The reason the junta in Yangon is ignoring the cries from around the world to turn the country over to Aung San Suu Kyi, said the editorial, is that “the generals know they have a ‘fraternal ally’ in Beijing.” The *Journal* complained that China is the “only supplier of large-scale economic assistance, from telephone exchanges to roads, bridges, and port facilities.” And its editors even put out the claim that India has been forced—supposedly out of fear of China’s military presence in the region—to drop its support for Aung San Suu Kyi, and to back the generals.

The *Journal* concluded: “China’s attitude toward Burma is of a piece with its lack of pressure on North Korea, another rogue regime. . . . Until it stops protecting tyrants in its neighborhood, China won’t be respected as a civilized world power.” The neo-conservative drive for a Clash of Civilizations, as peddled by the *Wall Street Journal*, could hardly be stated more clearly.

It is telling that on the same day, June 9, the *Journal*’s editor emeritus, Robert L. Bartley, published a diatribe against Presidential candidate and *EIR* Founding Editor Lyndon LaRouche, who has successfully exposed the fascist roots of the neo-conservative faction driving the United States to war and empire. Bartley admitted that he is himself intimately connected to the Straussian circles which make up the neo-conservative stable, and screamed that the likes of the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* must stop making “common cause with Lyndon LaRouche.”

ASEAN Pre-Empts the Threat

In the face of a potential confrontation with the United States and others at the June 18 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) over the Myanmar issue, the ten ASEAN foreign ministers, meeting at the June 16-17 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, chose to break from the traditional ASEAN ban on discussing of the internal affairs of member states. However, they did so only with the express agreement of the Myanmar Foreign Minister Win Aung, and with the clear intent of preempting any confrontation with the Western representatives who participate in ARF.

Foreign Minister Win Aung explained that the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi was due to the reports of assassination threats against the opposition leader, which would be blamed on the junta if it were not prevented. He assured his fellow foreign ministers that she would be released soon.

The final ASEAN Joint Communiqué stated: “We discussed the recent political developments in Myanmar, particularly the incident of 30 May, 2003. We noted the efforts of the Government of Myanmar to promote peace and development. In this connection, we urged Myanmar to resume its efforts of national reconciliation and dialogue among all parties concerned, leading to a peaceful transition to democracy. We welcomed the assurances given by

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Myanmar that the measures taken following the incident were temporary, and we looked forward to the early lifting of restrictions placed on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD members.”

In other words, ASEAN will not play the destabilization game. Nonetheless, this call for progress towards democracy within Myanmar demonstrated ASEAN’s intent to work for a solution, and allowed Secretary Powell to express his approval of the ASEAN approach to the issue.

In a concluding irony, the ministers of the ARF nations “welcomed the offer of Myanmar and China to co-chair the Inter-Sessional Group on Confidence-Building Measures in the next inter-sessional year.”

Reconciliation Is Urgent for the Region

Hassan Wirayuda, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, was reported to have proposed that an ASEAN Ministerial delegation visit Myanmar. Such a delegation, if approved by the Yangon government, might help to bring a resolution to the political crisis, but would undoubtedly also address the issues which are far more pressing to all the ASEAN nations—building regional economic development as the necessary response to the collapsing dollar and to U.S. imperial threats.

Myanmar represents a crucial crossroad for the great infrastructure projects now coming to fruition in Southeast Asia, including the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) project, which is extending rail connections westward to India through Myanmar; the East-West Road connecting Bangkok to India via Myanmar; and the North-South “Asian Railway” from Singapore to Kunming, which also passes through Myanmar on one of the two planned routes.

Some accommodation between the opposition and the military is urgent. Aung San Suu Kyi, whose father, Aung San, led the independence movement in Burma, must play a leading role in any solution. But, in the view of UN Envoy Razali Ismail, she must also be willing to learn, and change. Razali, who commands the greatest respect from all but the extremists in Washington, warned at a press conference in Bangkok, Thailand on June 14, after his visit to Yangon, that “if you hit too hard, the moderates or the pragmatists [in Myanmar] will be at a disadvantage.”

On Suu Kyi, Razali bluntly reported: “How to compromise, how to do things, how to endear herself to the military for a while tactically, she does not know how to do it. That’s the problem with Suu Kyi. She’s brilliant, she’s beautiful, but she’s very difficult, too.”

American Congressional yahoo Mitch McConnell, the author of the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act, and an elected official who appears unwilling to hear anything that doesn’t fit his preconceptions, responded to Razali: “In the future, it might behoove Razali to temper his enthusiastic comments to more accurately reflect the climate of fear in Burma.”