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Burma: Are Sanctions the Answer?

By Stanley A. Weiss

YANGON, Myanmar—In the often black and white, good-versus-evil debate over how to deal with the brutal military regime here, Ma Thanegi lives in a world of gray.

To her admirers, the feisty 61-year-old Burmese painter and writer is a voice of reason—a former assistant to opposition leader and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi who, after being jailed for three years herself, bravely opposed Suu Kyi's misguided call for Western economic sanctions to pressure the junta into relinquishing power.

To her critics in the democracy movement, Thanegi is a sellout who parrots government propaganda to foreign tourists and journalists. Meeting openly with me at a major hotel suggests that—with her writings on Burmese culture and cuisine, not politics—she has little to fear in the continuing crackdown on dissidents after the fall's protests led by Buddhist monks.

In reality, Thanegi seems an equal opportunity critic, which—with the world out of options for dealing with the junta—makes hers a voice worth hearing.

Expressing her hopes for "freedom of publication," she says that with a military government "it's a given that they are very controlling and rigid, not knowing anything about the running of the economy." She slams "sycophants" in both government and the opposition who have created "so much mistrust" that any real dialogue is "a pipe dream."

"I am not a traitor or a turncoat," she insists. "I wish with all my heart that I had been wrong, that the strategy laid down by Suu Kyi, who we love so much, was the right one." But Western sanctions are "costing us jobs and hurting people, who need to eat on a daily basis."

In brief, nervous encounters, ordinary Burmese—street vendors, taxi drivers, tour guides, waiters—tell me much the same thing: "We love Suu Kyi. We hate the military. But please, get rid of the sanctions."

For Maung Zarni, it's an especially "bitter pill" to admit that sanctions have failed to moderate the regime. As a graduate student in the United States a decade ago, his Free Burma Coalition led the grassroots campaign for sanctions and divestment, which forced corporations like PepsiCo and Texaco to leave Burma.

But we "failed to account for China and India," he says, explaining why he began opposing sanctions. "We can't isolate a regime that's trading and buying arms from the fastest growing economies in the world."

He concedes that more foreign investment could further enrich the criminal regime he opposes. But Zarni—who first befriended Westerners as a young tourist guide in his native Mandalay—argues that "this is a small price to pay in the short term for the longer term benefit of creating jobs for farmers and workers."

"It's extremely politically incorrect to say it," he says, "but economics, perhaps even more than politics, is the key to progress." As in dictatorships-turned-democracies like Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan and Chile, "economic reform could lead to political reform."

Thant Myint-U also challenges anti-sanctions orthodoxy. An historian and grandson of former United Nations Secretary General U Thant, he argues that "if over the last 15 years there had been trade and investment, and not just increasing isolation from the West, there could have been real economic growth and the emergence of much better conditions for political change."

His thanks for speaking such common sense? A liberal U.S. magazine lashed out at him for espousing a view that "justifies the junta's policies" and "forestalls democracy."

Tragically, Myanmar now represents the worst of all possible worlds. Having crushed the biggest challenge to its rule in two decades, the junta—which sees itself as the only force able to prevent the Balkanization of multi-ethnic Burma—seems in no mood to compromise, if it ever was.

In a message last week, Suu Kyi, now under house arrest for 12 of the past 18 years, urged supporters to "hope for the best, and prepare for the worst."

The regime's worst enablers—neighbors and trade partners, especially China, the junta's biggest military supplier—show no interest in applying the economic pressure that might persuade the generals to change course.

The United States and European Union, having already sanctioned themselves out of influence over the junta, have imposed still more sanctions that will likely push the generals even closer to Beijing.

Meanwhile, 55 million Burmese—including an estimated one million ethnic refugees in the countryside—are trapped in a growing humanitarian catastrophe of ethnic cleansing, disease, drugs, malnutrition and forced labor, including as child soldiers.

"The landscape that's been created is exactly the landscape that will keep things just as they are for a very long time," says Myint-U. "And branding people as 'pro-junta' for trying to suggest different ways forward only prevents the creative discussion we desperately need if we don't want to be facing the same situation 20 years from now."

After a decade of experience, it's clear: economic sanctions on Myanmar may feel right, but they have helped produce the wrong results. Encouraging Western investment, trade and tourism may feel wrong, but maybe—just maybe—could produce better results.

That might be politically incorrect, but at least it wouldn't be politically futile.