

Talks between Burmese junta and opposition stagnate

By Rohan Perera and Sarath Kumara
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The military junta in Burma released five more political prisoners last week—all prominent members of Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). But there are no signs of any significant agreement in the closed-door negotiations that have been taking place since last October between Suu Kyi and representatives of the military.

In all, some 150 political detainees have been freed in trickles in recent months. These include San San Nwe, a leading member of the NLD writers' group, who was arrested in 1994 and sentenced to 10 years jail for circulating "false news". Others were Aye Win, a cousin and former aide to Suu Kyi, and two comedians, Pa Pa Lay and Lu Zaw, who were jailed for lampooning the junta at NLD rallies.

As an additional sign of good faith, the military has permitted the opposition to reopen a limited number of its offices. In the Rangoon division, 18 out of 40 branch offices are now operating, with nine permitted to put up their old signboards.

The junta, however, remains firmly in control. Suu Kyi is still under house arrest and an estimated 18,000 political prisoners languish in jail. Hints have been dropped repeatedly that some sort of settlement will emerge out of the negotiations with Suu Kyi. But, as with the release of detainees, the talks appear to be aimed more at taking international pressure off the regime than reaching any resolution.

At the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in Hanoi in late July, the Western powers and Japan again warned that pressure would be kept on the Burmese junta unless some agreement is reached with Suu Kyi.

European Union external affairs commissioner Chris Patten said Burma must demonstrate a commitment to reform and an end to human rights abuses if it wanted

EU sanctions removed. Japanese Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka appeared to have toughened Japan's stance, by calling for the speeding up of the release of political prisoners and the ending of Suu Kyi's house arrest. In May, Japan broke ranks with the EU and US and agreed to a \$28 million aid package to rehabilitate a hydroelectric dam.

Special UN envoy Razali Ismail visited Burma in June to urge the regime to continue the talks. After meeting with Suu Kyi, the junta's military intelligence chief Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt and Foreign Minister Win Aung, he told the press that negotiations were continuing and agreement was possible. But he put any return to civilian rule into the relatively distant future—two to four years.

The junta or State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) tightened its grip over the country after its brutal crackdown on widespread opposition protests in 1988 in which at least 3,000 demonstrators—students, workers and others—were killed in the capital of Rangoon alone. By reaching a deal to hold elections, Suu Kyi and her opposition NLD played a critical role in helping the military regain control. But having stabilised the situation, the regime prompted overturned the election results in 1990, which went overwhelmingly in favour of the opposition.

Since 1988, the military has undergone a massive expansion from 170,000 personnel to 450,000. According to a World Bank report, defence spending constituted 32 percent of the budget in the financial year to March 1999, compared to just 2 percent for public health. According to some international human rights organisations, defence actually consumes more than 40 percent of government spending.

Although negotiations are taking place, all forms of dissent are banned. Telephone lines are tapped, and fax

machines, modems, computers and satellite dishes have to be registered with the government. Any unauthorised use or possession of “illegal” devices results in severe penalties and imprisonment. In 1996, the SPDC passed a Communication Computer Law“ that imposes a seven- to 15-year jail term on anyone caught using the Internet without prior approval from the Ministry of Communication and Telegraph.

Some attempts have been made to attract investment but with limited effect. While foreign corporations are interested in exploiting Burma’s cheap labour and raw materials, the highly restrictive regime acts as a barrier to the movement of capital and business operations. The major powers’ calls for “democracy” in Burma are aimed at securing the “rights” of investors not those of ordinary working people. The last thing that the military, Suu Kyi or international leaders want to see is a repeat of 1988 when masses of people intervened directly and demanded an end to the junta.

There are signs of divisions within the regime. Reports in June indicated that Khin Nyunt was considered more favourable to political change than the military chief Maung Aye. Maung Aye is reportedly backed by regional military commanders who are concerned about the political and economic consequences of losing power. The military has used its decades-long dominance to establish significant economic empires. Local commanders have used their control over business contracts, resource extraction, property development, schools, markets and road construction to extort money and build up their own businesses.

Khin Nyunt, however, represents those who are pushing for an opening up of the Burmese economy. In late June, he told *Associated Press* that Burma had to integrate into the global economy. “Under the present circumstances when globalisation is taking place at a fast speed, no nation can stay aloof or isolated,” he said. Khin Nyunt played the central role in pressing for Burma to become a member of ASEAN. At the same time, he insists that the military must retain a firm political hold, claiming that “to ensure a smooth transition to democracy—we must necessarily enforce certain rules and regulations”.

The country’s worsening economic situation is adding to the pressure on the regime. According to a report in the *Irish Times* in early July, inflation is

running at 20 percent, exports have been hit by fighting on the Thai-Burma border and the country has only a few months of currency reserves. “In the past few weeks, the value of the Burmese currency has halved to around 800 kyat to the dollar. In some shops, labels have been removed from goods because prices are changing so rapidly.”

Much of Burma’s trade has been with South East Asian countries where economic recession is looming. An important source of foreign currency has been remittances of the Burmese working abroad, mainly from Thailand. Many of these workers are now unemployed or have been repatriated. The level of new foreign direct investment (FDI) approvals plummeted to a low of \$29.5 million in 1998/99, compared with \$777.4 million in 1997/98—an indication of the impact of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and continuing economic sanctions.

The economic crisis is not only fuelling divisions in the junta. Broad layers of the population confront rampant inflation, a lack of elementary social services, chronic unemployment and poverty—a situation that is setting the stage for the reemergence of social unrest and widespread opposition to the regime.

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